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Natural Focus

New environmental curriculum has multiple benefits

By Howard McEwen

In a generation, the environment has moved from being the exclusive concern of the political fringe to being considered a major economic force. The adoption of an environmental studies curriculum at Aiken University High School in College Hill shows just how much that change has been accepted.

"Environmental studies was perceived as an old white hippie movement," says Principal Virginia Rhodes. "It wasn't considered mainstream economic content as it is now. It's not a thing anyone would have come up with 25 years ago but it's appropriate now."

The new curriculum takes effect in the fall. Aiken students -- about 500 mostly African-American kids from mostly urban neighborhoods -- will get a chance to experience nature, learn how to protect the environment and maybe find a job working in environmental issues.

Aiken has a unique claim for an urban school -- a bit of nature. The school is on a 62-acre wooded campus within walking distance of Mount Airy Forest. Students sometimes see deer running across campus. Science teachers already use some of these resources for projects such as tree identification, but Rhodes plans to make full use of their location with the new program.

To prepare, the school has staffed up on science teachers. An outdoor classroom and laboratory are planned for a clearing in the woods. The students will be involved in planning and implementing these learning areas while learning to minimize their impact on the forest.

This is more than feel-goodism and the taking up of a fashionable political cause. Although she's always recycled and given thought to the environment, Rhodes describes herself as "not a historic environmentalist." The new program goes beyond her own interest, she says.

"Looking at it from the kids' point of view, it's a smart direction to go in," she says. "When you see the issues they have, you have to wonder if it's because kids were raised on concrete. In some ways, many of our students lack the restorative resources of an outdoor setting."

While discussing plans for a new building -- part of the long-term capital improvements initiative in Cincinnati Public Schools -- Rhodes became aware of author Richard Louv's work, *The Last Child in the Woods* (see "Send the Kids Outside," issue of Feb. 8, 2006). Louv is a futurist who coined the term "nature deficit disorder" to describe the ill effects of children's detachment from nature.

"Healing the broken bond between our young and nature is in our self-interest, not only because aesthetics or justice demand it, but also because our mental, physical, and spiritual health depend upon it," Louv wrote.

Rhodes backs up Louv, citing as an example the rise of asthma among urban children. A 2003 study by the University of Michigan Health System found that black kids went to the emergency room for asthma twice as often as white kids, and urban kids went to the emergency room far more often than non-urban kids.

These are Aiken's students.

"Many students have never been camping nor have any opportunity to experience the great parks of Ohio or the rest of the country," Rhodes says. "Children raised exclusively in apartments or in concrete neighborhoods suffer from not having the moments of peace and serenity that we can all gain from being surrounded by nature."

For environmental holdouts, there are more plainly practical benefits to an environmental-studies curriculum.

"There's career and professional jobs available in this field," Rhodes says.

Hamilton County's Metropolitan Sewage District is an example.

"There are people who take the training at other universities for their water technician certificate," she says. "(This program) gives our kids different pathways to become a water engineer and water techs."

Rhodes predicts a ripple effect in the future.

"It's very difficult to get African-American math and science teachers," she says. "City schools are not emphasizing these fields of studies. We're taking up that challenge. We have lots of talented kids, and we're out to give them a really strong foundation in math and science."

While science and math are key disciplines of the environmental-studies program, Rhodes sees it benefiting the entire curriculum.

"Kids in English will be writing about it, and kids in social studies will be studying government issues regarding pollution control," she says.

Rhodes will teach juniors a course called "Eco-nomics," studying the marketplace's effect on the environment. Even gym class will incorporate the environment. A course called "Outdoor Adventures" will replace the dreaded class of rope climbs, jumping jacks and basketball. In the new class, students will hike, rock-climb, bike and canoe.

"Really, how many times can you teach basketball?" Rhodes says.

The environmental studies program came about during design discussions for a new school. The current building, dating to 1962, will be replaced in two to three years by a new "green" building that leaves a smaller environmental footprint and costs less to operate.

The environmental studies program is funded by a vocational grant from the Ohio Department of Agriculture. ©

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