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STARBASE is a hands-on extension of the classroom. It's funded by the United States Congress through the Department of Defense. Beginning in 1993 in Michigan, there are now 76 sites across the country. After today's grand opening, two of those sites are in Montana.

STARBASE Montana began in 2007 at Fort Harrison in Helena. Now 5th grade students in Great Falls School District will be attending STARBASE. They will be focusing on STEM curriculum which is science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. Director of STARBASE Montana, Michael Stone, says, "we don't tell them this is what's going to happen. They design it, test it, and they figure out what happened and what they have to do".

The unique aspect is how hands on this learning experience is, which helps students to grasp concepts. Eleven year old Landen Blades from Meadowlark school says hands on activities helps "you understand how it works better".

The goal is to plant a seed of inspiration for future careers in a variety of science areas. Stacy Dolderer is one of the teachers at STARBASE. She explains, "a lot of our careers are science based. We have engineering, science, technology, and math in all of our career that are coming up in our future". Landen says, "I want to be an engineer or an architect".

Stone says there will be a 17% increase in technology career fields in the next ten years which will create a need for a specialized job pool. Plus, not everyone needs to be in the forefront. Stone says, "when you have 7 astronauts go into space, there's probably 30,000 to 50,000 and maybe more people in support roles to get those 7 up there".

Being located on the Montana Air National Guard's base, students get an inside look into a variety of career paths. Dolderer says, "they are getting to see these science, technology, engineering, and math careers in action".

While the focus is getting the next generation of innovators ready, it's still an interdisciplinary approach. Dolderer says, "they're asked to draw and doodle because all scientists are artists". They also have to do journal writing and present in front of the class.

Even if science is not where a student's passion lies, lessons in communication, teamwork, and practical application are useful in every day life. Stone says, "everything out there, science touches it".

By Rachel Ousley

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