

Cooking up Knowledge

Waterman Teacher Blends 'Business' With Learning Skills

By **DOUG MANNERS**
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HARRISONBURG — The blender motor will start spinning again this month at Waterman Elementary School, churning out 16-ounce "boo-berry" smoothies just in time for Halloween.

But special education teacher Jennifer Wright's student-run smoothie business encompasses more than just whipping together ingredients and pouring the mixture into cups. It's an exercise that blends business lessons with academic skills.

Wright's three-part business earned top prizes recently in state and local competitions for projects teaching economic concepts to special education students. She received \$1,000 prizes each from the Virginia Council of Economic Education and the local competition sponsored by the Harrisonburg Rotary Club and Harrisonburg-Rockingham Chamber of Commerce.

The combination project, "Wright's Healthy Riches and Wright's Hearty Workers," guided students through working with healthy snacks, simulating small jobs and creating notecards for sale.

"What has really amazed me



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Victoria Jarboe, 9, picks out an item she wants during a lesson by Jennifer Wright, a special education teacher at Waterman Elementary School, about the difference between wants and needs. Wright was the top prize winner in the 2010 Economic Education Awards for the work she has done teaching her students about business and economics.

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Smoothie Business Helps Kids Pile Up The Skills

Teacher

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are comments that parents make, which to me makes it worthwhile," Wright said. "I've had parents say, 'I never would've thought my child could use a paring knife safely,' or, 'my daughter will save her allowance now instead of spending it all.'"

'Important Skills' For All

Wright instituted the current business model in her classroom last year, but she has integrated economic and cooking lessons into the curriculum throughout her 19-year career as a special education teacher.

For the smoothie business, Wright's kindergarten-through-fourth-grade students choose recipes and shop at nearby Red Front Supermarket for ingredients. The older students learn the denominations of currency, how to count change and understand a grocery receipt.

"Even the regular ed kids could benefit, because it's things that you're really not taught at school, but a lot of kids don't get it at home either," said Bobbi Paulette-Payne, one of two teaching assistants in Wright's classroom. "They're really important skills."

Back at school, students prepare the treats using adaptive knives, heated ice cream scoops and a specialized blender. The money raised by selling the smoothies goes toward educational field trips, Wright said.



Traci White / DN-R

Jennifer Wright, a special education teacher at Waterman Elementary School, is teaching her students a lesson in economics by letting them run their own smoothie business, blending academic and business skills in one experience.

The small jobs students simulate include counting yogurt lids for breast cancer research and assembling fundraiser packets to learn how to stack and staple papers.

"My goal through these businesses is to teach them real-life job skills and then academics in a functional way — reading things they're going to need to read, learning to count money, adding, graphing," Wright said.

Wright said she occasionally vis-

its some of the mainstream classes at Waterman, and in some areas she believes her students are just as skilled as their peers.

"They may not be reading on [the same] grade level and be doing math," she said, "but they can comparison shop, and I think that's important."

Contact Doug Manners at 574-6293 or dmanners@dnronline.com