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“Five, four, three, two, one. Blast off!”

College Park Elementary School students counted down and squealed with excitement as they took turns launching rockets on Friday, the culminating event of a weeklong science, technology, engineering and mathematics program through STARBASE.

“The whole principle is to stimulate interest in these fields because we need engineers and technology people in this country,” said STARBASE Commander Jerry Pyles. “If we can stimulate interest in three, four or five of them in these fifth-grade classes, that’s better than none.”

STARBASE, a program funded by the Department of Defense, gives students a hands-on STEM experience through interactive experiments – an approach College Park Assistant Principal David Greenwood said suits different types of learners.

“Some kids can read a passage and get the information they need by reading it – they comprehend it,” Greenwood said. “Other kids, they have to be able to see it and feel it and do it with their hands in order to learn it. It all depends on what type of learner they are. This reaches out to a lot of those kids that have to be hands-on in order to learn something.”

Fifth-grader Domonick Alborturbina-Rosales said the STARBASE program's engineering focus opened his eyes to the many career paths engineers can take.

“If you are an engineer, you can be in mostly anything you want to,” Alborturbina-Rosales said. “This week I have learned there is more than you know about engineering than just automotive. There's learning, working together, leadership – mostly everything you need to know in life.”

Even so, Alborturbina-Rosales said he did not want to be an engineer.

“I want to be a scientist,” he said, adding that while the rocket launch was the highlight of his week, he also liked the other experiments – particularly one centered around the effects of drugs and alcohol on the brain.

“You put on these glasses and they make your vision wacky like if you were under the influence of drugs and alcohol,” he said, noting that he had no desire to drink or do drugs.

The STARBASE program serves students in 40 states, providing 20 to 25 hours of Common

Core curriculum instruction.

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