Physics Day at Lagoon gives students thrill

Natalie Andrews Deseret Morning News

FARMINGTON -- Bryan Morrill was disappointed because his parachute didn't open, but he had fun anyway. The Box Elder High School student, along with 6,000 other junior high and high school students, made Lagoon a hands-on laboratory Friday.

Morrill, 16, had never participated in a physics experiment until he dropped a foam-padded egg from the Sky Ride. His egg splattered, missing the blue-and-white target, but if the parachute had opened, he thinks it would have gone differently.

The Sky Drop competition was a new event for the 15th annual Physics Day at Lagoon Friday. More than 400 students entered the competition, using common household objects to pad their eggs on the drop -- paper shreds, popcorn, foam, bubble wrap and peanut butter were seen falling from the sky.

J.R. Dennison, Physics Day chairman, said the day has two purposes. One, it makes physics fun and real to see it used in examples. Two, if a teacher can promise a trip to Lagoon at the end of the year it boosts enrollment in physics classes.

"We're kind of tricking the students," he said.

Students arrived with experiments in tow, ready to test them on rides and compete to win some of the $100,000 in prizes that were given away in the form of scholarships to Utah State University, Lagoon passes and other donations.

Eighth-grader Anthea Stevens learned the scientific reasons behind stomach churning on Colossus while studying a homemade instrument and twisting upside down at the same time.

"You kind of realize how many things you learn in a classroom apply in real life," Stevens said.

Stevens and her team, Harrison Baxter and Garrett McKenney, measured the force of gravity on the Colossus Fire Dragon roller coaster. Their teacher, Brian LeStarge, has taken his classes to Physics Day for the past eight years because he believes in hands-on learning. He brought 160 students to Lagoon.

The event boasts several sponsors that do more than send money. Boeing sent 16 engineers, who wiped egg splats off the pavement and talked to interested students.

Dennison started Physics Day in 1990 when teachers requested it after hearing of similar events in California and Texas. Now even the teachers compete, winning prizes if their students win, and in their own lesson plan contest. A 300-page textbook compiled from that contest is online for teachers to use.

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