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Students and mentors learn to be movers and shakers

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Special To The Times

TRENTON — For 200 small-business owners here, the economy is the least of their worries.

In addition to running their own businesses, these entrepreneurs have to concentrate on other priorities, such as graduating from eighth grade.

Junior high students from four Trenton schools came together yesterday for a Market Fair in the Hill Elementary School auditorium as part of the Minding Our Business program. The program matches college student mentors with junior high students and divides them into 20 teams. Each team is responsible for coming up with a business plan, which they implemented yesterday.

Sigfredo Hernandez, a professor at Rider University in Lawrence and MOB's founder, said the program benefits both the college-age mentors and the young entrepreneurs.

"It's a program where the mentors are trained as team facilitators, which allows the kids to participate and be the key thinkers and doers in running their own business," he said.

In this, the 12th year of the program, 200 students were combined with 60 mentors, 52 from Rider and eight from The College of New Jersey in Ewing. The number of participants doubled from last year, when 100 students from two Trenton schools participated.

Rider students participate in the program for three academic credits as part of a service-learning course.

Hamzah Abushaban, a freshman at Rider and student mentor, said the MOB program is an good opportunity for the students involved.

"This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for these kids," he said. "Even though it's a one-day thing, the kids know the concept of business for the rest of their lives."

Hernandez said the students and mentors started developing their business plans in January. The teams then presented their plans to judges, made up of alumni mentors, businesspeople and Rider professors.

The teams received loans from the judges and will pay the loans back from what they made yesterday. Hernandez said the average loan is about \$150, and the loan repayment rate is 96 percent.

One group of 12 students and three mentors, which called themselves "Wacky Pretzelade," had pretzels and lemonade for sale as well as baked goods donated from Starbucks.

"I'm learning things about business," Stanley Paez, an eighth-grader at Grant Elementary School, said.

One of his partners, Edna Duarte, a sixth-grader, agreed.

"When I'm bigger I will know how to run a business," she said.

Yasir Ahmad, a sophomore at Rider and mentor for "Wacky Pretzelade," said the experience is good for the students.

"It makes me appreciate the effort teachers put out," he said. "It helps kids get real world experience early on."

Geniene Manheimer, a sophomore at Rider, said she enjoys having the opportunity to influence kids and "get them out of the classroom."

Another group, "The Extreme Carnival," offered customers a chocolate fountain, popcorn, sand art and stuffed teddy bears.

Jen Webber, a junior at Rider, said the group met once a week prior to yesterday. She said they received a \$200 loan to start their business.

Makia Thompson, a sixth-grader at Rivera Elementary school, said she has learned a lot from participating in MOB.

"I'm really thinking about making my own business," she said.

PHOTO CAPTION: 1. From left, Rider students Dianna Rosenberg and Jen Webber assist Rivera Elementary School students Jahmere Burris and Makia Thompson yesterday during the Market Fair at Hill Elementary School in Trenton. Rider professor Sigfredo Hernandez is in the background. The event was part of the Minding Our Business program, which matches college student mentors with junior high students. **CREDIT:** 1. FRANK JACOBS III/THE TIMES

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