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In Durham, youngsters learn the do's and don'ts of dining etiquette

DURHAM — It's a lesson that students do not learn in the classroom, but could make or break someone in the business world.

So when Mimi Bergere, director of The Quantum Program in the Seymour Osman Community Center, was developing activities for students in the program, she thought a lesson in dining etiquette could provide a supplementary skill not taught in schools.

"When they start learning social graces, it opens doors for them," Bergere said. "It helps to be comfortable in any social setting and it's important for self esteem."

Students gathered for their lesson in dining etiquette earlier this month at Acorns Restaurant in the New England Center and learned a range of skills, from the proper way to sit down to where to place silverware after a meal is finished.

Bergere said students typically enjoy this specific field trip, and the lessons stick. "They began to correct me," Bergere said. "That's how I knew it had worked."

The field trip also provided an opportunity for the students, many of whom "have never had dinner in a formal restaurant," Bergere said.

The Quantum Program is run through the Dover Housing Authority and is aimed at providing at-risk youths academic support, life-skills training and recreational opportunities.

And Bergere said the varied activities and one-on-one attention has a proven track record.

The most recent group to finish the program, which runs from the middle of the students' eighth-grade year until high school graduation, had a 100 percent graduation rate and each student was accepted to multiple colleges, a statistic of which Bergere is very proud.

"They are on their way to breaking a cycle of poverty," she said.