



Director: Growing future engineers, scientists 'critical' to future of nation, Huntsville

By Kenneth Kesner

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Dave Dieter/
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Students from Holy Spirit Catholic School in Huntsville get a close look at the Raven unmanned aerial vehicle during the third annual Space and Missile Defense Student Day at the U.S. Space & Rocket Center Tuesday.

HUNTSVILLE, AL -- More than 250 sixth- and seventh-graders from seven schools in Huntsville, Madison, Decatur and Cullman were treated to special exhibits and activities Tuesday at the U.S. Space & Rocket Center during the third annual Space and Missile Defense Student Day.

It's all about numbers and all about the future.

"If we can interest two or three kids to go into science and engineering, then this is a worthwhile event," said Dr. Rodney Robertson. "It's all about exposure, just to get that interest."

Robertson is director of the Technical Center for the Army Space and Missile Defense Command/Army Forces Strategic Command, based at Redstone Arsenal. He's also president of the **Air, Space and Missile Defense Association**, which sponsored the Student Day along with the National Defense Industrial Association-Tennessee Valley Chapter and the Air Defense Artillery Association-Redstone Chapter.

It was hosted by the Space Center and the **National Education Partnership Alliance**, a co-op of government agencies addressing current and future workforce issues.

"It's critical for the future of our nation as well as the future of Huntsville," Robertson said of targeting the middle-schoolers. "If Huntsville cannot attract young professionals, and grow them internally, that's the only thing that's going to limit Huntsville's growth."

The average age of an aerospace worker here today is about 49 years old, he said. Five years from now, 70 percent could retire while, at the same time, the Base Realignment and Closure decisions and other moves bring jobs here that must be filled.

"This is a critical age because if they don't now get interested and take math and science classes at this age, then they've made the decision they're not going to major in science and engineering," Robertson said. "It's a long-term investment."

"If you don't get them involved, you're not going to get them in the workforce."

The youths certainly seemed involved during interactive lessons on physics, robotics, rocketry and more, including unmanned aerial vehicles and the high-tech equipment they can carry.

"We use it to spy on the bad guys," said Scott "Skip" Pollman, helping a student hold up a Raven UAV. He works for contractor Sigmatech on Redstone Arsenal.

Students helped Allen Jacobsen, a systems analyst for contractor Aerodyne, assemble the wings, fuselage and other elements of the UAV. They asked a lot of questions: How high does it fly? What happens if you point its cameras back down at the screen held by the controller/pilot?

"A lot of kids get right into it," he said.

McKenzie Mokry, a fifth-grader from Holy Spirit, said she was looking forward to a science career - and not just because her mom's an engineer.

"All the technical stuff seems fun to work with," she said.

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