

MC takes science out of classroom

■ Hydrogen fuel cell car among exhibits at annual Science Extravaganza for fifth- and sixth-graders.

By Ruth Campbell
Staff Writer

Kahyl Winn and Chance Spencer took a look at the prototype hydrogen fuel cell car at Midland College's Science Extravaganza on Friday and pronounced it cool.

"I want to drive it," said Spencer, who is in sixth grade at Bush Elementary School.

Spencer and Winn, also a Bush sixth-grader, were two of roughly 1,700 fifth- and sixth-graders expected at the 17th annual Science Extravaganza. Youngsters from Midland, the surrounding area and home schoolers turned out.

The car came courtesy of Texas Tech University and was driven here by graduate mechanical engineering student Alan Falls and some fellow students.

The Challenge X car is part of a 17-university competition sponsored by the U.S. Department of Energy and GM.

"Anybody who has a driver's license should be able to drive the car, no problem," Falls said. "It's perfectly safe. One of the things about these competitions is they have very stringent safety procedures."

The engine and transmission were removed from the front of a Chevrolet Equinox. The car was

originally all-wheel drive, but the 25-member team took that off to "lose some weight."

"In the back, we have a hydrogen fuel cell," Falls said. "Instead of making power dirty like a gasoline engine, the only thing that comes out of this is water. In the front we do have an engine, but instead of gasoline we're running E-85 and hydrogen."

E-85 is 85 percent ethanol and 15 percent gasoline. The ethanol was ordered in drums from BP and the hydrogen from Airgas. "That's going to be the biggest problem is infrastructure. You know how there are gas stations on every corner, but there's no place to get hydrogen. It's not going to be viable until they have localized hydrogen filling stations," Falls said.

Midland College biology professor Claudia Hinds said new features of the this year's extravaganza, along with the hydrogen cell fuel car, were an engineering room featuring construction engineering exercises, and Citibank's shopping game where kids were shown the importance of budgeting and saving.

A visit from the Police Department's drug dogs and driving golf carts with "drunk glasses" are always favorites, Hinds said. Kids also got to see various animals and travel through the digestive system, courtesy of the Veterinary Technician program.

The purpose is to make science and math fun for kids. "Take it out of the textbook, out of the class-

room and put it where they can (see it)," Hinds said.

"At the end of the day, I hurt like you know what but it's good to see the kids get into it and they definitely get into it," she added.

Rebekka Wollaston and Sara Krisa, both sixth-graders at Santa Rita, enjoyed everything.

"I think it's real interesting because there's all these different experiments they're doing. You're seeing the body, you can do math," Wollaston said. "I really like the thing where you look like you're drunk and you're driving."

Rachel Carr, an MC meteorology student, sat outside her tent, where kids see how tornadoes form, among other weather-related phenomenon. "Inside we have a tornado going that we built with dry ice and hot water. We have lightning warnings of different types, what time of year it comes and tornado safety," Carr said, showing off a yellow Kestrel that measures dewpoint, humidity, wind and temperature. "We're trying to teach them safety ... and how to prepare themselves."

"It's fun because a lot of them are learning about this now. They're learning and jumping in," Carr added.

And all the kids seemed to be doing just that.

"I think it's wonderful," Spencer said of the event. "I think it's a good learning experience for a lot of kids."