



The Oregonian

Portland school soars in NASA orbit

Vernon Elementary - The new status as a NASA Explorer School will bring learning opportunities

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ANNE LAUFE
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"If the rocket's really fast, how can it stay safe?"

"Is there a planet that is rainbow-colored?"

"What do you look for that will prove there's life on another planet?"

"Who inspired you to become an astrobiologist?"

These are just a few of the questions students at Vernon Elementary School in Northeast Portland asked visiting NASA dignitaries Wednesday as they launched Vernon's new status as a NASA Explorer School.

The three-year program provides professional development opportunities, family nights and curriculum support in math, science and technology. It also comes with \$17,000 the school can use to buy technology such as laptops or software.

Lewis Braxton, director of center operations at the NASA Ames Research Center in California, and planetary scientist Chris McKay were on hand to share their enthusiasm for the heavens.

"You're now part of the NASA family," Braxton proclaimed.

Vernon is the second Oregon school chosen for the four-year-old program. The principal and several teachers from Faulconer-Chapman School in Sheridan, designated an Explorer School in 2003, came to help pass the torch.

"The Explorer School designation will open up so many opportunities for Vernon's students and staff," said Carol Clark, a fifth-grade teacher at Faulconer-Chapman. "If you mention NASA to the kids, their eyes light up and sparkle."

The program targets underserved populations. With nearly 88 percent of students at or near the federal poverty line and a large percentage of African American and Latino students, Vernon fills the bill.

The Explorer School designation is helping fuel a renaissance at Vernon, which received the statewide Celebrating Schools Award in 2005 for making significant progress toward closing the achievement gap between minority and nonminority students. The school is also seeing rising enrollment and test scores, and more interest from neighborhood families.

Heather Lyman, secretary of the Vernon parent-teacher association, thinks the program is "absolutely fantastic. It's helping to make Vernon one of the best schools in the district."

Lyman, who has a daughter in second grade at the school, said she and her husband considered focus options at Richmond and Buckman elementaries before their daughter entered kindergarten. But they thought they owed it to Vernon and the neighborhood to try the local school.

"Now we're thanking our lucky stars we did," she said. "We really loved the energy at Vernon. It's a great school with a great staff."

Principal Joan Miller, who helped write the grant for the school, said, "We're really excited to have kids see how things learned in school apply outside of school. The things they learn in math and science are things they might use in their careers."

The NASA program focuses on students in grades four through eight but teachers will incorporate NASA projects into the science curriculum at all levels, said the school's Explorer team leader, Carla Bickett. For their first schoolwide project, students will help design a "mission patch" like the ones used for space missions.

Vernon teachers will also benefit from professional development opportunities, including national science and NASA workshops.

"It's a really great honor for our kids and our school to be recognized this way," said Bickett, who has taught fourth grade at Vernon for eight years. "Our mouths are hurting from smiling so much."

Avery Cain, a seventh-grader who won second place in Wednesday's rocket-launching contest, agreed. "I know that NASA has done a lot of exciting things. It sounds like it's going to be really fun."

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