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'Hip' science revs kids' engines

By Mitchell Layton for USA TODAY

FMA Live! Austin Romero, rear, and Scot Carlson direct Janiece Hawkins, left, and Samiya Harris, both 13, in driving carbon-dioxide-powered cars at Kelly Miller Middle School in Washington.

Program seeks to hook students

By Kate Holloway
USA TODAY

WASHINGTON -- With chanting, break dancing, sideways baseball hats and a young actor playing scientist Isaac Newton, Honeywell International and NASA are telling middle-school students it's cool to study science.

FMA Live! is a multimedia program sponsored by the aerospace corporation and the space agency. It's named for Newton's Second Law of Motion (force equals mass times acceleration) and has reached more than 55,000 students in 100 schools since starting last year, sponsors say.

The show was created both to inspire students and to meet a need. NASA and Honeywell officials say the number of science- and math- related jobs is multiplying at three times the rate of other professions.

"The first person to step foot on Mars is sitting in an elementary or a middle school today, so that could be any one of these kids," says Rick Varner, a NASA education specialist.

"We know there's not just one way to reach the students," says Michael Holland, Honeywell's director of hometown solutions. "You have to try multiple ways."

The show looks for fun ways to explain how and why things move; the larger goal is demonstrating to kids the relevance of science. In a typical show, students ride rocket cars across the stage, stick to Velcro walls and try to kick a soccer ball taller than they are into a net. Two teachers get decked out as sumo wrestlers and knock each other to the floor. Their principal rides a hovercraft into a giant pie.

"This was on the scale that would get their attention," says principal Robert Gill of Kelly Miller Middle School here, where the show was put on last month. The three-year tour is expected to reach 125,000 students in more than 150 middle schools, according to the organizers.

According to a Center on Education Policy report released this year, achievement in math has been on the upswing. The average SAT math score of a student entering college in 1984 was 497; in 2004, it was 518.

The report also says the percentage of high school students completing advanced science courses rose from 35% in 1982 to 63% in 2000; the percentage completing advanced math courses went from 26% to 45%.

Although teachers might need a more hip agenda, a big problem is keeping quality teachers, says Gerry Wheeler, executive director of the National Science Teachers Association. Teachers and parents together must fuel children's interest in math and science, he says.

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