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Students try crime solving

Science center allows youths to learn with hi-tech equipment

By LARRY JAMES GREENE
For the Norwich Bulletin

Studying science is more exciting these days because students can emulate crime solving techniques used on popular television shows.

At the Science EpiCenter and DNA Learning Center students from middle school through college make high tech, hands-on DNA and forensic discoveries just as scientists do on television's "CSI" and "Forensic Files."

Named after the pre-eminent DNA scientist, the Dr. Henry Lee's Crime Scene Exhibit entices students to solve a crime based on evidence found in a mock home setting.

In two laboratory classrooms, 24 students at a time utilize a discovery/ inquiry-based approach using professional-grade equipment.

"Using the equipment seems to impress students," said Abby Demars, the center's interim director and one of two scientists who conduct classes. "They feel like a real scientist because they're using real equipment," she said.

Each student has use of an equipped work station during a 2 hour lab session to examine forensic evidence gathered from a mock crime scene. Students also construct cell models and do simple DNA extractions.

Although the EpiCenter has and is developing programs for younger children, many laboratory classes are targeted toward sixth- through eighth-grade students and are designed to meet requirements outlined in Connecticut's Core Science Curriculum framework.

Prior to a visit at the EpiCenter, teachers must attend a day-long workshop where they receive instructional guidance and written material for student reinforcement activities before and after visits.

Nancy Mavrogeanes, a teacher whose seventh-grade East Lyme Middle School class recently visited the EpiCenter, appreciated the resources available. "They can supply high-tech equipment that we couldn't duplicate in our classrooms," she said. "The students liked being empowered to use the equipment and seeing that they could get results," said Mavrogeanes.

An open house will be held at the EpiCenter from 5 to 7 p.m. Tuesday as part of an annual fund-raising appeal and membership drive. "It's a chance to see if you want a membership," said Demars.

A \$60 family membership entitles families to privileges such as discounted rates on programs and free admission to more than 200 science centers worldwide, including the Boston Museum of Science.

Major renovations at the EpiCenter were completed earlier this year and plans are being formulated for new exhibits like the Cellarium, a room-sized, 3D model of an animal cell, which ties into seventh-grade science curriculum.

