

It is not often that kids go to school and are allowed, let alone encouraged, to play video games. Yet that is exactly what the sixth-grade class at Milton M. Somers Middle School found itself doing Friday morning.

Granted, only five students got to actually play the game, which itself bore little resemblance to those typically under lock and key at retail stores. Instead of requiring players to capture a terrorist stronghold or take a team to the Superbowl, the game asked questions about healthy lifestyles and the dangers of underage drinking.

Created by The Century Council an Arlington, Va.-based nonprofit funded by a group of major distillers including Diageo, Bacardi and Brown-Forman the game draws on research indicating that people learn best when their bodies are also active.

In order to play, five student volunteers tapped their feet on a pad to make onscreen characters run and jump along a seaside path or down a supermarket aisle. The quicker they tapped, the faster they ran in the game and the louder their classmates cheered.

At frequent intervals, the game would stop them to ask a variety of true-or-false questions, including whether drinking was cool, if booze boosts athleticism or helps grades and whether it was OK to say “no” to peer pressure.

Outside of a few young rebels, the youngsters shouted out the right answer each time.

The activity was part of The Century Council's “Ask, Listen, Learn: Kids and Alcohol Don't Mix” initiative, which encourages middle school students to talk with their parents and other role models about the perils of underage drinking.

“This is when the kids still listen, at this age,” said former New York congresswoman Susan Molinari, who chairs the council.

Once the students had assembled in the school cafeteria, Molinari made sure to get their attention early.

“How many of you are excited for summer vacation?” she asked.

Every hand in the room shot up, but when Molinari followed by asking how many of the students had discussed underage drinking with their parents, only a handful raised their mitts.

She led the class in a few chants of “yes to healthy lifestyles, no to underage drinking,” before turning the podium over to U.S. Rep. Steny H. Hoyer, who served with both Molinari and her father in Congress.

“We need you healthy and sharp and at the top of your game, getting good grades and performing well and making America a greater country than it even is today,” Hoyer told the students.

He asked them how long it took ingested alcohol to reach the brain, offering the students a number of options on which to raise their hands. A wave of fingers went up instantly once Hoyer informed the audience that those who had guessed correctly that it takes 30 seconds for alcohol to reach the brain from the stomach would receive extra credit.

“You were right,” he said to Principal Stephanie Wesolowski. “This is a sharp crowd.”

Wesolowski said she was thrilled to have Hoyer (D-Md. 5th) and Molinari visit the school, which already had made underage drinking a focus of its annual D.A.R.E. program and health classes.

"It's a great honor and privilege to welcome them to our school but also have them reinforce something we've been teaching all year," she said.

Once the five volunteers finished playing the game, which remained with the school for future use, Century Council staffers passed out goodie bags to students who answered more questions about alcohol, the effect it can have on the body and mind, potential consequences of alcohol abuse and habits that contribute to a healthy lifestyle.

"We are here today to start a conversation with you," said Jennifer Curley, the council's East Coast regional coordinator. "We don't want you to go home and forget what you learned today. We want you to go home and talk to someone you look up to."

Curley asked several students to name someone whom they admired and could talk to about underage drinking. Names included parents, grandparents, siblings, cousins and friends.

"The point is there's a lot and lots of people you can talk to," Curley said.