Beltsville Elementary School gets interactive science lesson

Program unites students, retired researchers

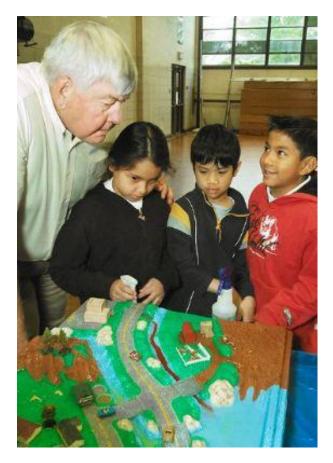by David Hill | Staff Writer, (Thursday, May 7, 2009) http://www.gazette.net/

Beltsville Elementary School students were treated to an "in-school field trip" April 28-30 when a group of scientists used games and hands-on exhibits to teach them the importance of chemistry.

The visit was part of the Science Enrichment Program, a partnership between Beltsville Elementary and nonprofit Friends of Agricultural Research-Beltsville.

"We're lucky to have them come in like this," said Catherine Hopkins, a sixth-grade science teacher. "It's something different from the day-to-day."

Each year, retired scientists from FAR-B come to the school and lead a series of interactive lessons.

"We sort of consider Beltsville Elementary our adopted school," said Diane Odland, of West Friendship, outreach coordinator for the Agricultural Research Service and adviser to FAR-B. "The teachers and kids both look forward to this program every year.

Susan Whitney/The Gazette
(From left) Retired Agricultural Research Service scientist Allan Stoner, with the group Friends of Agricultural Research-Beltsville, shows Beltsville Elementary School second-graders Michelle Vasquez, 8, Oliver Masangcay, 8, and Francisco Salvador, 8, how chemicals dumped irresponsibly in watersheds can make their way into the Chesapeake Bay. The activity was part of the school's Science Enrichment Program on April 29.

The program began in 2004, when FAR-B members became worried about what they considered a decreasing emphasis on science in many schools. They approached Beltsville Elementary, less than two miles from BARC, about coming in and teaching the students.

"We thought, in a small way, we could help fill a void," said Allan Stoner of Hampstead, a 40-year BARC employee who now sits on the FAR-B board of directors. "[Science] is not becoming less important in their lives. It's probably become more important."

In past years, the program has focused on nutrition, animals and plants. This year's theme was "Exploring Environmental Science."

Over three days, scientists taught one-hour lessons to first- through sixth-graders. Each class spent 20 minutes at three stations, each with its own distinctive lesson.

At the nutrition station, students learned the importance of food labels and played a rapid-fire game of "name the nutrient." At the insect station, they learned about blood-sucking bugs while sticking their hands — protected by netting — into a box of mosquitoes.

"It's all interactive," Hopkins said. "The kids are engaged in what they're doing. They're not bored to tears."

At the chemical science station, a model city was used to demonstrate the dangers of pollution. Stoner placed a few drops of food coloring, representing a pesticide, on the town's grass. Students then used spray bottles to rain on the town, causing the dye to spread into the city's rivers.

"[This] can be helpful so you don't harm the earth by using bad chemicals," said Samantha Sweeney, 11, of Beltsville.

The lesson persuaded Richard Ayodele, 11, of Beltsville, to take better care of his own community.

"When I'm on the street, I'll sometimes litter. But now I know how much it affects the environment," he said. "We shouldn't do things to mess up the environment."

This is the sixth year that FAR-B has come to Beltsville Elementary. This fall, FAR-B will partner with the Maryland Agricultural Education Foundation to bring mobile science labs to the school.

James Anderson, now of Silver Spring, worked at BARC for 37 years before retiring in 2005. In addition to helping with the enrichment program, he tutors reading and math at Beltsville Elementary once a week.

For Anderson and his colleagues, the program gives them a chance to help the community in which they've worked for more than half their lives.

"I used to live in Beltsville. My kids went to these schools," said Anderson, also on the FAR-B board of directors. "Maybe this is just a little way I can help back."