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Area youth fill Baker Center for Energy Days Office of Sustainability and local schools team up for energy curriculum

Oct 21, 2009
By Krista Bradley

This week Baker University Center may have hosted more elementary students than college students as Athens City Schools' third- through sixth-grade students swarmed the building for the Office of Sustainability's eighth edition of Energy Days.

"We hope students see their connection to the environment and the way their lives interact with the world around them," said Erin Sykes, project assistant with the Office of Sustainability. "We want them to think when they flick the light switch, where does the power come from? It's not from the wall. It's from the power company."

Energy Days, held Oct. 20-21 this year, is an education fair on sustainability and energy topics for elementary school students. Students from Chauncey, West, East and Morrison elementary schools visited learning stations run by Ohio University education majors, community organizations and volunteers. This year, the event welcomed nearly 1,000 area students for hands-on experiential learning.

The program is one that area teachers come back to each year.

"This is a hands-on approach that can't always happen in a classroom. The kids can see new science technologies and grasp them. They get opportunities in quick little bundles to get that one-on-one look. Even seeing the escalators in Baker is a huge deal!" said Jordan Langton, a sixth-grade teacher at West Elementary. This was Langton's second year bringing his students.

Ohio University middle childhood education majors were in charge of grade-level learning stations on topics as various as potential and kinetic energies, solar energy, circuits and chemical energy. Besides this grade-specific learning, all participants visited the Van de Graaff generator station, where they delighted in seeing static electricity cause others' hair to stand on end.

Senior education major Ethan Swepston was one volunteer who dressed as a "Mad Scientist" to teach his sixth-grade sessions about solar energy. Students learned how solar power works by building miniature solar panel circuits and studying solar-powered robots.

"The opportunity seemed like a great way to spread knowledge about renewable energy. It's an honor to be able to help with a program like this, and any time I get to work with the local schools is fun for me," Swepston said.

Other volunteers represented organizations like the Athens Soil and Water Conservation District, which ran a Streamulator watershed table to demonstrate the power of water energy.

The event even provided a leadership opportunity for area youth.



Ohio University student Katie Shrake gives a science demonstration on Tuesday.

Photographer: Kevin Riddell

Student-developed global warming curriculum teaches area youth

When it comes to fighting global warming, Erin Sykes says take it outside.

Sykes, an employee of Ohio University's Office of Sustainability, created a climate change curriculum program for middle school students. Sykes' program is an extension of her master's degree in cultural studies she completed from the College of Education in summer 2009.

"When it comes to the environment, it's more about teaching students to care," Sykes says.

Her research found that this goal is best accomplished through tasks like spending time in nature, being influenced by role models with environmental interests, participating in dialogue and reflection, completing an action project, repeating exposure to nature over time and learning how scientists complete their research.

While designing her curriculum, Sykes

For the third year, Lori Rolfe, a teacher at Minford Middle School, brought her eighth-grade students to teach learning stations. The students are from Rolfe's gifted and talented class and are members of an energy team in the Scioto County school system, as part of the Ohio Energy Project.

"Energy Days at Ohio University kicks off our year, with the students eventually leading an energy fair for county schools at Shawnee State University. It is student leaders leading other students, and it's a way for them to get out of the classroom, learn about energy and become energy leaders themselves," Rolfe said.

The group led two stations: the energy bike, where students could see how much energy must be generated for daily tasks, and a station featuring an energy trivia game about sound, petroleum and coal energies.

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combined three components she felt were necessary when teaching this particular age group about the environment: allowing them to think critically, influencing pro-environmental behavior change and leaving them with a feeling of empowerment.

To test her curriculum, Sykes led a field trip this fall with area homeschooled children. The trip began at The Ridges with a greenhouse effect demonstration, a critical thinking activity. The children participated in an obstacle course, playing the roles of sunlight and carbon. Other activities included a tree coring experiment; a tour of Lausche Heating Plant to learn about coal use; climate studies using a world map; and the final action project, which demonstrated the carbon cycle.

"We planted 12 trees along the Hocking River upstream from the Richland Avenue bridge as our action project," Sykes explains. "The kids saw everything up close and I think they really enjoyed it."

Sykes coordinated the tree planting with ReLeaf for Ohio, a volunteer group of students, staff and faculty members that focuses on planting trees on campus and surrounding areas.

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