



Science challenge for FUSD takes off

The district wins a \$500,000 grant to build a space flight simulator in partnership with other local agencies.

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John Sawasky helps students extract DNA from strawberries during a science class at Mount Elden Middle School. The Flagstaff Unified School District has received a grant of \$500,000 that will be used for teacher development and student science experiences. (Jake Bacon/Arizona Daily Sun)

Flagstaff Unified School District has scored a major grant to boost science education and eventually build a state-of-the-art space flight simulator expected to draw thousands of school children from around northern Arizona.

The \$500,000 grant allows FUSD to send students on field trips to the Challenger Space Center in Peoria, which also features a space shuttle simulator and education hub; train teachers to deliver a comparable program locally; and let students practice "E-missions" online at school.

Although it doesn't fully fund the construction of the "Challenger Space Center North," it does build momentum for FUSD to form partnerships with other local educational and science agencies to erect Flagstaff's version of the simulator. The monies are awarded by the Arizona State Board of Education by way of the nonprofit Science Foundation Arizona.

Challenger Space Center North will house a simulator that will let students specifically in grades 5 through 8 experience a "mission" to the moon, Mars, or a comet. It will also provide other hands-on "STEM" -- science, technology, engineering and math -- lessons for students in grades K-12 and professional development for teachers, and be open to students from surrounding districts such as Williams and Page and schools on the Navajo and Hopi reservations.

Darcy Renfro, executive director of Science Foundation Arizona-STEM, said \$2.5 million in competitive grants were awarded to six schools or districts around the state for innovative math or science-centered

programming. Flagstaff's award was one of the biggest. The organization received 28 applications.

FUSD Superintendent Kevin Brown said science allows Arizona to expand on its traditional "Five Cs" of commerce: cattle, citrus, climate, copper and cotton.

"Now, we have Challenger, a sixth C, to help with that," he said.

Local auto dealer Lavelle McCoy, who is active with Science Foundation Arizona and the Governor's P-20 educational task force, strongly supports the learning hub.

"My passion and my mantra has been to see that our education here in Arizona is world-class," he said. "Education is a journey, not a destination. I think we all understand that concept, that principle, but it has to start somewhere."

And so it will start here, he said, with help from established experts at Lowell Observatory, the U.S. Geological Survey, Northern Arizona University and Coconino Community College, and the K-12 education community.

"We are so rich that we can't help but succeed if we will take that step and try and go forward," McCoy said.

Local architect Ryan Smith and builder Tim Kinney teamed to draw up a proposed housing for the simulator in the former pool house at Mount Elden Middle School. However, Brown said the learning center might instead be built on the grounds of Lowell Observatory, where officials have expressed interest in partnering with the schools on the project.