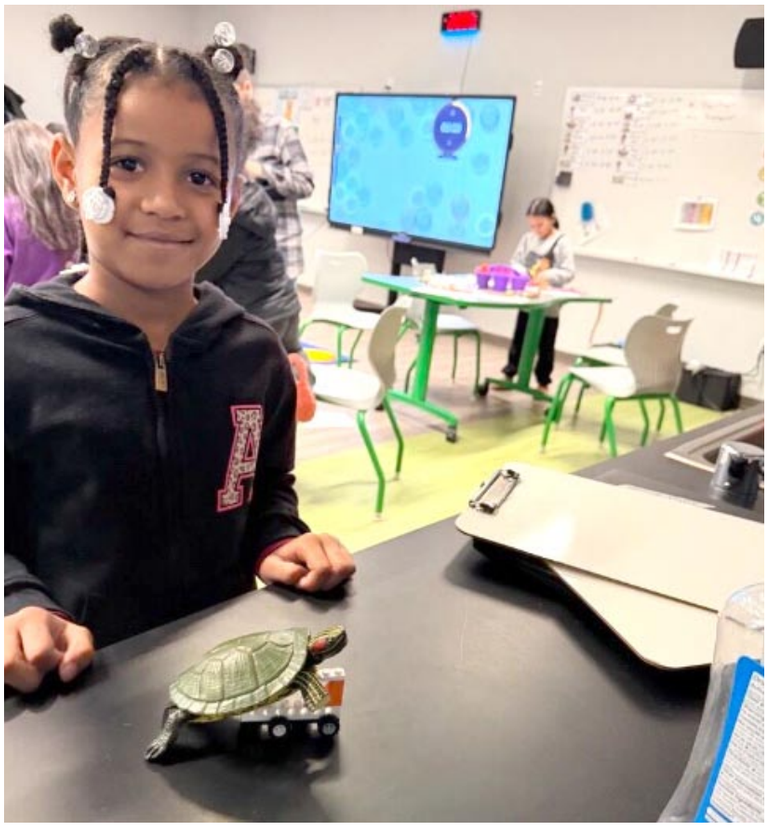
DA VINCI DIGEST

Engineering Empathy with Scuter the Turtle

By Da Vinci Science Center

LEHIGH VALLEY - During National Engineers Week, Da Vinci Science Center invited students from the Allentown School District STREAM Academy to take on a unique challenge: use engineering to practice empathy.



Through this partnership with the Allentown School District, students from Central Elementary School visit the science center every day for hands-on learning. Their weeklong engineering experience centered around Scuter, a Wood Turtle from the Science Center's Education Animal Collection.

Scuter lost two legs in the wild, was deemed non-releasable by a wildlife rehabilitator, and was transferred to Da Vinci Science Center. Now she helps students and guests learn not just about science and conserving Wood Turtles (an endangered species), but also meaningful lessons about resilience, compassion, and adapting to the world around you.

Students met Scuter and reflected on her journey. Instead of trying to "fix" her, they were encouraged to imagine the world from her point of view:

What helps her feel comfortable? Curious? Joyful? Safe?

Inspired by her story, the students designed creations meant to brighten Scuter's day. Their ideas were thoughtful, creative, and often heart-melting:

Tiny wheelchairs and scooters to help her move with ease

Play spaces complete with food, shelter, and enrichment toys

A favorite idea: a "training wheelchair" with food attached to encourage her to explore and stay active

Using toy turtles as stand-ins, students tested each design for stability, size, safety, and comfort — then improved their prototypes, just like real engineers.

The result was more than clever gadgets. It was a room full of young learners discovering that engineering is ultimately about kindness, creativity, problem-solving, and caring for others — even when "others" have shells.

Thanks to the STREAM Academy partnership, Central Elementary students experience moments like this every day at Da Vinci Science Center. And thanks to animals like Scuter, they are reminded that science is not only about how things work — but about how we can make the world better for every living thing.