

Celebration showcases Pajaro Valley after-school programs

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WATSONVILLE - Music blared, Watsonville Fire Department's ladder truck whooped and children - some 2,000 of them - shrieked with excitement.

The cacophony Thursday afternoon at Starlight Elementary School arose from Seeds of Change, part of a nationwide celebration of after-school programs called Lights On Afterschool.

Hosted by Pajaro Valley Unified School District, the event was part party, part showcase for programs sponsored by the district and agencies, ranging from the YMCA to city Parks and Community Services.

"We want to have people understand what we're doing," said Joe Trautwein, who heads up the district's Extended Learning Services. "We're supporting academics and in addition filling in the gaps in the arts, science and technology."

Pajaro Valley's program, operates at 21 schools, serving 5,000 children.

Thursday, the education mixed seamlessly with the fun.

Students checked out computer games created by classmates in a program available in five Pajaro Valley schools thanks to a grant won by ETR Associates of Scotts Valley.

Others navigated robots, made and operated by students through a partnership between Pajaro Valley and Monterey Peninsula College, through the waters of a kiddie pool.

Nearby, Jennifer Baker of Watsonville Wetlands Watch showed off Rocky to the oohs and aahs of students, who reached out to touch the 20-year-old gopher snake.

At a booth hosted by the city's Environmental Science Workshop, Armando Garcia and Sabrina Ramirez, who attend Academic Vocational Charter Institute, lured younger students into a circle, where the press of a switch sent a surge of electricity from hand to hand.

"Oh!" squealed two giggling little girls before breaking off contact and dashing off.

Children lined up to compete in a cup-stacking contest sponsored by city Parks and Community Services and to receive apples and clamshells of strawberries from Second Harvest Food Bank, which aimed to promote healthy eating.

Maria Gonzalez, a single mom and a cook at the food pantry, Loaves and Fishes, said her 7-year-old Krista always comes home excited from the after-school program, telling her about the day's activities. Gonzalez said the program supports her efforts as a parent, as well.

"I work until 4, and if they didn't accept her, I couldn't work," Gonzalez said. "I hope it's going to be around forever."

