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West Smithfield a model for others

By KATHERINE HIGGINS, STAFF REPORTER

Smithfield -- At West Smithfield Elementary last Friday, fourth-graders passed out programs and directed guests to their seats.

The school was celebrating its selection as a demonstration site for the Accelerated Schools plus model.

Student involvement contributed to the selection of West Smithfield as an example of what an Accelerated School should be, said Gene Chasin, director of Accelerated Schools Plus.

"It's very child-centered," said Chasin, who came from Connecticut to celebrate the school's accomplishment. "The kids own things here. I've been here twice, and both times I have been struck by the energy level in the building.

"These really are the beacon schools."

More than 1,700 schools have embraced the concept since its inception 19 years ago. But West Smithfield is just one of seven models, meaning it's a destination for schools that are honing their program or thinking about adopting it.

Accelerated Schools choose goals with input from the whole school community, empower those people through responsibility, and find and nurture every person's strengths.

Kimberly Jones, one of the student greeters, said she was excited about her school's accomplishment. "I am really proud to be here," she said. "We are going to have fun today."

After the outdoor ceremony, which ended with students blowing bubbles, the school threw a party with inflatable slides and ice cream from Cold Stone Creamery.

Students also had a big part in the program, as they took the microphone to talk about how the Accelerated Schools concept plays out in their classrooms.

"They trust us to work by ourselves and be responsible," said R.J. Ireland, a fourth-grader.

Fifth-grader Enrique Fraire told the crowd about the two schoolwide units, biomes and world cultures, that all grades studied this year.

He said it made him feel special to share his Mexican heritage with his classmates. "Toward the end of the culture theme, we shared what we learned with Mrs. Everton's first-grade class, and they shared what they had learned about Africa," Enrique said.

Eleanor Herr is the Southeast regional director for Accelerated Schools plus, and she pushed for West Smithfield's selection for demonstration status. "Really, a part of the culture of the school is looking for and finding the gifts of every person who comes in the building," she said.

Brookie Honeycutt, the school's former principal who now leads Cleveland Elementary, came back for the celebration.

She was the principal when West Smithfield opened in 2003 as an Accelerated School, the only one in Johnston County.

"There were a lot of reservations," Honeycutt said. "Would we be able to sustain it? Once we got into it and saw the positive energy it generated ... that's what motivates all of us, seeing the students light up. It's why we all do it."

Herald Staff Reporter Katherine Higgins can be reached at 934-2176, Ext. 127, or by e-mail at khiggins@nando.com.