

First Tee links up with Albemarle alternative learning program
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Angelina Hillier said she used to think of golf as an “old-man sport,” and had little desire to try it for herself.

But this spring, the Western Albemarle High School junior has enjoyed her weekly visits to the Birdwood Golf Course with the First Tee of the Virginia Blue Ridge.

“[First Tee] turns golf into something that teens can enjoy,” Hillier said.

Hillier is participating in the golf clinics with her classmates at the Enterprise Center for Learning and Growth, an alternative learning program for Albemarle County middle and high school students who have struggled in traditional school settings.

The Enterprise Center typically serves fewer than 20 students at a time in the Ivy Creek School building on Lambs Lane. Renee Willis, a teacher at the Enterprise Center, said it gives students the opportunity to continue their education in an intimate learning environment, and then return to their base schools when they are back on track.

“Many of these students were good at flying under the radar,” Willis said. “Here, you can’t help but to be noticed.”

“The Enterprise Center is smaller than a normal school, so there is no drama,” Hillier said. “Everyone is really close, and teachers are very focused on students’ mental health.”

The center previously partnered with the First Tee of Charlottesville, a chapter of First Tee that was discontinued after the closure of the McIntire Park golf course in 2015.

Jin Ellington, executive director of the First Tee of the Virginia Blue Ridge, said she was excited to revive the partnership this year.

“Our mission is to serve all kids, and to increase the impact we can make on kids who might not have access to our resources,” Ellington said. “These are the kids we really have a heart for serving.”

First Tee-VBR offers after-school golf lessons and summer camps that are open to all children. However, Ellington said the enrollment of these programs often does not reflect the diversity of Charlottesville’s population.

To broaden its reach, First Tee-VBR works with physical education classes at local schools and hosts youth-serving organizations such as the Boys & Girls Clubs of Central Virginia.

“We are working with groups that don’t normally have transportation and access to a golf course on a regular basis,” Ellington said. “It’s good to be part of a network of partnerships like this in Charlottesville.”

Willis said the Enterprise Center’s First Tee participants have taken a “healthy risk” by coming to the Birdwood Golf Course — a very unfamiliar environment for some of the students.

“It is healthy to put yourself in environments you have not been to before and learn how to remain poised and engaged; to be uncomfortable and work through that,” Willis said.

Willis said the Enterprise Center often brings students on field trips to introduce them to unfamiliar places in the community and to expose them to different career fields.

“When you’re not successful, you often don’t look beyond the little world where you are struggling,” Willis said. “You don’t realize that there is something else out there for you to strive for.”

First Tee is a national organization that uses golf to teach core values for life, including honesty, confidence and respect. It also teaches healthy habits to promote physical, emotional and social wellbeing.

Bruce Blair, First Tee-VBR’s program director, recently led a team-building game for the Enterprise Center students designed to teach the core value of integrity.

Boys and girls separated into teams and passed a suitcase from one person to the next while standing on small rubber mats spaced farther than an arm’s length apart.

If someone lost their balance and stepped off their mat, the team had to return the suitcase to the beginning of the line. Students were asked to self-enforce this rule, just as golfers are typically responsible for calling penalties on themselves.

“No one is going to call you out,” Blair said. “You only have to worry about yourselves. ... Integrity is about doing what is right, even when no one is watching.”

Blair said he tries to take a subtle approach to character lessons for teens, and gives them freedom to

make their own choices.

“These kids don’t like to be preached to,” Blair said. “They already are preached to a lot.”

Ellington, who recently completed her first year as executive director, said her vision for First Tee-VBR is to provide academic support and mentorship that will help young people prepare for college and their careers.

First Tee-VBR plans to offer a financial literacy lesson from a BB&T employee after the Enterprise Center students finish their golf activities Monday.

“It’s great to teach these core values, but what really matters is the impact we are having on kids’ lives,” Ellington said. “I want a high school student to be able to put First Tee on their résumé as something that transformed and changed their life.”