Getting a clue

By **Michelle Muellenberg**/ Daily News Staff
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CAMBRIDGE -- Who took Gertrude the alligator?

The question lingered yesterday as MetroWest Jewish Day School students used their investigative crime-solving skills and teamwork to eliminate possible suspects and find the beloved mascot of the fictitious Cambridge Jewish Day School. Student sleuths from all across Greater Boston flooded the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's campus yesterday intent on solving the "mock crime."

The "CSI"-inspired event was sponsored by the Jewish Day School Advocacy Forum, a collaborative of 19 Jewish day schools in central and eastern Massachusetts and Rhode Island, and WhizKids, a nonprofit organization aimed at helping middle and high school students become involved with math and science.

At MIT in Cambridge, Cohen Hillel Academy teacher Marc Shnider works with students. (Schuyler Pisha photo)

"We really try to make it fun for the kids," said Ilene Sussman, executive director of the advocacy forum.

The daylong exercise also fits into the state's curriculum frameworks in areas of physical science, life science, technology and engineering.

The 200 students split into teams of 20 each using the same forensic evidence to try and solve the mysterious disappearance of Gertrude.

Prior to breaking into groups, the students studied the crime scene, which included splattered blood around the alligator's open cage, a mysterious white powdery substance and hair evidence. The students also learned an airplane had been stolen from the nearby Bedford airport with the perpetrator carrying an alligator. The plane, however, appeared to have a fuel leak and could only travel so far.

"We are trying to solve a crime," said Newton's Jane Herman of the Rashi School, adding she already had eliminated a couple of the suspects.

The elimination came after she tested the substance standing in for blood and determined how fast the plane was leaking fuel.

"We are trying to find out how much fuel is left from the tank and at what rate" it is leaking, said a pensive Lindsey Flammey from Framingham, a student at Solomon Schecter of Greater Boston.

Using their mathematical skills and measuring the flow of water, representing the fuel, from various holes, the students determined where the plane may have landed, then tested their chemistry knowledge with the powdery substance.

"It's really cool," Flammey said. "You really learn more about what's going on around you and it makes you more aware."

After only conducting two experiments, Holliston's Simma Lamb of the Solomon Schecter School had her own thoughts on what happened.

Sitting in a makeshift MIT laboratory, Lamb believed an animal, possibly a bear, got into the alligator's pen and then dropped it. A teacher saw the alligator hurt, took the plane and flew the reptile to a zoo.

"The hair left isn't human hair," she said.

Several students said they enjoyed the mock crime scene investigation because of the hands-on and critical thinking experiments.

"It makes it more fun, and I think personally it makes it easier too," said Uxbridge's Danilo Milevsky of the Jewish Community Day School of Rhode Island.

Sussman said the hope is to make this an annual event and expand the grades and scope of the project in the future.

The identity of the thief is remaining under wraps until later this afternoon.