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EDUCATION FOCUS

Getting a real-world look at chemistry

By ERINN UNGER

Staff Writer

MOUNT VERNON — A Diet Coke and Mentos fountain spewed in one corner of the playground at Lincoln Elementary, as green foam frothed from a tall beaker in another. “This was so cool,” a sixth-grade girl gushed, her gloved hands covered in the green stuff. “OMG.” That excitement is precisely the point. Thursday’s chemistry demonstrations at the elementary school are a new partnership between Lincoln’s sixth-grade class and Skagit Valley College chemistry students, meant to connect the younger students to science in a real-world way, said sixthgrade teacher Alicia Farmer.

“It shows kids science is not just in a book; it has real-world applications,” she said.

Farmer teaches a unit on mixtures and solutions, but the class focused mostly on physical changes rather than chemical reactions, she said. The science demonstrations are a way to expand on the material in an interesting way, she said.

“They were begging me to do Mentos and Diet Coke,” she said. “I said there were way cooler (experiments) than that.”

Farmer called on Roxi Hulet, the mother of a child at the school and a chemistry professor at Skagit Valley College, for help. Armed with a grant from the Skagit Valley College Foundation, Hulet then recruited 13 second-year students and another chemistry instructor, Amy Cully, to bring chemistry to the elementary school’s playground.

Hulet said her college students were inspired by the sixth-graders’ enthusiasm.

“The students were hugging them (the college students) afterward and wanting to get their pictures taken with them,” Hulet said. “...When it was over, I think they realized the magnitude of what they had done.”

Farmer estimates that about 50 percent of her class would be first-generation college students, if they attend. Interacting with the Skagit Valley College students makes college seem accessible and helps the students realize that science is not just in a book, but can lead to a career, she said.

The push to excite students with science is part of a larger movement, called STEM, which is short for science, technology, engineering and math, Farmer said. The movement is becoming increasingly popular, and there’s even a new STEMdedicated West Seattle elementary school opening in September, called K-5 STEM.

Farmer attended a STEM conference with members of the Mount Vernon School District and was part of a committee gathering information and curriculum meant to encourage students to engage in those subjects.

“There is a huge push nationwide for this, because businesses are asking us to graduate students who are able to think outside the box and take technology to the next level, because that’s what we need,” Farmer said.

It’s also about getting girls interested in science, she said, especially since research shows that girls start to lose interest in the subject when they move into secondary schools. She wants them to feel capable of choosing science classes.

“I wanted to make sure my girls walk away with a love of science,” she said.

During one of the demonstrations Thursday, a Skagit Valley College student dropped a graham cracker into a bucket of liquid nitrogen. After lifting the cracker from the vat, he popped it in his mouth. Children shrieked as vapor billowed from his nostrils.

A few tables away, students stuck their hands enthusiastically into “elephant toothpaste,” a foaming concoction of water, yeast, peroxide and food coloring.

“It’s awesome, with 2,000 exclamation points,” 11-year-old Martha Flores said.

Erinn Unger can be reached at 360-416-2141 or at eunger@skagitpublishing.com. Follow her on Twitter at www.twitter.com/schools_svh.



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Arturo Martinez (left) Swen Larson (center) and Osvaldo Mendez react to a stream of cola launching past their heads during a chemistry demonstration put on by students from Skagit Valley College on Thursday at Lincoln Elementary in Mount Vernon.



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Sixth-grade girls squeal and laugh during a chemistry demonstration with elephant toothpaste — a mixture of soap and yeast that bubbles — during a chemistry demonstration Thursday on the playground at Lincoln Elementary in Mount Vernon.