

MAKING IT COUNT

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DURHAM – Ian Pearson, proud new owner of a used 1996 Honda Accord, got a nasty surprise Tuesday afternoon when he walked down the stretch of corridor known as “Holton Highway.”

Officer Paul Clark of the Durham Police Department stepped out of an alcove, announced he was pulling over the 17-year-old Performance Learning Center student and issued a \$20 speeding ticket.

“Are you kidding me?” Pearson asked with a laugh.

It was just one of many lessons about impending adulthood that Pearson and about 100 other students at the Holton Career and Resource Center got from the Real World Youth Simulation. The program, provided by Independent Living Resources, Inc., BECOMING Durham and Communities in Schools, provided students ages 16 to 21 with insights about what’s involved with managing money after high school and college.

Based on career assessments, students reached into gray bags associated with their job choice, such as law enforcement or information technology. From their bag, each student plucked a small slip of paper that gave a salary and medical benefits based on education level. This helped determine their net monthly wages for budget purposes.

Then they reached into another bag labeled “Life Happens.” The paper drawn from this bag provided some unexpected turns of events, such as eating disorders or other situations that might require regular counseling or medical treatment.

After workshops on topics such as insurance and banking, students took their budget worksheets to a large room on the second floor of Holton, where vendors waited at tables to sell them everything from groceries to cable television to luxury electronics. They also had to factor in necessities such as an apartment, which they could probably make more affordable by getting roommates; clothing and transportation, which might be a bus pass or a car, if they could budget for it.

It was an eye-opening experience for Otis Frazier, 19, who wants to go into law enforcement as a career.

“This is teaching me stuff I really didn’t know, like how to budget my money so that I don’t spend it all right when I get it,” he said.

The big lesson 17-year-old Adriana Velazquez took away from the day: “Go to college.” She drew a job without a degree and no medical benefits. The upside: She didn’t have to pay off any student loans. The downside: She had to pay for insurance and scrimp and save to survive.

Brandon Alexander of BECOMING Durham wanted students in the real

world simulation to learn those tough lessons now when it's safe to make the occasional misstep.

"We know that it's going to be hard when they get out there," Alexander said. "It's good to do it now when they can make a mistake and learn from it."

Sarah Carucci, representing Communities in Schools, agreed that it is critical for teens, especially in difficult economic times, to learn as soon as possible to manage their money.

"If they're not dipping their toes into the real world yet, it's just around the corner for them," she said.

Nancy Carter, executive director of Independent Living Resources, originally developed this curriculum in 1996, but this was the first time her program was adapted for Durham students.

"If kids listened to what teachers tell them all the time, we wouldn't have to do this," Carter said. "They have to learn by doing, by experiencing it for themselves. It's good for them to see what the real world is all about and hit them with all these surprises before it counts."

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