

GFD brings fun new spin to fire education at schools

Written by By Holly J. Wagner Sun Correspondent
Friday, 12 August 2022 04:33



Many adults remember the day a fire truck pulled up outside their school classroom: they met firefighters, got a close-up look at a fire truck and maybe even got a coloring book.

Gallup Fire Department has been busy with a new approach to fire education, developing grade-specific lessons designed to fit into students' regular school programs.

Younger children will still get a coloring book, but the way firefighters interact with them is different. In a kindergarten class, presenters may sit on the floor and read to a class or color

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with them. A visit from Sparky the fire education dog is always a hit.

“Kids at that age, it’s hard to keep their attention for 30 minutes,” Gallup’s Fire Marshal Jon Pairett, who gives the presentations with fire inspectors Arlita Pablo and Andrew Laweka, said. “It’s mostly about them getting to know who firefighters are and what we do.”

A typical visit at Tobe Turpen Elementary has firefighters pulling up in their rig, showing students the truck and gear at the curb one grade at a time, then going indoors to give a presentation with visual aids to each group, fifth grade teacher Viola Hoskie said.

“They respond to any kind of in-person presentation,” Hoskie said. “I know that they’re engaged when they are listening and asking questions.” It also helps with retention.

“I learned not to keep piles of stuff in front of the door to not block the fire escape [route],” Cauy Boggs, an 11 year old who was in Hoskie’s class last year, said. “I also learned that a rubbery smell is most likely an electrical fire.”

This year will add a special surprise for elementary classes: a new fire education robot and a contest to name it. The winning class will be the first to get a visit from a radio-controlled Dalmatian driving a fire truck, complete with lights and sirens on it.

“It’s fully remote controlled so we can drive it around,” Pairett said. “The Dalmatian’s head moves. We can control its eyelids. [...] We have a little headset so when we talk the Dalmatian’s mouth moves and it changes our voice to a cartoon voice.”

Progressing through grades, the lessons layer on new information. First and second-graders learn about 911 and home fire safety. Upper-grade elementary and middle schoolers learn about cooking and home fire safety.

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kitchen fire safety because we know a lot of those kids go home and cook. We also taught them how to use portable fire extinguishers,” Pairett said.

The key to the grade-specific programs is adapting the lessons to fit state educational standards. Fire education doesn’t take students away from their regular programs, it’s designed to fit in.

“There’s lot of things where we can adapt our program to meet those standards of learning. When we go into the schools [...] we are actually teaching the students things that they are going to need anyway, that they are required to be taught,” Pairett said.

After their visit, Hoskie’s class had science lessons about the difference between chemical and physical reactions and a problem-solving exercise on how to build a fireproof structure. “They had to do a blueprint and back up all their claims with facts,” she said. “They know what evidence to present to prove that their structure is fire resistant.”

Pairett hopes to do a fire science module for high school science classes, but so far his team has been addressing health and culinary arts classes.

In health classes they focus more on medical and personal health topics, like wearing seatbelts, not drinking or texting and driving and properly fitting child car seats. In culinary arts classes the focus is kitchen fire safety.

“Those kitchens where the kids are cooking have very specialized fire protection equipment just like a restaurant kitchen would,” Pairett said. “Especially if those kids are interested in becoming professional chefs, we want to teach them about kitchen fire safety in a business kitchen and how those fire protection systems work.”

The high schools did have one surprise for presenters: “We took Sparky,” Pairett said. “At first we didn’t think it would go over real well because those kids already know it’s someone in a suit, but the kids really loved it.”

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Older students also get a career pitch. Fire service offers a career path that doesn't require a four-year degree. Students can get a basic EMT license at UNM-Gallup and then apply to Gallup Fire. The department will pay for fire training for new hires.

Pairett is enthusiastic about continuing to build and refine the education program to strengthen safety and community ties as well as hopefully gain a few recruits.

"This year we're taking what we learned last year and expanding it a little more," he said. "We're getting further into our lesson plan development because we know what worked and what we can do better."

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