
National Blue Ribbon Schools Program

EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATION SINCE 1982

Field Trips Spark Students' Passion for Science

Narrator: We all hope that our students learn how to give back to their community in some way. Every single student at Deer Park Elementary is helping the Elizabeth River project, a nonprofit organization that is working hard to restore the environmental health of the notoriously polluted Elizabeth River through community and business partnerships. And through these partnerships the Elizabeth River Project and the Dollar Tree provided all the supplies that Deer Park needed to join this effort. Using the donated plants, pots, soil, and sand, every student got involved by planting their own *Spartina* grass.

Every class placed their plants in Deer Park's grow labs to help create a wetland right in the hallways. For years, Kinder Morgan, an energy company that believes strongly in protecting and restoring the environment, has supported the Elizabeth River Project dedicating six acres of their land to the restoration of the Elizabeth River.

This wildlife conservation area is where each grade level made the trek from Deer Park to the banks of the Elizabeth River in Chesapeake. Students, parents, Kinder Morgan employees, and volunteers set out to the wetland with boots and tools to plant over 500 *Spartinas*.

The *Spartina* grass will help prevent erosion along the river's edge, filter water from run off, and provide habitat and food for a variety of animals, specifically why this land was donated in the first place. The students enjoyed the hands-on experience and seeing up close how their hard work in the classroom will benefit the environment. Some students even made time to pick up litter around the wetland area. This is a great example of how our students, no matter the age, can make a positive difference. When businesses and local charities team up to equip our young people the benefit is for the students and the environment.

Since 2011, Deer Park Elementary has partnered with the Elizabeth River Project as a River Star school. Deer Park students participate in hands-on learning activities related to restoring the Elizabeth River. And one of the highlights for third through fifth graders is visiting the world's first floating wetland classroom. The Elizabeth River Project's The Dominion Virginia Power Learning Barge is America's greenest vessel, capable of producing all of its own energy through sun and wind power.

On board the learning barge, and along the shoreline, Deer Park students are heavily engaged in a variety of learning stations that use the Elizabeth River to model and teach ecology and sustainability while promoting scientific discovery. Students learn about the wildlife that relies on the watershed for shelter and food.

Water samples are analyzed and the data is collected to constantly gauge the revitalization of the river. And knowledgeable educators illustrate how important the Elizabeth River is to transporting goods around the world. By partnering with a non-profit organization like the Elizabeth River Project, students at Deer Park's environmental science magnet program are able to venture beyond the classroom walls and do scientific field work that will benefit the environment for generations to come.

Since Deer Park Elementary is the environmental science magnet program in Newport Public schools, teachers design grade-appropriate and interactive activities with many of these supporting classroom instruction by tying in math, science, and English skills. Grade levels offer a series of activities that allow their classes to take turns rotating through learning stations with parent volunteers assisting the teachers and students.

Kindergarteners focused on the theme of water. They learned how pollution in our waterways affects animals and humans. First graders used their artistic talents to decorate rocks that will be placed around butterfly gardens in the courtyard. They also teamed up to design and paint their grade's bench that was constructed by the school's PTA volunteers. Second graders took turns gardening, weeding, and working in the school's courtyard to prepare the outdoor classroom and raised garden beds for spring weather.

Lab instructional assistant and resident vermicomposting expert Julie Ward helped third grade students start a worm composting bin with a batch of red wigglers. Third graders also spent time outdoors inspecting and documenting all that nature provides in a square foot of earth. The 4th grade spent time up-cycling plastic orange juice containers as pots for brand new flowers. And fifth graders repurposed plastic water bottles as rain gauges to measure precipitation during the rainy spring months.

All of these activities plus many more help the Deer Park students make the connection between using what they're learning in school and the lifelong skills that they'll use to benefit the earth every day of the year.

Community business partners do a wonderful job helping out our schools with volunteers, resources, and donations. But what's great about a partnership is that the giving goes both ways and an excellent example is Deer Park Elementary and the Virginia Living Museum. Some of the exotic frogs that reside at Deer Park Elementary recently enjoyed a weekend field trip to the Virginia Living Museum. For the second year, the museum hosted its one-day event, Frogs and Friends, a day filled with amphibian-related exhibits, activities, and sweet treats from Sweet Frog. Families were able to view a great variety of frogs and amphibians. Each display was accompanied by an information card, allowing families to learn and appreciate the uniqueness of each creature.

But since most of the Living Museum's collections consist of native frogs, the museum needed to borrow some hoppy exotics from their neighbor, Deer Park Elementary. Principal Mary Jo Anastasio was happy to lend out her webbed friends for the weekend to herpetology curator Travis Land and his team of staff and volunteers took great care in preparing the frogs and their habitat for their trip and kept them well fed during the excursion. Deer Park was happy to lend out more than five different species of frogs ranging from the tiny African dwarf frog to the massive smooth-sided toad. New to Deer Park this year is the African clawed frog, a fully aquatic species that has no tongue. At Deer Park, the frogs are just a few of the exotic examples of wildlife found along hallways and inside classrooms to help educate the young environmental science magnet students about the living world around them.

And fifth graders in Lindy Doeppe's class visited neighboring Virginia Living Museum to learn more about sea turtles from the experts. Lindy's class adopted a real live sea turtle that lives off the coast of Florida and have been tracking and analyzing data about the turtle. At Virginia Living Museum the students were able to ask questions to further their understanding about these ancient creatures while receiving a behind the scenes tour of the museum's impressive displays.

Video produced by and courtesy of Newport News Public Schools.