

Clayton Program Teaches Work Skills

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By **Stephanie Brown**

CLAYTON Eleven-year-old Dallas Carey is an assistant manager at a restaurant. Adashia Gomez, 11, is a banker. Luke Apana, 9, is a health inspector.

Together the Herma S. Simmons Elementary School students, along with about 155 of their peers, run a miniature society as part of an after-school program.

The MicroSociety program, which launched in January, offers students enrolled in the after-school program the opportunity to learn and practice the skills that will help them become successful adults.

"I think it's a lot like how the real world works, but we have more fun," said Josie Rolon, 10, who is a fitness instructor.

The only one of its kind in New Jersey, the Simmons' school MicroSociety is run in conjunction with the national MicroSociety organization, New Jersey After 3, which is a non-profit organization that facilitates after-school programming, and the Education Information and Resource Center (EIRC).

On Wednesday, also known as "open-market day," the students showed off their society to representatives of the state Department of Education, NJ After 3, EIRC, and MicroSociety organization.

"I think the kids are learning without realizing it," said Willa Spicer, Deputy Commissioner for the state Department of Education. "It's wonderful to watch them learn like that, because that's the difference between schooling and education."

All throughout the bustling society, students were actively engaged in their job.

At the Card Shop, Cheyenne Scott, 7, said the business sold 70 items at \$2 a pop.

"People kept coming over here with money, and that's how we made the big bucks," she said.

Site Coordinator Mario Ayala said the program not only touches on a number of educational disciplines, such as math, but also cultivates an entrepreneurial attitude among the students and improves social skills.

"You get a lot of things from the students that you wouldn't expect unless you put them in this environment," he said. "And when you do, they just thrive."

For example, he said the students have decided to create a movie theater, which is slated to open fall 2009. The students decided it would be best to have two theaters, one to show movies for the younger students and another to show movies for the older students.

"The intriguing thing about this is they know exactly what they want," Ayala said.

After the tour, the visitors asked a panel of students' questions about their experiences so far with MicroSociety.

When asked how they thought the program has changed them, Raquel Valverde, 10, said acting as governor has taught her to be a more responsible person.

"I felt like I changed a lot, because I was like this last year or the year before," she said.