



County student participate in program to learn about nature



*(Sarah Lane/The Washington Post) - C.J. Davis, a seventh-grader at Parkside Middle School, examines the markings of a dragonfly nymph.**

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Using a small magnifying lens, C.J. Davis carefully pointed out the markings on the wings of the dragonfly nymph he caught off a dock at Camp Snyder in Haymarket.

He explained how the wings will change as the dragonfly grows into an adult. The seventh-grader at Parkside Middle School had learned that while standing in the wetlands at the macro invertebrate station during ED OUT, a Prince William County public schools program designed to get students out of the classroom and into nature.

C.J. said science was one of his strong subjects. Learning to correctly skim the bottom of the leaves with a net to catch and identify insects, however, is something he would not have learned in the classroom.

"It's a wonderful, new experience," said classmate Alondra Martinez after looking at a diving beetle. "I love being out of the classroom," classmate Christal Allen said.

More than 500 fourth-graders from Loch Lomond and West Gate elementary schools and seventh-graders from Parkside participated in the second annual ED OUT event this month, a partnership with the U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service.

The middle-schoolers explored Camp Snyder, a 350-acre Boy Scout camp. The elementary school students were down the road at Silver Lake Regional Park.

The program "helps them apply what they've learned all year in the classroom to real-life scenarios," said Steve Kibler, an ED OUT volunteer who teaches health and physical education at Marsteller Middle School.

In addition to macro invertebrates, rotations for the middle school students include water quality and conservation, mapping hiking and biking trails and playing games. They even experienced nature with their eyes covered. Middle school students were blindfolded and required to follow a rope path through a small wooded area.

"We want them to feel and sense nature without one of their senses," said Sue Cummings of the U.S. Forest Service.

The elementary school students also learned about water conservation and safety, as well as how to make potting soil. They also participated in nature hikes. Mehrunnisa Khan and Parker Weinbender, fourth-graders at Lock Lomond, both liked going on the hike and seeing the different plants, animals and tracks.

"It's not like everyday in your back yard," Mehrunnisa said. "You see different things. We saw nests and spider webs." Safiya Samman, director of conservation education for the U.S. Forest Service, said it's important for children to connect with nature.

"If they love something," she said, "they will protect it."

*PEREC Education Director Cindy Smith and Lisa Des Jardins conducted this 7th grade macroinvertebrate collection station to test whether the created wetland was functioning as a natural wetland. Students collected and identified snails, damsel and dragonfly nymphs, beetles, giant water bugs and many more wetland inhabitants.