

After-school program connects kids with nature

With help through grant, kids stay active and learning after school

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Montgomery Elementary School students look at butterfly wings that were found on the trail during the "Safe Routes to Nature" program. September 4, 2015. Photo by David Hodges. *David Hodges*

Chula Vista — When the school bell rings Friday afternoons at Montgomery Elementary School, students in the after-school program put on their walking shoes in search of the great outdoors.

A \$61,000 grant from the San Diego Foundation to promote health and fitness is helping them learn about nature, evaluate their surroundings and get a little more exercise in their day.

The Chula Vista Elementary School District teamed with Circulate San Diego on the "Safe Routes to Nature" program, which aims to boost activity and connect kids with the outdoors through a weekly nature walk to Otay Valley Regional Park.

Each Friday, anywhere from 16 to 20 students walk with Canyoneers, volunteer guides from the Natural History Museum, and identify bird calls, collect bugs, discover how flowers are pollinated, and learn about becoming good stewards of the park. As they make their way from their school to the open space, they also take note of how they get there for a report on improving safety and accessibility that will be given to school and city officials.

"Part of the program is that we evaluate the walking environment," program coordinator Michelle Luellen said. "We're looking for places that might need sidewalks, places to put way-finding signage, or crosswalks."

Luellen said the students quickly picked up on changes in the community from one week to the next.

"They cross a culvert to get to the park and noticed, oh my goodness, last week there was more water. Or they see some graffiti and notice how it is affecting the environment," she said.

Luellen said most of the children in the program don't typically have access to nature because they live in apartment buildings. She says the walks have been so popular, however, that kids are already taking their parents to the park to spend time together.

“It’s not just a value for the students, but for their families,” she said.

Lessons focus on a single topic, and even the big people are learning a lot.

“One week it could be about birds, another week it could be about bugs, or plants or lizards,” she said. “Many adults come on the walks and they all say they learn as much as the kids do.”

The 80-minute program launched Aug. 21 and will run through spring. It targets four schools in the district for five weeks at a time. The other campuses that will be taking part at Juarez-Lincoln, Finney and Otay schools.

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