

North Tahoe students learn to be FIRE SAFE

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A fire erupted at the North Tahoe Middle School Wednesday; it was set by firefighters after being planned by seven middle school students.

The seven students that make up teacher Pat Hamilton's service learning class arranged the mock house fire as one part of a series of events scheduled to teach the 255 North Tahoe students about fire safety. In addition to the fire demonstration, the class members arranged power point slide shows and poster presentations about defensible space and discussions about fire safety with firefighters from the North Tahoe Fire Protection District.

The students arranged the two-hour event during Wildland Fire Awareness Week, which is May 17 through 24.

"Our role is to teach kids that they need defensible space," said Tania Rosas, 14, eighth grade service learning student.

The effort was helped along by a partnership with the Sierra Watershed Education Partnerships, or SWEP, said Executive Director Christine McMorrow.

"We have been involved with defensible space projects for four years," McMorrow said. "This was a huge opportunity for the kids to get involved."

By being involved, the seven students will become the first Youth Fire Safe chapter to join the nine-year-old Nevada Fire Safe Council, according to Project Coordinator for the North Shore Ryan McDermott.

"This is a very impressive program," McDermott said before firefighters started the mock fire. "This is truly a great step in showing the grassroots education process that we are trying to achieve through the Nevada Fire Safe Council."

Part of the council's mission is to be an organization that serves as a bridge between fire services, public agencies and communities threatened by wildfire, according to its Web site.

The council's board of directors will vote the group of students in at the end of the month, he said.

What started as a science elective with no particular goal, but to give back to the community through education, morphed into a progressive youth program that will continue at the middle school and be carried into the high school, according to Principal Teresa Rensch.

Part of the reason the class took on the fire safety issue was the example of the Washoe Fire that burned several homes on the West Shore last summer, said science and math teacher Lisa McCready. The class also focused on teaching their peers to establish fire escape plans because of a story McCready told the students.

"My 22-year-old son's house burned down three weeks ago," she said. Her son survived but during the fire realized that he may have been safer with a planned escape route, she said.

"You can't start educating fire safety soon enough," said Hamilton. "We want to get the kids aware that it is up to all of us as a community to be prepared for any kind of catastrophic wildfire by getting defensible space.

The Youth Fire Safe Chapter is not only something the North Tahoe Fire Protection District supports but encourages, according to district Chief Duane Whitelaw.

"We encourage all neighborhoods to join [the Nevada Fire Safe Council]," he said, explaining that groups who engage in defensible space work could be eligible for grant funding.

"This is a new direction [in fire protection]," he said.

Service Learning

Service learning at North Tahoe Middle School is a piece of the science curriculum, according to Teresa Rensch.

While the eighth graders learned and taught fire safety this year, seventh graders learned about wetlands and sixth graders learned about the local ecosystem by raising trout and releasing them into the Truckee River, according to McCready. Teachers try to show students how science relates to their world in every class, she said.

"It is nice to see the kids getting involved in caring about their communities and making a difference in the lives of their peers and friends," McCready said.

SWEP and youth forestry Members of the Sierra Watershed Education Partnerships took middle school students on a forestry field trip on May 16, in the woods behind North Tahoe Middle School, according to Executive Director Christine McMorrow. The education partnership members taught the students about healthy forests and tree density, she said.

North Tahoe Middle School students look at an example of a structure fire during a wildfire awareness education event at North Tahoe Middle School Wednesday. The event was supported by North Tahoe Fire Protection District and the Nevada Fire Safe Council.



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