

Pentagon Official Starts Children's Space Organization
JEREMY SINGER, WASHINGTON

Fed up with complaints that the United States lacks the passion to make dramatic advances in space, one Pentagon official has taken it upon himself to address the problem.

Nicholas Eftimiades, senior architecture integration officer in the office of the National Security Space Architect, has started the Galaxy Explorers, an after-school and summer educational program similar to the Boy Scouts.

The idea came to him in April 2001 after attending the Space Foundation's National Space Symposium in Colorado Springs, Colo.

Eftimiades felt panelists at the conference expected the president of the United States to rally enthusiasm for space. After thinking about the issue, Eftimiades decided that offering more space education to children would nurture their interest and draw their parents in too.

Recognizing that the school day is already packed with a variety of vital subjects, Eftimiades earlier this year launched the Galaxy Explorers with a pilot after-school program for 25 kids at the Rock Creek International School here.

The children learn about space science, Earth science, rocketry, engineering and space communications, which involves studying the business case for space programs, Eftimiades said.

Galaxy Explorers also ran a space camp for 150 kids from July 8 through July 19 at Saunders Middle School in Dale City, Va., which covered the same basic topics. The camp also featured an aerodynamics lesson taught by U.S. Army officials who flew in on a Black Hawk helicopter and allowed the children to sit in its cockpit, Eftimiades said.

The camp has been a success, and will almost definitely continue next year, Eftimiades said. The camp curriculum will likely be planned so children who attended this year will be able to continue to attend, he said. Those children who also enroll in Galaxy Explorers at their schools will have new challenges each year as they advance in grade levels, he said.

The program, which is aimed at children in grades 3 through 11, will be expanded to nine schools in Virginia this fall, and educators in other U.S. states, as well as countries like Germany, Australia and Iran, have expressed interest in establishing the program at their schools, Eftimiades said. Several thousand kids will likely be enrolled in the program this fall, and about 10,000 kids may be involved by the end of this year, he said.

Staffed entirely by volunteers, Galaxy Explorers is run with little financial overhead, but significant investment in time from space industry officials as well as those at NASA and in the military who help develop and teach the curriculum, Eftimiades said.

The program's board of directors includes Stephen Oswald, a former astronaut; Paul Graziani, chief executive officer of Analytical Graphics, King of Prussia, Pa.; and John Logsdon, director of the George Washington University Space Policy Institute here.

Its advisory board includes U.S. Rep. Dana Rohrabacher (R-Calif.), chairman of the House Science space and aeronautics subcommittee, as well as several other congressmen; former astronaut Buzz Aldrin; and Kathy Sullivan, the first woman to walk in space. Senior military officials including U.S. Air Force Gen. Ralph (Ed) Eberhart, commander in chief of U.S. Space Command, have cited the need to attract young people into the space work force.

"As I look at the last 10 to 15 years, I'm disappointed in the decline of aeronautical and astronautical degrees we see across this nation," Eberhart said in an April interview. "I've seen a survey that when you ask elementary school students what they are most interested in, you get two subjects, dinosaurs and space. So someplace between elementary school and degree time, we lose these people."

Graziani said he hopes the program will help address the concerns from Eberhart and others. "When I look at the gaping whole of kids going into engineering and math sciences, this is a fantastic way to capture their interest at a very early age and continue with education that will stay with them for the rest of their lives," Graziani said.

In addition to educating future aerospace engineers, Eftimiades and Graziani said the program will stoke the knowledge and enthusiasm for space in children who choose other fields, as well as their parents. This will help increase the national desire for pushing ahead with new space programs, they said.