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Off the Beat: Geography leads to culinary adventures

By CATHERINE BAUM Staff Writer

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NORTHAMPTON - Parents: whip out your family cookbooks, for your children might try foods they wouldn't normally taste at home Thursday at the Jackson Street School's International Day celebration at 6 p.m.

At least those are the expectations of Geography Club teacher Dorrie Brooks, who reports a dozen students in her club have expanded their food curiosities since September. Fruit breads, greek salads and olives are among the meals students have found delectable this year in the Geography Club, a division of the Jackson Street After School Enrichment Program. The club seeks to raise student interest in cultural differences across national borders.

"It's really neat to explore foods with kids at this age," Brooks said. "In the context of an after-school club they're willing to explore anything - things they would never try for mom and dad."

In addition to a multicultural family potluck, the International Day event Thursday night includes a map-making workshop, student-made poster showcase and two National Geographic geography bees. Fourth and fifth-grade students who qualify in Thursday's bee may take the written test to enter the state National Geographic geography bee. This is the first year Jackson Street students will partake in a preliminary to the nationwide geography bee.

"I think it's good to show high expectations of kids," Brooks said. "Learning how to sometimes be wrong and how to figure out something that you don't know is a good skill."

Brooks stepped up to create and teach the Geography Club this fall, when the After School Enrichment Program at Jackson Street started. For their lesson on India, Geography Club students played cricket with random-sized balls and canoe paddles and sipped on chai tea.

"They liked that improvising," Brooks said. "They really enjoy being able to play games that they're not already behind."

Other clubs in the enrichment program include the Lego, Scrabble, Chinese, sculpture and yoga clubs. Led by Cathy Santosus, the program seeks to be self-funded. To that end, there will be raffles, donations and other fundraisers to benefit the program at the International Day celebration Thursday. Family recipes will also be collected and added to a cookbook Santosus intends to put together.

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Report cards

Every six years, the state audits the school district's performances in special education, civil rights and English learner education programs. Following an audit this spring, Northampton was cited for 43 issues.

"It's huge," said Valle Dwight, co-chairwoman of the Northampton Special Education Parent Advisory Council.

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Last time, in 2003, Northampton was cited for non-compliance or partial compliance on six issues.

While Dwight noted she couldn't directly pinpoint the cause for change, she speculates there was different criteria in the two reports. The report also attributes a lack of support in the district for inclusive classrooms and instructional support to the drastic evaluation change. What's more, a special education director has not been hired to replace Craig Jurgensen after he left this summer, which Dwight said she believes is "worrisome."

The Parent Advisory Council will discuss the report and the school district's Correction Action Plan Jan. 20 at 7 p.m. at JFK Middle School. All parents are encouraged to come to the meeting.

"We really want everybody to come out because it affects everybody," said Dwight, who noted about 22 percent of the student population is in special education. "We're spending money for special education and we're not getting what we're spending money for."

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NEF awards \$24,000

The Northampton Education Foundation has awarded \$23,730 to 17 applicants in its Small Grants to Teachers program. Projects range across subjects and schools, many of which include partnerships with local businesses and museums. R.K. Finn Ryan Road and Jackson Street School students are to present concerts in March with ewe drumming, a complex tradition in west Africa.

Other projects awarded with funding include improvised movie-making workshops for fourth and fifth-grade girls, the school garden program at Jackson Street School and Eric Carle Museum educator presentations and bookmaking for second graders. Advanced Placement students at Northampton High will attend the local Chemistry Olympiad competition in March and the Connecticut Science Center in May.

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