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NM spaceport hosts launch of student experiments

A rocket carrying more than two dozen science experiments lifts off from Spaceport America's vertical launch area near Upham, N.M., on Friday, May 20, 2011. Hundreds of students attended the launch as part of NASA's summer innovation program.

Students unload the payload section of a rocket that briefly carried more than two dozen science experiments into space after lifting off from Spaceport America's vertical launch area near Upham, N.M., on Friday, May 20, 2011. Hundreds of students attended the launch as part of NASA's summer innovation program.

UP Aerospace president Jerry Larson, right, helps students dismantle the payload section of a rocket that briefly carried more than two dozen science experiments into space after lifting off from Spaceport America's vertical launch area near Upham, N.M., on Friday, May 20, 2011. Hundreds of students attended the launch as part of NASA's summer innovation program.

In the remote desert of southern New Mexico, hundreds of students from across the state, Arizona and Texas gathered at dawn Friday to watch as a rocket whisked a year's worth of their work into space.

The SL-5 rocket lifted off following a bright flash as engineers from UP Aerospace supervised about a mile away from the crowd. At five times the speed of sound, the rocket carried the students' experiments to a record 73.5 miles high.

The high altitude winds turned the contrail into a corkscrew, and the students belted out their approval with a chorus of "cool" and "awesome."

More than two dozen experiments were launched from Spaceport America as part of this year's annual student launch sponsored by NASA through its Summer of Innovation Program.

George Whitesides, president and CEO of Virgin Galactic, the commercial space venture founded by British billionaire Richard Branson, said it's moments like the rocket launch that capture children's attention.

"We know that as a nation, we need to do a better job of getting our kids excited about science and technology. It's essential to our future, and I think space still has a really big role to play in terms of getting kids tied to those subjects," he said. "We're probably going to have 500 future astronauts because of this event."