

Robotics helps make global connections

A New Horizons team competes in FIRST contests and mentors a New Zealand team.

By Jennifer L. Williams | 247-4644

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HAMPTON - — [Joe Johnson](#) kept noticing folks in tie-dyed shirts constantly around the New Horizons Regional Education Centers in Hampton. He had just taken over as executive director there several years ago and asked who they were.

Joanne Talmage, one of the coordinators of the school's FIRST robotics team, which wears the shirts, was more than happy to explain.

Her after-school group, operating now for 12 years, has soared in popularity. Next school year, its area of emphasis will be more of a focus during the regular school day, as the Career and Technical Education Center's electronics program expands to robotics and fiber optics.

Talmage will be one of the instructors in the new program, which dovetails with her students' participation in FIRST robotics. FIRST, an acronym for For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology, is an international group that fosters scientific creativity.

Contests for building robots is part of what it does, and Talmage uses the challenges to get her students interested in the inner workings of electronics.

Talmage is the longest-tenured and one of just two women doing FIRST robotics in [Virginia](#). Her team is mentoring one in New Zealand, and Talmage is serving as science and technology ambassador to the United States for XI Tech Inc., out of Petersfield, United Kingdom.

[NASA](#) Langley is the local team's biggest sponsor, and local professionals come in to work with students.

"Because we've been doing it after school with mentors from industry, it's just taken off," Talmage said. "We're known throughout the country and in other countries."

As the robotics team and interest grew, it pushed into the classroom. A student would figure out how something worked during class and then want to run down to the robotics lab and put it in place, Talmage said.

Nowadays, electronics courses are being offered in more local high schools, so advancing to the more technical robotics and fiber optics was a natural progression, said Butler Farm Campus Principal David Creamer. It also provides more advanced skills needed by prospective employers.

Close to a half-million dollars was spent renovating a lab and buying new equipment to make the transition.

When the robotics team was started 12 years ago, it was mostly an offshoot from New Horizons' Governor's School for Math, Science and Technology, Creamer said. It started attracting more career and technical students.

It has helped generate interest in New Horizons as a whole.

"We've found the robotics team is a wonderful venue to reach out to parents," Creamer said. "Once we get them into this building and they realize the things that are going on, their eyes are opened."