



Once upon a time in Bay St. Louis...

Preschoolers enjoying "Story Hour" at the award-winning Bay St. Louis library.

# Hancock Co. 'Excel x 5' Multiplies Success

A revolutionary new Hancock County program gives local students an early educational boost



**T**he most pivotal learning period in a child's life occurs from birth until age five, and a new program being implemented in Hancock County intends to make the most of those years.

The first of its kind in the country, Excel By 5 is a cutting-edge Mississippi initiative to help educate children in their most formative years. Hancock County is well on its way to certification, a stringent process requiring a close collaboration of parents, educators, childcare professionals, physicians, churches and social service organizations.

Bob Clay is the Excel By 5 state sites

coordinator. To underscore the importance of the program, Clay pointed out that a newborn's brain is about 25% the size of an adult's, but has grown to 90% of adult size by age five.

Clay called the program a "community grass-roots initiative that identifies issues with children and ensures that they're ready for first grade." The ultimate goal is to create "child-friendly" communities, which improve a child's overall well-being by age five. The program's four-fold approach integrates health, family and parent support, community involvement, and early care and education.

While participation in the program



# Shooting for the Stars

**F**ew schools in the country can offer students the opportunity to work with NASA to create hardware for space vehicles or to build underwater robots with Naval scientists. Yet Hancock County has discovered that being home to the unique federal and commercial "city" of Stennis Space Center (SSC), has many extraordinary educational advantages.

In a program called HUNCH (High School Students United with NASA to Create Hardware), area high school students design, fabricate and make prototypes of hardware and software models needed for space. Collaborating with NASA engineers and mentors, they also video conference with HUNCH peers and NASA engineers around the Southeast through Skype technology. Stennis education projects coordinator, Cheryl Guilbeau, said that HUNCH gives students real work-world experiences and training, with the goal of inspiring

them to become scientists or engineers.

"The Hancock team is the largest group we have in HUNCH," Guilbeau said. "In 2010, they worked on equipment used on the international space station. They were the first group to complete their mini "pocket" rocket and fire it on HUNCH recognition day."

## Stennis Space Center provides high-tech opportunities

The Naval Research Laboratory (NRL), located at Stennis Space Center, also has an extensive educational outreach program and works with both teachers and students in Hancock and Bay-Waveland school systems, as well as at Our Lady Academy and St.

Stanislaus. Partnering with the schools, NRL has sponsored science camps and teacher training. "Seaperch" is another NRL program which gives local students an opportunity to work with naval scientists to build and operate underwater robots. SSC Director Patrick Scheuermann summed up the educational efforts. "The community is so important to us, and we



Photo courtesy St. Stanislaus

### St. Stanislaus students test-dive their Seaperch project robots in the pool.

continue to have a strong focus on outreach efforts in the STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) fields to educate and inspire our Mississippi students at every level. We want them to know that if they work hard, they can anticipate a great and rewarding career right here at home at Stennis Space Center."

For a complete listing of educational opportunities available through Stennis Space Center, go to: [www.nasa.gov/centers/stennis](http://www.nasa.gov/centers/stennis) and click on "education"

For information on the Seaperch program, see: [www.seaperch.org](http://www.seaperch.org)



(continued from page 14)

stands to enrich the lives of Hancock County families and children, there are other advantages as well. For instance, although Excel By 5 is a recent initiative, certified communities are already seeing an improvement in test scores when children enter school.

Clay also notes that the program has a direct economic development impact and Trent Favre agrees. Favre, a local attorney, is a board member of the Hancock Chamber and serves as chairman of the Hancock County Excel By 5 steering committee.

"Results will be seen across the board," said Favre. "For example, families with small children will choose to live


here rather than move to neighboring counties. Businesses will also be more inclined to locate here if their employees are certain that opportunities exist for their children. And we will eventually have a more trainable workforce."

Favre, who is also past chair of the Chamber education committee, added, "Excel By 5 will help our community harness and expand existing resources while also assisting us in devising a plan to identify and eliminate our deficiencies. We want to develop a "child friendly" community and we want everyone to know it!"

*Excel By 5 is a sponsored fund of the Hancock Community Development Foundation, a 501 (c)3 non-profit managed by the Hancock Chamber to foster community and economic development in the region. Tax deductible donations to support the program can be sent to the chamber at 111 Court Street Bay St. Louis, MS 39520.*



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