Spaceport project encourages students to learn science

Students at Mesa Middle School in Las Cruces wanted to see if it was possible to send text messages to a cell phone or a satellite phone aboard a rocket as it is blasting into space.

Aztec High students from the Four Corners region wanted to find out if a New Mexico chile would heat up or get roasted in space.

Middle-school students from El Paso wanted to test the effects of microgravity on a marshmallow.

Some 1,200 visitors, including students from New Mexico, Arizona and Texas, gathered at Spaceport America last week for the third student launch put on by the New Mexico Space Grant Consortium with NASA funding.

Students had been readying their experiments for weeks in preparation for Friday's launch.

And, while those experiments were different, they all gave students a glimpse into the world or space exploration.

And, hopefully, the event sparked a curiosity for some that will lead to further study in science and math and, perhaps, a career in aerospace down the road.

Education has always been a huge component of the Spaceport America plan. That is why a percentage of the local tax generated for the spaceport is dedicated to science and math education.

And, it is why New Mexico State University created a new degree program in aerospace engineering shortly after construction began at the spaceport.

The spaceport launch provides a perfect opportunity for students to take what they have learned in the classroom and apply it to a real-life space launch.

And, while experiments on marshmallows or text messages might seem frivolous, it is the process that matters, not the results.

For the spaceport to be successful, and for our community to derive the maximum benefit from it, it is going to require a local workforce with a unique set of skills.

The student launch may be the first step in sparking the interest that leads to that unique workforce.