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Exploring the great outdoors



Members of the 3rd-5th grade Eco-Explorers group at Reisterstown Elementary School are shown at the school Dec. 16. Pictured from left, back row: Nathan Reynolds, Alex Gabriel and Benjamin Brisk. From left, front row: Christopher Sampson, Madilynn Blumberg and Rachel Lubovsky. (Submitted photo)



By **Elaina Clarke** · Contact Reporter

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When the school day ends for many students, it means time for homework, games and after-school activities.

But for several students taking part in Irvine Nature Center's Eco-Explorers after-school program at participating Baltimore County elementary schools, the learning doesn't end when the bell rings.

"[Eco-Explorers] is an after-school program that obviously Irvine hosts and we go out to local schools, public and private schools, and put on, it's like a one-hour lesson teaching kids about nature, and we do different science activities, nature and science-related activities. And it's just a way for them to participate in something educational after school," said Courtney Sagal, Irvine's director of community engagement.

Irvine Nature Center is an Owings Mills-based nonprofit dedicated to providing environmental education

and awareness to the community. It is currently offering the Eco-Explorers program in 15 Baltimore County elementary schools, including Reisterstown Elementary and Cedarmere Elementary, both in Reisterstown, Glyndon Elementary, in Glyndon, and Garrison Forest Day School in Owings Mills.

"It's a series. Depending on the school, some schools we do a six-week session; other schools prefer a longer schedule ... so it's one day per week for many sessions," she said.

Children are put into the program on a first-come-first-serve basis. Typically, sessions accommodate about 15 kids, but if there is a high demand, more sessions may be added so that more children can be included, Sagal said.

Currently, the sessions are divided by grade into K-2 groups and grades 3-5 groups.

Sessions are paid for by the parents of the students. Each six-week session is \$72.

Sagal came up with the idea for the series last year, she said.

"It was kind of a 3 a.m. idea that I had, thinking actually my daughter goes to Sparks Elementary School in northern Baltimore County and she loves nature and she went into play centers and she had fun but she wanted to do something more structured after school ... we kind of created this program, started it at Sparks to see how it would run and if kids were interested in it," she said.

The program sold out in 2 hours, she said. From that point, it quickly grew in popularity among area schools.

"Our environmental educators, our naturalists, we've actually had to hire many new part-time naturalists with environmental education backgrounds. When we started last year we had about three teachers. As of right now we have 12 teachers, which is great and we also use the help of our volunteer naturalists, who we train," Sagal said.

The programs are almost always conducted outside, Sagal said, and only if the weather is extremely bad are they moved indoors.

"When it's cold we still go outside as long as the kids have coats and are dressed warmly, even if there's a little bit of snow on the ground we still go outside ... nature happens all the time so even if it's drizzling if the kids are dressed appropriately we take them out."

She said that having the program outdoors even in less favorable weather emphasizes that there is always something to learn about nature, no matter the season.

"There's so much learning to be done in the colder months too," she said.

Kim Scotto, Irvine volunteer coordinator and after-school program instructor, who currently teaches

Eco-Explorers K-2 students at Reisterstown Elementary School, Pot Spring Elementary School, in Timonium, and Warren Elementary School, in Cockeysville, said each week's lesson has a different theme, all of which are nature-related.

"So say for instance one day the theme is rocks and minerals or frogs and we'll teach a lesson that relates to that theme, so we'll play games, we'll do science experiments, oftentimes there'll be an animal encounter, and they all relate back to that original theme of the day," she said. "So the kids are having fun and they're still learning at the same time. So it's kind of a different kind of after-school program compared to one where they play on the playground or something. This is an educational opportunity for them as well."

Each lesson incorporates hands-on learning opportunities such as crafts and experiments, as well as a visit from an animal from Irvine.

The point of the sessions is to teach not only nature and environmental education, but also the importance of appreciating and caring for the Earth, Sagal said.

"I think it makes them better stewards [of the Earth]; it helps them to understand what they're surroundings can kind of provide them, can give them. We talk a lot about what nature gives us. What do trees give us and what do seeds from the trees, fruit from the trees [give us]? We talk about living green, eating local. It's a great way for us to talk about their surroundings and make them more aware of nature," Sagal said.

Joyce Powell, special education teacher at Reisterstown Elementary and the school's liaison to Irvine, said the program is "fantastic."

The environmental awareness the program has instilled in students has already made a difference in how they act and think about their role in caring for the world around them, she said.

"They're definitely more conscious — we're a green school so we talk a lot about these things anyway ... but I definitely noticed them being more responsible for making sure that their parents do give them a waste-free lunch and waste-free snack and many of them are starting to do this not just on Wednesdays which is when [the school does it] but other days as well," she said.

Scotto said the program allows students to be active physically through outdoor activity while engaging their minds and learning important values and information.

"It's great to get kids interested in nature and even just science and all other topics like that at a young age, I think. I would say overall just the hands on learning, the fact that we bring out animals which is obviously a great experience for the kids, the experiments, the crafts ... everything we do is tied back to environmental education and I just think that's really important," she said.

Reisterstown resident Olga Brisk's son Ben Brisk, 9, has been a part of the Eco-Explorers sessions at Reisterstown Elementary School since they started last year. Ben has a natural curiosity about the environment, she said, and this group helps him pursue that interest.

"I know that it matches Ben's interests," Brisk said. "Because he likes nature and animals and he knows a lot about it and this is something he enjoys doing. He enjoys participating. Even though he does know a lot, there are still some new things that he either learns or confirms his knowledge and they bring in different animals and do different projects."

Sagal said she hopes to expand the program to middle and high schools in the near future. For now, she said, she and her staff are working to make the elementary school programs as successful as possible.

For parents like Brisk, the benefits of the program are already being seen.

"Not all parents have an ability or the time to take their kids to Irvine ... but Irvine coming to school, and having that partnership and allowing the kids to be part of making the world better and greener, I think that's just great," she said. "I'm glad that they start early and let kids explore."

For more information about Eco-Explorers, contact Courtney Sagal at 443-738-9224 or visit www.explorenature.org.

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