

FREE education: Foundation promotes understanding of economics and business

About Phil Castle

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Phyllis Hunsinger, founder and president of the Freedom & Responsibility Education Enterprise Foundation, interacts with students at Caprock Academy in Grand Junction. The foundation educates local middle and high school students about free enterprise, trade, economics and financial literacy. (Photo courtesy Elaine Matthews)

Phil Castle, The Business Times

John Miller opened the brown paper sack and discovered a pair of socks. He wasn't thrilled. But he wasn't that disappointed, either.

Consequently, Miller didn't trade his socks even as other students in the class at Caprock Academy in Grand Junction frantically hawked the odd assortment of wares they'd found in their bags, eager to switch.

But that's one of the important attributes of free trade, says Phyllis Hunsinger, a retired educator who led the demonstration. It's a voluntary exchange in which the participating parties are happy with the outcome.

Miller was happy with his socks. Moreover, the 12-year-old seventh grader at Caprock says he's happy he signed for the course. "It's entertaining, yet you still learn things."

Miller says he wants to learn more about trade, economics and business. He's considering a career in business, in fact, perhaps in retailing or manufacturing.

Hunsinger, founder and president of the Freedom & Responsibility Education Enterprise (FREE) Foundation, says the local organization and its efforts are geared to students like Miller as well as those who might be less aware, at least initially, of the forces economics exerts in their lives. "It's so critical to, I think, the students to succeed, to navigate the world."

The foundation provides resources to students and teachers in Western Colorado to promote the understanding of economics, financial literacy and free enterprise. That includes classroom instruction as well as an annual leadership conference.

The FREE Foundation has offered a course at Caprock Academy for five years as part of a program called goal hour in which students suggest activities in which they're interested and sign up for courses.

Andrew Collins, head of school at Caprock, says the FREE Foundation course always fills up, even though students have such others choices as outdoor sports, book club and chess club. "The kids love it."

Teachers and administrators at Caprock love it, too, Collins says, because the instruction complements the curriculum at a charter school that offers a classical education and character development designed to prepare students to become active participants in their communities.

Free markets and economics are important concepts to understand, Collins says. "We like our kids to get a good dose of that early on."

Hunsinger says she founded the FREE Foundation to expose students at an early age to business, economic and financial concepts and in turn give them a literacy that will them succeed later in life.

As a former teacher, principal and superintendent, Hunsinger says she saw that instruction was largely missing — in part because of the increased emphasis on standardized testing. “What doesn’t get tested, doesn’t get taught.”

The FREE Foundation program matches particularly well with what’s taught at Caprock and the students there, she says. “These kids are bright and articulate.”

Over the course of the fall semester, students taking the FREE Foundation course will apply what they’ve learned in creating a business — a hamburger stand. Students will come up with a business name and logo, a competitive analysis and product and marketing plans. Community business leaders will critique the efforts.

Miller says he’s already learned about product quality and pricing as well as the importance of a well-designed logo and good service in attracting customers.

In addition to the instruction at Caprock, the FREE Foundation has scheduled its next Western Slope Leadership Conference for Nov. 13 at Colorado Mesa University in Grand Junction. The conference is open to high school juniors and features nationally recognized speakers and hands-on activities. The foundation provides teaching materials to educators who bring students to the conference.

For more information about the Freedom & Responsibility Education Enterprise Foundation and its programs, log on to www.freedom.us.com.

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