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A not-so-top-secret program at Nellis Air Force Base is counting on youths to strengthen the country.

Sponsored by the Department of Defense, Starbase Nellis is an education program that provides students with 25 hours of classroom learning and experiments, while introducing them to careers in the fields of science, technology, engineering and math (STEM).

The formula is simple: Kids spend about 30 minutes learning about a concept in the classroom ---- such as Newton's Three Laws of Motion, fluid mechanics and aerodynamics ---- then do experiments that illustrate the concept.

Experiments include building rockets out of straws, crashing a wooden airplane holding an egg into a wall and a GPS-coordinated scavenger hunt.

Students usually are bused to the base to attend the program once a week for five weeks. Each student picks a nickname for the duration of the program. It is way better than being in school, students said.

"I think it's really fun; it's really cool," said Alla Pobsuk, a fifth-grader at Bracken Elementary School, 1200 N. 27th St. She nicknamed herself Brace Face despite wearing a retainer.

"I learn a lot from it," she said. "It has really fun projects that we don't normally get to do at school, like shooting rockets. We can't normally do that at school."

Alla's classmate, Thomas McGrath, nicknamed Blackbird, also liked the hands-on approach.

"Like (Alla) said, we get to do projects instead of just going over it in a book," Thomas said. "We learn about it, and we do a fun project to kind of sum it up."

Michelle Wheatfill, a teacher at Bracken, said the Starbase curriculum aligns well with the Clark County School District's curriculum and helps prepare students for Nevada's required criterion-referenced test in the spring.

"It's very brief on a lot of topics, but it helped introduce everything in a hands-on approach that we don't have the resources for at our school or the ability to do," Wheatfill said. "In general, we don't have access to all the supplies they have here to be able to do it."

Wheatfill also said it is the best structured and organized field trip she has ever been on.

Starbase started in 1989 with the Michigan Air National Guard. The Nellis location opened

April 1. About 12 schools have participated so far, but program director Myles Judd said the \$300,000 annual budget could accommodate 28 classes and 1,200 students. The national budget for all Starbase programs is about \$26 million, Judd said.

Shrinking school budgets, specifically busing costs, are keeping several schools from taking advantage of the program, Judd said. He said the program is looking for local businesses to help sponsor schools. A typical five-day program involving three classes of fifth-graders costs between \$2,000 and \$3,000 for transportation.

"The goal of Starbase overall is to expose at-risk kids to STEM," said Judd, " ... and have them gain an interest in these career fields.

"The reason the (Department of Defense) is involved with this is, we cannot create enough kids who want to go into these areas, not just for the military but the nation as a whole. If we're going to stay competitive as a whole, we've got to create more kids who want to go into this."

Judd, a retired artilleryman and former director of Troops to Teachers in Nevada and Utah, said he recruits mostly Title I schools for the program, but he is open to others. Students are given entrance and exit exams as part of the program, and they typically score 20 to 30 percent higher by the end of it, Judd said.

"It's really neat to see their eyes light up," he said. "... Everybody benefits from it. If we can inspire these kids to finish high school and get into college, we're a success as a community."

For more information, visit starbasenellis.com or email Judd at mjudd@starbasenellis.com [1].

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