Teacher Juanita Ramsey and the five students she worked with show the plaque they won from the state of North Carolina.

Philo-Hill Students win state award, earn $5,000 for school

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SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

Working with teacher Juanita Ramsey, a team of five students at Philo-Hill Magnet Academy created a design for a telephone app called Aged-Out Help that won first place in the state out of more than 1,200 entries and went on to be chosen as one of the regional winners.

"I am extremely excited and proud of my wonderful students," Ramsey said.

Student Zach Gittings said he was so excited by the news that he was still wondering whether he was dreaming.

"I'm pretty sure I'm asleep right now," he said.

Ramsey

Along with being a member of the N.C. House of Representatives, Evelyn Terry is a long-time friend of Ramsey's who sometimes helps with school projects.

"I am so proud of these children and my friend," Terry said. "I know of her dedication as a teacher."

It's good to see Ramsey and the students receive such positive attention, Terry said. "I told them this afternoon when I came, 'You are all stars to me.'"

The app, which is designed to help young people who become too old to be served by foster care, was in the running for a national award. On Thursday, Jan. 20, the students made a 15-minute live online presentation to the national judges.

The state award came with $5,000 for the school to use to enhance its STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) education. Principal Kenyatta Bennett can ponder how the money might best serve the school.

Ramsey teaches business, finance and information technology. For winning the state, the seventh- and eighth-graders on the team -- Ja'ya Jackson, Ayniah Duncan, Anthony Sturdivant, Larry Clary and Zach Gittings -- will also receive a tablet computer.

By some state criteria, Philo-Hill is considered a low-performing school. This award shows, Bennett said, that students and teachers at Philo-Hill are working hard. "It means validation for the work that we do ... Regardless of labels, students are learning and growing. Real-world problem-solving is alive and well at Philo-Hill."

When the students heard about the 2015 Verizon Innovative App Challenge in October, they decided to take it on, designing an application (app) that could be used on a wireless phone as a class project.

Deciding what they wanted the app to focus on proved to be pretty straightforward. All of the students on the team know young people who are or were in foster care.

"We have a lot of foster kids at this school," said Jackson.

"My stepdad and his four siblings were foster kids," Duncan said. "They went through a lot."

Her father was also in foster care, she said.

The team members quickly came to a consensus about designing an app that would help those young people find resources and would be a way to serve individuals and the wider community.

"Everybody was on board with it," Sturdivant said. "We all came together."

"I like to help people," Clary said.

When they looked to see whether such apps already existed elsewhere, they found, in general, very little. As for this community in particular, they learned that, although it has a number of nonprofit organizations, churches and businesses that serve people who are homeless or need help in other ways, there was no app specifically designed to help young people on their own after aging out of foster care to find the necessary resources.

So they went to work designing an app and doing the research to support it. "I never realized how serious aging out was until we started working on this app," Sturdivant said.

"It's a big problem in our community ..." Duncan said.

"... that needs to be solved," Jackson added.

Being on your own is a big deal, and someone in that situation may need help with finding a place to live, with finding a job, with pursuing their educational goals and much more. Among the facts they discovered were that 42 percent of such young people become homeless at some point, 45 percent don't complete high school or earn a GED high school equivalency certification, 68 percent have no natural support system, and 29 percent become single parents.

The contest requirements included answering a series of questions and creating a video "commercial" about the app for judges to watch. Making the video proved to be lots of fun. The other students joked that Clary, who played the young man who had aged out of foster care, had the easiest job because he had no lines and just had to concentrate on looking hurt and distressed while the rest of them had to learn and recite lines about how the app worked and what support services are available.

Ramsey said she was proud of the students for sticking with the project. When they started, she said, no one realized how much work it would require. The students stayed after school and worked on weekends, doing whatever was necessary.

"It was a lot of hard work but it paid off," Ramsey said.

Philo-Hill was in the South Region, which includes 11 states.

The eight Best in Nation winners -- one high school and one middle school from each of the four regions -- was announced on Feb. 2. Philo-Hill did not win. See the results at http://appchallenge.tsaweb.org/sites/appchallenge.tsaweb.org/files/press-room/BestNation-pdf%20for%20website1-flat.pdf.