

Like Technology? Join the Club!

Computer Clubhouses offer underserved kids an after-school retreat for inclusive, hands-on learning -- and some new ways of approaching old subjects.

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by [Rob Baedeker](#)

In the nine community centers in Fairfax County, Virginia, kids can drop in after school to play games, use the gym, or hang out with friends -- it's afternoon youth recreation in its standard, timeless form. But at six of the centers, which are home to [Computer Clubhouse](#) programs, something more unusual is going on. Here you'll find students editing digital photos, working with other digital media, and producing their own music.

They might even be building robots.

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"We've still got thousands of robot pieces all over the clubhouse," says Ron Moses, manager of the James Lee Community Center Computer Clubhouse, in Falls Church, Virginia. He's just returned from the University of Maryland, where six students from his program took part in a robotics competition called [Botball](#).

"We competed to the third round," he says. "Our design was pretty good, but we had some issues with programming."

The kids will have plenty of opportunity to refine their skills before the next competition: The center is open every day after school. "We have homework help when kids get off the bus," Moses says. "The robotics program meets twice a week; the kids can work on Web pages with Dreamweaver, or build their own video games, or create beats with music-editing programs. Their eyes open wide when they see how much software we have to assist with anything they want to do on the computer."

Funding for the software -- and the rest of the county's Computer Clubhouse operation -- comes from the [Equal Footing Foundation](#), the charitable arm of the Northern Virginia

Technology Council. According to Colleen Hahn, president and executive director of Equal Footing, the organization's mission is to "make sure underserved kids in northern Virginia are getting the skill sets they need to enter the workforce or college on equal footing" with those who have had access to better resources.

The six clubhouses act as after-school drop-in spaces for children ages 8-18, says Lee Betton, the county's coordinator of computer-network activities, who oversees the operation of all six locations. Some students come in with specific school-related or personal projects to work on, he explains, and program managers also have a long list of starter projects to help students who visit the centers without a particular goal in mind.

Betton says the centers act as an important complement to the more formal atmosphere of school. "It gives kids a little bit of break from structured presentation, and helps kids who, for whatever reason, have decided school is strange," he adds. The centers, he says, also can enable these students to develop "focus and organization, and those two skills are transferable back to the classroom."

Ron Moses also emphasizes the nontraditional approach to learning the Computer Clubhouses champion. "We try to teach a lot of math and science without teaching them math and science," he says. "When you say 'math' and 'science,' they can tune you out. But if you do it in a different way -- as opposed to a teacher standing at a board -- you can see the lightbulb come on."

Betton says an important part of the program is the group of adult mentors, many drawn from the Northern Virginia Technology Council, who volunteer to hang out in the centers and help students navigate the new technologies. "They're good at what they do, and they can wow the kids," he adds.

Colleen Hahn says the Computer Clubhouses recently found another way for adults in the community to inspire the students. "Last year, we launched the Clubhouse Speakers Series," she adds. "It's a way for successful businesspeople to come in and talk to students about how they got where they are today." Guests have included a Nicaraguan immigrant who now runs a supermarket chain, the director of a tsunami-relief organization, and a NASA employee.

The Fairfax County Computer Clubhouses are modeled after a flagship program established in 1993 by [Boston's Museum of Science](#) in collaboration with the [MIT Media Laboratory](#), and with support from the [Intel Corporation](#). More than a hundred [Computer Clubhouse](#) programs operate around the world.

Betton explains that the museum's model (which emphasizes hands-on inquiry, peer-mentor collaboration, learning in context, and "homework first") is part of what he calls a "three-legged stool" that stabilizes the centers; the other two legs, he adds, are the staffing provided by the county and the extra support and funding from the Equal Footing Foundation. "It has really been an excellent way of putting together what can be a fairly expensive program without it being a burden to anybody," Betton says.

The Computer Clubhouses have opened new doors for many of the students who become involved, Moses and Betton agree. Moses remembers a particular "shy young lady who had good grades but was not a people person. We were fortunate enough to take her to [Teen Summit](#) (a gathering, in Boston, of Computer Clubhouse students from around the world), and she really opened up and got to meet other people like her.

"She became more outgoing and more confident," he says. "She's built four or five computer role-playing games and is the head of our Botball team." She also maintained a 4.0 grade-point average, Moses adds, and has been accepted at the College of William and Mary. Betton adds that Equal Footing will contribute \$10,000 toward her tuition.

Moses says part of what makes a Computer Clubhouse inviting is its supportive, collaborative atmosphere. "We have computers grouped in pods of three," he explains. "The chairs have wheels, so the kids can roll around the floor, and we encourage that. Kids that have more experience are willing to help the younger kids; it's not like they're keeping a secret to themselves."

The rolling chairs and free-form collaboration are a real-world manifestation of Equal Footing's loftier goal of inclusion -- offering resources and opportunities to students who would not otherwise have access to them. As Moses puts it, "If there's something they don't know, instead of ostracizing the kids, you say, 'Let's go and find out, so we all can know.'"

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