

Students take their science lessons outside

Campus garden features desert environment

By RACHEL BYRD Staff Writer

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By ditching the textbooks and making a classroom out of the great outdoors, local science teachers are trying to instill in students a passion for their desert environment.

“If you can catch a kid being curious, right there you’ve got a magical moment,” said Matthew Huffine, the science department coordinator for the Academy for Academic Excellence. Wendi Rodriguez’s eighth-graders at Heritage Elementary School are prime examples of how student interest can be sparked with real-world applications, some time in the sun, and a little bit of dirt. For the past four years, it has been the responsibility of the eighth-grade science classes to care for the campus garden, which includes native plants and animals, and a compost bin. “I don’t like being stuck inside the classroom reading a book,” said student Kevin Cook. “This is hands-on.” Cook is one of eight student leaders in his class who have a particular interest in the environment. Every week, the group assigns tasks to the other students depending on what needs to be done in the garden — from pulling weeds to preparing to install a pond.

Those students meet with their teacher during some lunch periods to plan what needs to be done, and do extensive research on the Internet to learn how to care for the indigenous plants.

“It makes them work harder in the classroom when they know they have free time to come out here,” Rodriguez said of her students, who will be spending a couple of class periods each week in the garden now that Spring has arrived.

Rodriguez believes that in addition to teaching the required state standards, it is the job of every teacher to help their students be environmentally informed. **Huffine agrees that kids need to learn early on to respect and care for their environment. He says that the key is letting kids loose to “play science.” “You’re not teaching them what to do — they’re doing it,” Huffine said. “I give them materials and knowledge, and I say ‘go.’ ” In Huffine’s Mojave River Scientists class, students spend the majority of the time in the campus greenhouse and working on the large pond that will soon be used to raise fish before releasing them into the river.**

Huffine begins the course by finding out what students are interested in learning about. Students get individual and group assignments — from studying native turtles to planting Joshua trees.

Oscar Miranda, a seventh grader in the class, has been studying Joshua trees.

“I thought a Joshua tree was just a big prickly cactus,” he said. “Then I learned about it, and I’m thinking differently. Now we care and we’re trying to help protect the wildlife.”

Oscar is currently caring for baby Joshua trees which he will eventually help plant around the school.



The plants in Heritage Elementary School's garden are selected by students after learning what is appropriate for the region.





A horned toad wanders through Heritage Elementary School's garden.

Photos by James Quigg / Staff Photographer

Students at Phelan's Heritage Elementary School work on the school's garden. The garden project has eighth-grade students assigned to work on several aspects of the garden, then use the garden to teach younger students at the school.



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Students at Phelan's Heritage Elementary School work on the school's garden. The garden project has eighth-grade students assigned to work on several aspects of the garden.

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