

Building a better speed trap?

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DURHAM -- A project that began with students playing with building blocks culminated in the construction of a class "motorcycle" and a visit from a police officer with the real deal Friday.

Fifteen students at Primary Colors Early Learning Center on Dixon Road spent seven weeks building their own motorcycle for a class project, deemed King Rumble. The students were part of More at Four, a state-funded pre-kindergarten program for four-year-olds created by former Gov. Mike Easley in 2001 to prepare children for elementary school.

Jena Carter, the classroom's teacher, said the project idea came from the children playing in the building block center.

"They were building a lot of different things, but they built the motorcycle over and over again. So I had a feeling that that was something they were interested in and would want to do a project for," Carter said.

After gathering all the materials for the project, the children went to work. Seven weeks later, the motorcycle was complete. Carter said she prefers the project approach to teaching because she can take an interest the children have and stretch it across every aspect of learning.

"When you're doing worksheets, at-the-table work, it's very hard to connect it from one learning area to the next. With the project, we had science, math, history, language, writing, reading -- everything involved in one project, so that they stayed engaged the whole time," Carter said. "Every child was involved in a different way, yet they were all learning at the same time and took different things from the project."

When coordinators at Durham's Partnership for Children heard about Carter's project approach and the

class assignment, they wanted to connect it with the larger community. The result was a chance for the children to see a real motorcycle operated by a Durham police officer.

"This is a normal job function that we do, just coming to schools and talking to students of all ages. It's always exciting for us," said Officer Chris Fisher of the Durham Police Department, who visited with the class. "We love to interact with the kids because it's natural that they're attracted to the motorcycles."

Fisher fielded questions from the children, ranging from "Why do you have boots on?" to "How do you get the bad guys?" Fisher's main advice to the children was to stay in school and never be afraid to ask the police for help.

"Maybe if they need help in the future, maybe this event will make them less likely to be scared in the future asking for help," Fisher said. "You always worry about kids and a lot of kids don't ask for help because they're scared of the police. Anytime I can combat that with something like this and make it a better situation, that's what I like to do."

Melanie Busbee, community development coordinator for Durham's Partnership for Children, said law enforcement leaders have long supported high-quality early childhood education, "recognizing the value of investing in our children early as a critical strategy to reduce crime, lower prison costs and save taxpayers money."

"Much evidence, particularly results from a long-term study of Michigan's Perry Preschool, shows that at-risk children who do not participate in high-quality programs are five times more likely to be chronic offenders by age 27 than children who do attend," Busbee said. "From the remediation perspective, it is far less costly to get kids on track early and significantly reduce the likelihood that they will commit crimes."

The More at Four program allows children to attend the preschool for free, and according to Carter, serves the kids that don't have access to a lot of resources in the community.

"Some of them don't have the smallest things like markers, crayons, pencils and paper at home. They can come here and use that kind of stuff and be familiar with resources, and once they get into kindergarten they're starting at the same level as the rest of their peers," Carter said.

The social aspect of the environment is also helpful to the children, according to Carter.

"They learn to interact with other kids, whether it be talking about taking turns, sharing or solving problems that come up, like sharing their feelings," Carter said, "ultimately learning how to talk to one another and problem-solve throughout the day."

The class' next project -- a habitat for caterpillars.