



Students keep learning after school lets out

NextUp classes in Richmond help middle schoolers stay productive, explore interests

BY JUSTIN MATTINGLY
Richmond Times-Dispatch

School's out at Lucille M. Brown Middle School and as students sprint to the bus, others rush to the cafeteria, where their potential future awaits.

The group of students checks in for the NextUp experience, an after-school program at three Richmond middle schools aimed at giving students learning experiences after the school bell rings. NextUp serves about 650 students across the three partner schools — Lucille Brown, Boushall Middle School and Henderson Middle School — where 3 in 4 students come from economically disadvantaged homes.

STUDENTS, Page B2



MARK GORMUS/TIMES-DISPATCH

Stephen Friedrichs of Virginia Commonwealth University works with students in a forensic science class that is part of NextUp.

Students

From Page B1

"It's not a one-kid fix. It's a generational fix," said Barbara Sipe, the executive director of NextUp RVA. "We're trying to break the cycle."

After checking in, students at Lucille Brown receive announcements from "Miss G" — site coordinator Sidney Gafford — and break into their first elective. Some students learn about forensic science from Virginia



Sipe

Commonwealth University-sponsored instructors. Rather than learn Spanish, which the room is used for between 8:30 a.m. and 3:15 p.m., students learn to extrapolate the DNA of a strawberry.

Outside the school, a Sports Backers-sponsored class trains for long-distance running with the goal of running in a 5K race. On the school's tennis courts, girls are practicing conflict resolution through a Fit4Kids-sponsored program.

Back inside, students are making steak fajitas during the most popular class — "So You Want to Open a Restaurant?" In this class, taught by Edible Education, students learn to prepare food, but also learn the basics of menu planning and finances to start a restaurant.

The activities are meant to help students explore what they might want to do after



Travis Rountree (left), 12, smells cilantro held by Ashley Brooks of Edible Education. Students were making steak fajitas in the class called "So You Want to Open a Restaurant?"

high school graduation, but it also works to make sure they reach that point.

About 1 in 5 children spend unsupervised time alone during after-school hours, according to the Afterschool Alliance, a national nonprofit. NextUp works to make sure those hours are spent learning rather than being unproductive.

"Middle school is a magical time in our development," Sipe said. "It's when we're coming online."

In the computer science elective, students are quite literally programming computers and learning the basics of coding.

Asked why he signed up for the computer science class, sixth-grader Michi Woolfolk said, "It's all about the money." He'd heard about the promising job prospects for those able to code and wanted to learn himself.

After the first set of electives, students gather for dinner be-

fore taking on their second set of electives. Family time follows the second 90-minute elective period, and students are dismissed at 6:30 p.m. on buses.

The program is spread across three, 10- to 12-week sessions with a \$2,804 average cost per student, putting the average total site cost at \$560,806. NextUp's funding comes mostly from corporations, which contribute 57 percent of the organization's revenue. About 21 percent comes from individual donors, while the government kicks in \$262,500, or 14 percent. The rest of its revenue is through in-kind contributions and foundations.

NextUp's role is to coordinate the more than 30 community-based providers.

"There are lots of programs in Richmond that do this work but not a lot of coordination," Sipe said.

With that in mind, a learning pilot was launched in 2014

at Henderson Middle School. In the three years since, it has expanded to three schools and wants to add two more middle schools by 2020.

"Right from day one, we could tell something special was happening," said Steve Rogers, one of the organization's founding board members.

Involvement in the program is voluntary — less than half of students at all three schools choose to participate — but NextUp reaches out to students who are struggling during normal school hours in hopes that after-school involvement could spur academic progress.

"We create an incentive to come to school every day," Sipe said. "Education is a winning lottery ticket in America and, if we can help kids through these tough years, then we've done our job."

jmattingly@timesdispatch.com
(804) 649-6012
Twitter: @jmattingly306