

More than 900 students receive free backpack, supplies at 'Back to School, Stay in School'

by Cory Davenport, Contributing Writer
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ALTON - Upwards of 900 students came to the annual "Back to School, Stay in School" event sponsored by the Alton branch of the NAACP and the Alton School District.

The event gives students who attend it a free backpack filled with school supplies needed for the upcoming school year. It is held every year at James Killion Park, and seems to grow every year, its organizers said. Outside of free school supplies, students were given talks by mentors, fed, and were able to browse several booths ran by community stakeholders and potential future employers.

"Children are our greatest resource," Alton NAACP President Andy Hightower said. "They are your future presidents, doctors, lawyers and whatever else they choose to be."

Hightower also championed the community's involvement with the event.

"It is always good when the community comes together for a worthy cause, and supporting our youth is the worthiest cause of all," he said. "We are grateful that the community continues to contribute their time and money on support of this event. We would also like to thank the planning committee led by Mrs. Kristie Baumgartner, assistant superintendent, and Mrs. Rosie Brown, Madison County Program Coordinator."

Baumgartner said the event is great for students in her district, adding 800 plus students are able to get a head start at the school year with free necessities, such as backpacks and school supplies. Brown, who also sits on the Alton Board of Education echoed her sentiments.

"It's amazing to see everyone come out today like this," she said. "This is one of the biggest givebacks to the community every year. It's great to be able to help these students get the things they need to get into the classroom and succeed."

Alton Board of Education President Ed Gray agreed with those sentiments, saying he is happy to see the event grow every year. He added that the hot dogs were great as well with a laugh.

Those hot dogs were cooked with care by a team of volunteers, including Madison County Board member, Bruce Malone, who is himself an educator in the Staunton School District and member of the Alton NAACP. He said he is asked by Hightower to volunteer every year and is happy to oblige.

Happiest of all, however, are the children and parents who are able to see their community care about their educational futures. Each student who received a backpack full of supplies walked away with a smile, and their parents did as well.

