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Students explore nature at Lakehill Preparatory School's new Environmental Science Center

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By **NANCY VISSER / The Dallas Morning News**
nvisser@dallasnews.com

Roger Perry, headmaster at Lakehill Preparatory School, grew up in rural Texas near Wichita Falls. So when his students needed outdoor education, they went to the country.

It wasn't until he started looking at property in East Dallas adjacent to the school's off-campus ball fields that he realized that hands-on environmental education can be taught well in an urban area.

As a result, the \$2.2 million Alice and Erle Nye Family Environmental Science Center opened this school year on a wooded lot on Ferguson Road, about four miles from the main campus in Lakewood.

The center has three science labs, a large meeting room and a retention pond. But the bonus is the adjacent 43 acres of untouched urban forest owned by the city along White Rock Creek. There, students can explore the flood plain and follow up with lessons and experiments inside the science labs.

But it's more than that.

The building itself is a lesson in green construction. It was designed to meet LEED silver certification – meaning construction materials came from within 500 miles; furniture, carpet and other features were made from recycled materials; and rain is captured to irrigate the campus, among a host of other requirements.

Melissa Carpenter, a science teacher who runs the center, said it gives students a direct connection to the environment.

The younger students explore the trails and learn about nature – such as an impromptu lesson last week when a boy found a piece of bark and used a microscope in the lab to see the organisms that live on it.

The eighth-grade students have forged the kindergarten trails and are cleaning up flood debris – hauling out old tires, shoes, bottles and underbrush.



Photos by XIAOMEI CHEN/DMN
Lakehill Preparatory School kindergartner Claire Blomquist (left) is intrigued by a ladybug that her teacher Sally Batt caught, while Ashton Sharifi is bothered by the smell of a pond in the woods adjacent to the school's new Environmental Science Center.

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The high school students, who will start using the center next year, can directly study environmental issues, such as testing water samples from the pond and creek.

"It's a progression. And what we provide is the first step in the progression," Carpenter said.

Innovative programs

Lakehill and other independent schools have long made environmental education a priority, Perry said, and he doesn't necessarily see his school as a leader in the field.

He noted that schools across the country are implementing innovative programs, such as school gardens that supply food for the cafeteria.

In Dallas, for example, four elementary schools were selected this year to receive grants from REAL School Gardens, a Fort Worth nonprofit organization that is building learning gardens at schools where a majority of students are from low-income families.

But many other schools aren't doing as well, lacking either the money or the will to support such programs, said Michaela Zint, an expert in environmental education at the University of Michigan. "We have a long way to go," she said.

She said many schools have cut back on nature field trips because of transportation costs and safety concerns. In addition, environmental education lost support in the 1990s after a backlash over programs that were more advocacy than education.

"I'm not sure the field recovered from that," Zint said. "If teachers advocate on behalf of the environment, they mean well. But they don't know how to do it more effectively."

Carpenter, who was Lakehill's science director for 10 years, said environmental science has matured significantly, with more data, technology and studies to support sustainability programs.

"People have been going green for years and years," Carpenter said, "but they were people who were considered a little peculiar. Now environment science has become such an important field that it's giving them more credibility."

She said students can use environmental science as a springboard for a variety of careers, including law, health, medicine, water treatment and construction.

Zint encouraged teachers at any school to find resources for environmental education among parents with expertise, as well as local environmental nonprofits and government agencies. And to search the school for real-life learning opportunities, such as an urban garden or studying a school's air quality.

Environmental summits

At Lakehill, marketing director Gigi Ekstrom found such an abundant network of community resources that the school is hosting environmental summits at the center. The second one will be Wednesday with a focus on how people can make more environmentally friendly choices.

Ekstrom said most of the speakers – such as Carol Henry, a buyer for Green Living in Lakewood, and Bruce Bagelman, owner of Green Spot Market & Fuels at White Rock Lake – have East Dallas connections.

The school decided to organize the events after parents and other visitors at the center's open house said they'd like to attend classes there.

"When you have a facility like that, it's almost an obligation to share it," Ekstrom said.

The symposium is free and open to the public, but reservations are required by calling 214-826-2931 or e-mailing Ekstrom at gekstrom@lakehillprep.org.

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