

Argyll adventure

STEM

Madison-Grant starts its STEM focus at preschool level

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SUMMITVILLE – Rachel Dilts hands the 4-year-olds blue pegged geoboards.

One student sits at a desk while others lie on their stomachs on a rug pulling rubber bands around the pegs to make squares, rectangles and trapezoids.

The exercise is part of a science, technology, engineering and mathematics lesson at the Argyll Adventure Academy at Summitville Elementary School, believed to be the only STEM-related program serving Madison County preschoolers.

“I think it helps the students having hands-on learning where they’re doing it themselves instead of all on paper,” Dilts said. “They are a lot more involved when it’s hands-on

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Rebecca Gunter learns about magnets as she plays with these magnetic items in Rachel Dilts’ Summitville Elementary School pre-K class. The class is part of the Argyll Adventure Academy.

Photos by John P. Cleary | The Herald Bulletin



Phoenix Meredith shows what she has created on her geoboard in Rachel Dilts’ Summitville Elementary School pre-K class that emphasizes STEM curriculum.

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instead of so much paper.”

Open to 15 4-year-olds, the Argyll Adventure Academy is one of three preschool classrooms at Summitville, though it is a separate program from the other two.

In the end, district officials hope to have the district certified in STEM education from preschool through 12th grade.

Summitville Elementary Principal Jackie Samuels said the Argyll Adventure Academy is an opportunity to start the youngest of students on the road toward becoming creative and problem solvers.

act as facilitators who need to ask good questions that allow the students to explore the world around them.

“The biggest challenge is allowing the kids to continue asking those questions. I guess, I feel schools often are more rigid, and this allows for better learning.”

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The inaugural program this school year was started with a \$50,000 grant to fund a teacher and manipulatives and other equipment and supplies, such as Dash the robot, that help the lessons feel more like play than work. However, some elements of the pioneering program, such as the cost of tuition, overlap with other preschool programs, such as the state's On My Way Pre-K and the federal Title I programs.

Madison-Grant United School Corp. Superintendent Scott Deetz said the Argyll Adventure Academy puts a high-quality preschool into a geographical area that is considered a day care desert with few options. The academy is the only Level 3 certified STEM-focused preschool program in Madison County.

"It's our ability to reach our 4-year-olds in a STEM curriculum that's completely aligned with our K-12 curriculum," he said.

The district is working on certification for the program and Dilts, who will be attending special classes intended to give her better insight for infusing STEM-related concepts into her curriculum and activities, Deetz said.

"We wanted it to be something different than what students can get anywhere else," she said. "We kept throwing words out there, and it all came back to 'discover,' 'adventure.'" Though much of it looks like play, which actually is an education standard for 4-year-olds, the activities do a great deal of heavy lifting, tying the brain to fine motor skills, Samuels said.

"I think they are going to be risk takers," she said. "They will be confident and look to alternative solutions as they grow up. They are not afraid to make mistakes at this age, and we really want them to keep that confidence."

Jenna Langel, an innovative learning specialist with Five Star Technology Solutions, is helping the district with its STEM focus and with aligning it between the grade levels.

"It's so important because STEM is so inquiry-based. If we can get them started at a young age, that's going to be even more beneficial," she said.

Starting the STEM focus at the preschool level takes advantage of the children's natural curiosity, Langel said. The teachers



Phoenix Meredith creates different shapes and patterns on a geoboard in the Argyll Adventure Academy, which is one of three preschool classrooms at Summitville.

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