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Students learn math, science in nature-focused program

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The area around Livingston Elementary's temporary home at the former Beck Urban Academy isn't very scenic, so fourth- and fifth-graders at the Columbus public school relish the opportunity to visit the nearby Scioto Audubon Metro Park.

"At the park they get to see plants and animals that they don't see here, that they don't see in their neighborhood," said T.J. Kagey, math and science teacher.

The students consider it a fun field trip. Educators believe the excursions provide innovative ways to learn.

The school is in its second year of a partnership with the Grange Insurance Audubon Center, which is helping students who traditionally have



Fifth-graders from Livingston Elementary School plant vegetation on the Northern Tier, a reclaimed brownfield at the Scioto Audubon Metro Park, in May 2007. For the second consecutive school year, the Grange Insurance Audubon Center is helping Livingston students improve their scientific skills through an academic program that includes field trips to the park.



struggled with science learn the subject by working in nature.

The students have improved in science since the school expanded its fifth-grade curriculum last year to incorporate the Audubon Center's lessons, principal Melinda Dixon said. Fourth-graders began participating in the program for the first time during this school year.

"You can do hands-on experiments in the classroom, but ... the more true to life it is, the more that they're going to retain," Dixon said.

The Audubon Center, scheduled to be built beginning next year on the Whittier Peninsula, hopes to "empower urban youth to enjoy and protect the nature in their own backyard," according to its Web site, <http://oh.audubon.org/>.

As part of that mission, the center began its pilot educational program last year at Livingston. The center assessed the academic abilities of Livingston's fifth-graders and discovered the students "were really weak at the scientific process," said Doreen Whitley, school programs coordinator for the Audubon Center.

Whitley and the Livingston faculty worked within the school's curriculum to develop lessons that would provide students a chance to perform scientific tasks on field trips to the metro park near downtown Columbus.

To support a lesson on plants earlier this year, Livingston's fourth-grade class examined plants at the park to determine the types of migrating warblers that would stop there to find food and shelter. That kind of data collection and mathematical analysis is "very much part of what you would do in real science," Whitley said.

Before the trip, students are given the question that they'll have to answer in their field research, and they're taught how to use the tools that they'll need for data collection and analysis, Whitley said.

Each student also is given a job on the trip and "they really take ownership," Whitley said. "They want to test their hypothesis and share what they learned with their classmates."

Kagey, who goes on the field trips, said the students' interaction with the material that they're studying makes the program a success.

"You can read and you can get on the Internet and look at things, but it's totally different when you see it up close," he said.

In addition to the fourth-grade class of about 30 students, Livingston's two fifth-grade classes, which include a total of about 50 students, also have the opportunity to take the quarterly field trips.

Dixon attributed the students' success, in part, to how the lessons have been structured.

Instead of only discussing the field trip upon returning to school -- the traditional way the outings are organized, according to Dixon -- Whitley visits with students in their classrooms before and after each trip to assign and review their work.

"These field trips are driven by the curriculum, as opposed to a field trip maybe supplementing the curriculum," Dixon said.

Whitley said Audubon Center officials were interested in working with Livingston students because of the proximity of the school's temporary home at 387 Beck St. to the park, and because the students proficiency test scores "indicated there was a need there."

Students had difficulty last year with data collection and using graphs, so math was added to the program, Whitley said.

The fourth-grade class also was added, Dixon said, so those students would have two years working in the program before taking the fifth-grade Ohio Achievement Test.

"What I wanted to do was give them two years of support with the program before (the students) had to take the achievement test," said Dixon, who predicts "great gains" in science and math test scores this year. Students will take the tests in the spring.

The Audubon Center hopes to raise funds through corporate donations to expand the program to other schools. While the Livingston program has helped the center develop a model, Whitley hopes to adapt future lessons to meet the needs of each school and its students.

"Our goal is to create a partnership with the students we work with and create an individualized education plan for each school," she said.

Dixon hopes the program will continue at Livingston for years to come. The school is scheduled to move next year into a new building where the former Livingston once stood on Heyl Avenue.

"It's a wonderful opportunity and experience for my kids because a lot of my kids haven't had the experience of being out in nature and learning about nature hands on," she said.

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