Cute ducklings could open doors to future careers

By BRIAN BREHM The Winchester Star
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Quarles Elementary School computer science integration coach Jenny Ramsey walks with ducklings hatched and reared by students at the school Thursday. The project is part of a STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) learning project.
WINCHESTER — Seven-year-old Kiah Anderson sat in her classroom at Quarles Elementary School Thursday morning and held Moby Duck, a duckling she and her fellow second-graders hatched in an incubator.

Moby is one of three ducks that have been raised in teacher Nicole Hobson’s classroom these past few weeks as part of a STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) learning project.

“We’ve had them since they were babies,” Kiah said as Moby Duck’s friends Duke and Ocho waddled around the room.

Kiah reads to the ducklings every day. She said their favorite book is “Duck On a Bike” by author David Shannon.

Eight-year-old Ella Trdlickova said it’s calming to come to school and spend time with the ducklings.

“They’re so cute and playful,” second-grader Ella said on Thursday, which would be her last full day with her fluffy friends.

Moby Duck, Ocho and Duke are moving today to their new, permanent home on a farm owned by Winchester Public Schools grant specialist Jennifer LaBombard-Daniels, who is overseeing the grant-funded STEM program at both Quarles and John Kerr Elementary School.

“What we’re doing with our kids is immersing them in STEM and computer science fields,” LaBombard-Daniels said on Thursday.

How do baby ducks help kids learn about computers? By teaching them about modern farming techniques that involve robotics, automation, coding and more, LaBombard-Daniels said.

Thanks to the Virginia Department of Education and the National Inventors Hall of Fame, Winchester Public Schools recently received a “farm to family” kit that included devices and information to show students at Quarles and John Kerr elementary schools how modern farming embraces technology to reduce workloads and produce better food.

One of the devices in the kit was a miniature John Deere tractor the students programmed to automatically make its way around a classroom.
“They created a farm and made pathways, and then we coded the tractor to go through the farm,” Quarles computer science coach Jenny Ramsey said. “We want to show them how computer science is out there in every industry there is.”

The project with the ducklings began before they even hatched. LaBombard-Daniels said incubators were used to develop the eggs, which allowed students to follow the growth of the ducklings while they were still in their shells. The incubation process also taught the second-graders how farmers must limit the number of eggs they hatch in order to control their poultry populations.

Once hatched, the ducklings stayed at Quarles and John Kerr so the students would have an immersive experience while learning to properly care for them. That experience could be instrumental later in their lives, LaBombard-Daniels said, when the children decide what they want to do for a living.

“When we did a survey of third- and fourth-graders last year,” she said, “veterinary science was the number one STEM field that they picked. I really attribute that to these projects because they’re having hands-on experiences.”

Apart from the educational aspect, Ramsey said the ducklings provided other benefits for the students.

“Sometimes they’re having a rough morning or having a hard time in the classroom, so a lot of these ducks end up turning into therapy ducks,” she said. “The students come to the counseling corner, they sit and hold the ducks, they read to them, get their feelings back in action and go back to the classroom. Not only are they learning to raise a duck and understand the life cycle of an animal they may not see in the city, but they’re also learning empathy and caring and giving.”

It’s not just the kids who enjoy spending time with the ducklings. On Thursday, LaBombard-Daniels brought in five additional ducklings that caught the attention of every Quarles teacher who passed by in the hallway.

“It’s therapy, something different in the building than math and reading,” Quarles instructional coach Heather Williams said.

The five ducklings brought in Thursday are being raised on LaBombard-Daniels’ farm. In order for her to take the animals to Quarles, she also had to bring along a Silkie chicken who became their de facto mother after a batch of chicken eggs she was nesting failed to hatch. Since the Silkie
couldn't have babies of her own, she gravitated toward the ducklings and the ducklings bonded with her immediately. The unusual brood is now inseparable, so the ducklings wouldn't leave the farm with LaBombard-Daniels unless their mother went, too.

The duckling project recently concluded at John Kerr and will end today at Quarles when LaBombard-Daniels moves the three ducklings in Hobson's classroom to her farm. LaBombard-Daniels said the ducks will live out their natural lives there and won't be used for meat, but the eggs laid by the females will be collected and appreciated.

“She'll send us picture updates and we'll send them out to the kids,” Williams said.

John Kerr computer science coach Amy Thomas said the students at her school held up quite well when it was time to say goodbye to their ducklings.

“They know that the ducks need to be in a space that's more comfortable for them,” Thomas said. “And it starts to get a little smelly after a while.”

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More Information
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