



SEED: Propagating Environmental Education

By Stacey Fowler, Science Interchange Reporter

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"I usually say snail, but I think he's a slug," said Savannah, a shy third-grader with the longest eyelashes I've ever seen. Then a flash of certainty lit up her face. "Yeah, because snails have the shells," she said as she pondered the tiny slug in the palm of her hand.

Savannah explained to me how she discovered the little guy. "I was just reaching under my plants and I felt something slimy and I pulled it off," she said.

Savannah's school, Lagunitas, has been trying to attract "more beautiful birds and beautiful bugs like butterflies" with the help of SEED: School Environmental Education Docents, a nonprofit program that focuses on fostering volunteers to work with teachers in an effort to expand environmental education in the classroom.

According to executive director Sheila Molyneux, SEED's role is to train volunteers and teachers, and then provide resources for them to carry out hands-on projects with students. SEED currently works with 23 Marin Schools and has 150 volunteers, but SEED's resources are available to teachers and volunteers from all Marin schools. They offer free plants, seeds, tools, as well as ideas and advice on how to start a project at your school.

Savannah feels the hands-on activities she's participated in through SEED's involvement at her school are better than just learning from textbooks because, unlike in books you can actually see the insects and birds in motion.

Savannah was one of several enthusiastic guests who attended the grand opening of SEED's new greenhouse and nursery on October 24th. "This is a classroom facility that belongs to Las Gallinas Valley Sanitary District, one of our many collaborative partners," explained Molyneux. "They built it along with a laboratory that can accommodate a full classroom of kids and we do a lot of field trip programs out here," she continued.

Last year, 4th graders from Dixie School District and Mary Silvera School who were studying California water and native plants erected the greenhouse and nursery behind the lab facility at the water treatment plant. They also planted theme beds in front of the building: one for butterflies, one for larval insects, one for beneficial insects, and a fourth designed to attract hummingbirds.

"One of the theme beds is beneficial insect plants, which means if students plant these they're not going to need to use pesticides at their school garden or at home," explained Molyneux. "It's important for them to see that there are alternatives—alternatives in the garden, alternatives in what they buy in the store, and all the choices they make throughout their lives," she said.

Choice and empowerment are important components of SEED, as is students' ability to recognize the interconnectedness of the world around them. For example, when children build a habitat at their school they really see how critical clean water, food, and vegetation are to the life cycles of the animals about which they are learning. The children come to realize that, like the birds and the butterflies, they too must fulfill these basic needs to thrive.

"If we nurture nature's needs then we, in turn, nurture our own needs," noted Molyneux. "It goes beyond beauty—it goes to the heart of protecting our Earth because that's the most important thing. That's where we live," she said.

SEED is certainly a valuable resource for children, but it also serves adults in the community. "SEED offers information and teaches community members what they need to know about their own environment," said Gina Colombatto, President of SEED.

She emphasized that most teachers and parents in Marin, and everywhere for that matter, are overwhelmed by the demands of daily life. Teachers are struggling to meet all the state's standards and provide their students with a meaningful educational experience.

"SEED says to the teachers, 'We have something to offer that you can give to your students, but you don't have to do the research, you don't have to find the funds, you don't have to do more work in order to pass this information on'," says Colombatto. "By involving community members we're helping the whole community learn about our environment and are able to pass that on without demanding that parents somehow support the teachers without any support themselves."

SEED docents are typically parents who sign up to volunteer in their children's classrooms. Docents receive training to enable them to work side-by-side with a teacher in supporting and reinforcing the science or social studies curriculum.

"I knew nothing about butterfly habitats when I started SEED, but working with my kids and my kids' classes I've learned about so many things I never knew before," said Molyneux. "And I think a lot of volunteers love that because they're doing stuff with their kids and they're helping their teacher, but they're also learning," she continued.

Kate Powers is Molyneux's assistant at SEED. Her daughter's 4th grade class is studying water, its properties, and watersheds. She explained that one of the activities the class participated in with SEED was a field trip to Blackstone Canyon so they could see how a real watershed works and what plants and animals it supports. "All of a sudden everything came alive for them in terms of the broad picture of what they were learning," said Powers.

Volunteers are, of course, critical to SEED's ability to bring experiences like this to the children of Marin. "Make that phone call to SEED, take that day to learn what you can be as a docent, then take that day to teach in the classroom," urged Colombatto. "It's three days out of your life, but look at how many people you'll touch and how much you'll learn," she continued.

And said Colombatto, if you really don't have the time to volunteer, you can support SEED financially. "We can always use funds to buy new shovels, buy new trees, and to expand our program into more classrooms and make it available to more children," she said.

RESOURCES

The SEED lab and nursery is open every Tuesday from noon to 3:30. For more information including directions, email seed@marin.k12.ca.us or call 415-720-4930.