The college experience
Tour gives fourth-graders a feel for life after high school

By TODD GUILD and
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APTOBS — Some eight years before they’ll receive their high school diploma, nearly 5,000 Santa Cruz County fourth-graders on Friday began to plan their time at college.

The kids, who came to Cabrillo College’s Aptos campus, were part of the third annual Santa Cruz County College Commitment. Smaller Fourth-Grade Experience, also known as SAGE.

The event was designed to give young people a taste of college life by allowing them to visit the campus, complete with classrooms and dorms.

“It’s a perfect experience,” said Pajaro Valley Unified School District Superintendent Donna Balse. “Students see a campus and start thinking, ‘This is something I can do.’ It gets them on the right mindset.

“The Santa Cruz County College Commitment was launched in 2012 when former county resident Barbara Smupper donated $1 million to the program. She said she wanted to help the children of migrant laborers, but the program has expanded to include everyone.

In addition to supporting student scholarships, Smupper’s financial support has also gone to student scholarships and to Cabrillo’s Visual and Performing Arts program and maintenance of Cabrillo’s Music Recital Hall.

“We’re hopeful that every single student in this county knows they can go to college,” said Cabrillo president Laurel Jones. “This helps plant that seed.” It’s unclear what impact SAGE is having on student college attendance, since the first participants are still in middle school, but SCU Treasurer Director Bay Knapf pointed to research showing that visiting a college before ninth grade increases the chances students will go. There are also the T-shirts that the students are given, emblazoned with the words “Future College Graduate.”

“They wear those shirts for months,” Knapf said.

Moreover, essays before and after the event has shown a growing sophistication in students’ understanding of post-secondary education, Knapf said.

The visit is the beginning of a series of college-readiness programs that include a seventh-grade high school night and an 11th-grade career event.

“This is the beginning of their education plan,” Knapf said. Destiny Gomez from Ann Soto Elementary School said she hoped to see a college football game during her first visit to a college campus.

“As fun as it is here,” she said.

Marc Quilty’s Elementary School student Janelle Cardoza said she hoped to see the art department because she hopes to be an artist.

Jacob Martinez said it was his first time seeing a college campus.

“I am really excited about being here today,” he said. “I hope I can meet some college students today and see their classrooms. I hope to study here some day.”

Marc Quilty’s fourth-grader Jasmine Cortez described her visit as “awesome,” and remarked that the campus was bigger than her school.

“Some day I want to go to college to study cooking,” she said. “I want to open a bakery. I want to make wedding cakes.”

Marc Quilty tech liaison Sylvia Moore said her students prepared for the event by studying different careers and what it takes to achieve them. They also made videos on their own career aspirations.

The college visit makes those dreams tangible, and allows them an insider’s look at a campus some Santa Cruz County families don’t know exists, she said.

“Here, they realize why they are in school,” she said. “They realize they can be anything they want to be.”

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