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Program lets OC middle school girls shine in math, science



Laura Jones, a retired teacher and volunteer in the Girls Excelling in Math and Science after school club at the Oil City Middle School, helps a group of girls including (from left) Kiersten Deeter, Annie Lenze, Olivia Klapec and Ayla Swarm engineer their own devices to protect an egg from breaking when dropped. (By Jerry Sowden)

A classroom full of sixth-, seventh- and eighth-grade girls was buzzing with excitement Tuesday afternoon in the Oil City Middle School but jewelry, boys and pop icons weren't the topics of discussion — it was science, math and technology.

The Girls Excelling in Math and Science (GEMS) initiative was formed at the middle school this fall by local resident Laura Reasoner Jones.

After receiving a \$2,500 NASA Summer of Innovation Grant, Jones contacted the middle school principal Scott O'Donnell and began to implement the GEMS program.

The eight-week-long program is held every Tuesday at the middle school. Science teacher Jennifer Heffernan, math teacher Kristen Sutley and Jones teach different lessons and conduct experiments to provide hands on learning in the noted fields.

Where's the story?



Points Mentioned



Oil City Middle School science teacher Jennifer Heffernan (center) watches as eighth-graders Olivia Klapec (left) and Annie Lenze (right) members of the Girls Excelling in Math and Science after school club, work together to build a devices to protect an egg from breaking when dropped. (By Jerry Sowden)

"This year we chose robotics to be our main focus," Heffernan said. "The girls are learning different aspects of math, science and technology as applied in robotics."

Heffernan and Sutley said they got together and selected girls that they wanted to gain interest in math and science.

"We came up with a list of students we thought would be great for the program and the ones that are here are the ones that showed interest," Sutley said.

On Tuesday afternoon the girls built contraptions to protect eggs from breaking when dropped from a certain height onto the ground.

Kiersten Deeter, 11, a sixth-grade-student, said the egg experiment was her favorite lesson this year.

"I learned the forces of gravity," Deeter said. "The GEMS program has helped me a lot in science. I am getting better grades."

Deeter's partner in the egg experiment, sixth-grade-student Jessa Girty, said she also really enjoys the program.

"I really like the experiments and I have learned a lot in like physics and stuff," Girty said. "I will continue in the program if they have it next year."

Lauren Greenlee, 13, an eighth-grade-student said her favorite exercise was the programming lesson.

"We had to direct classmates through an obstacle course with blindfolds on," Greenlee said. "I like the program and enjoy learning everything."

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Jones said her goal is to have a GEMS program in every area school district or for GEMS to be accessible to girls throughout the region.

"These girls need to be in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) programs. There is a lack of girls and we need to start them young and keep them interested," Jones said. "These areas are where the jobs are."

author>By MEGHAN KEELY/author

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