



JIM MACLEAN/RIVERTOWNS ENTERPRISE

Teacher Matthew Kennedy works with a student on Dec. 4.

Hour of Code inspires dancing and more

By Kris DiLorenzo

Twenty-seven fourth-graders at Concord Road Elementary School was gaming on their Chromebooks on Dec. 4, while computer science teacher Matthew Kennedy let them play their favorite popular tunes.

Although the students' volume level nullified Kennedy's earlier exhortation to "use your indoor voices," he shared their excitement. The students were learning to code, through software enabling them to participate in the play lab "Dance Party."

The school is participating in the global "Hour of Code," consisting of approximately 205,400 events during annual Computer Science Education Week, Dec. 3-9. The week honors computing pioneer Rear Adm. Grace Murray Hopper, who was born on Dec. 9, 1906, and died on Jan. 1, 1992.

The coding campaign is supported by more than 200,000 educators and 400 partners, the latter including Microsoft, Apple, Amazon, Boys and Girls Clubs of America, and the College Board. This year, more than 180 countries, from Algeria to Zimbabwe, hosted events.

Concord Road's first, second, and

third grades each had their own Hour of Code. Kindergartners did not. Though fourth graders voted for "Dance Party" in an online Google forum, third-graders chose "Minecraft Voyage Aquatic." Second graders had a split vote: "Disney Infinity" and sports games. First-graders participated in "Snoopy Snowball," snowball fights featuring "Peanuts"

comic strip characters Snoopy and Woodstock.

Kennedy's students employed tools on the screen's right side (the work space) that provided drop-down menus, from which the children built a program, choosing and naming animated

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characters (robots and cats were popular), positioning them on the screen's left side (the play space), adding a background scene, picking a song from a long list ("Uptown Funk," by Mark Ronson and Bruno Mars, was a favorite), and instructing their characters what type of dance to perform.

The music, dance, background, and character size could be changed at any time — even randomly, if the player selected that option — and characters added or subtracted. On one child's screen, a main character was encircled by a ring of prone characters, reminiscent of a synchronized swimming pattern in an Esther Williams movie.

Nicholas Stone, 9, was so thrilled with his dance party that he was waving his arms in the air and bouncing in his seat as his onscreen robot gesticulated. "I love electronics a lot," he said. "I maybe started at [age] 5." He continued manipulating his character as he explained, "What I really like about it is, you can make all different kinds of things possible."

Lorre Archer, also 9, was concentrating on her screen, creating an exotic party background, with palm trees and a mirrored disco ball. Her performers varied: a cat, duck, moose, child — and backup dancers.

"I like that you get to create puzzles," she said. "It's going to look real cool."

Kennedy wasn't surprised at how quickly the students picked up on the game. "The Hour of Code is part of the computer science curriculum," he said. "They have the background and the skills. They've been working on computers in pair programming. One student is the driver, one is the navigator."

Today (Dec. 7), 21 Ardsley High School seniors were scheduled to visit Concord Road to participate in the Hour of Code with fourth graders. "They'll be showing the kids some fancy stuff they learned," Kennedy quipped.

At the end of the half hour on Tuesday, Kennedy took an informal poll of the fourth-graders: "What did you think of the class?"

"It was awesome!" was the loud, unanimous reply.

As the energized students prepared to file out of the lab, two girls were still dancing in line.