

Annual field trips to UGA for Clarke students part of new plan

By Lee Shearer

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Thousands of students from Clarke County public schools visited the University of Georgia campus this fall as UGA and the school district embarked on a plan to bring the students to the campus at least once a year.

An outgrowth of a continuing partnership between Clarke schools and UGA's College of Education and community efforts to improve Clarke's graduation rates, the so-called "Experience UGA" program will give every Clarke student the chance to visit UGA at least 13 times before they graduate from high school.

One aim is to help students see that a post-secondary degree is something they can achieve, according to Shannon Wilder, director of UGA's Office of Service Learning.

Wilder was on hand off South Milledge Avenue last week to observe one of the first of the planned field trips, when about 120 Burney-Harris-Lyons seventh-graders spent the day at the university's UGArden and the nearby State Botanical Garden of Georgia.

Half the students started the day at the Botanical Garden and learned a few things about biodiversity, forest life and ecology walking a forested path from the Botanical Garden to the largely student-run UGArden

The other half started the day at the UGArden, where UGA student volunteers took small groups of seventh-graders touring the growing organic garden, stopping to take in compost piles, empty beehives and long rows of growing green produce.

At one table, students held real pepper plants to learn about the parts of a plant, and then got to taste different kinds of peppers, including one that was really, really hot.

"It was unbearably hot," reported Burney-Harris Lyons seventh-grader Matthew Roberts, who didn't resist the temptation to try out the hottest one.

But it was a good day, said Matthew and friend Jonathan Julius.

“It’s very fun,” said Julius.

Walking through the woods in small groups led by Botanical Garden workers, the students at one point marked off a grid on the forest floor, then counted the different species they could find in it, he said.

The students had lunch sitting on huge logs that are sometimes a kind of outdoor classroom at the UGarden, then switched places; the students who’d walked from the Botanical Garden toured the garden, and the morning gardeners went through the woods back to the Botanical Garden.

Burney-Harris-Lyons science teacher Monica Huff gave last week’s trip a good grade.

“It’s a good thing,” she said. “They learned a lot about plants, about how they grow and how they decay.”

Students may have also experienced “forest therapy,” the calming effect being in woods has on people. Students who usually misbehave didn’t during the forest walk, Huff explained.

Other planned trips this year include a trip to the Georgia Museum of Art for fifth-graders. That trip isn’t new, though. Clarke fifth-graders have been visiting the Georgia Museum of Art for years, and planners used the art trips as a model as they designed new trips for the Clarke students.

Other field trips this year included a trip by sixth-grade students to the J.W. Fanning Institute for Leadership Development, where they learned about leadership skills at the institute’s Outdoor Leadership Lab.

Ninth-graders are visiting UGA biological science research facilities, and some eighth-graders will learn about Georgia history in the Richard B. Russell Building Special Collections Libraries.

Not all Clarke students will get a chance to visit UGA this year, in the first year of the field trip program. But the number will double next year as UGA and Clarke gear up to their goal of a trip a year for every student. The school district has more than 12,000 students in 21 schools.

“By the time a student graduates from our district, our goal is that they will have seen each college or school at UGA, which will undoubtedly help students prepare and plan for post-secondary success,” said Clarke County School Superintendent Philip Lanoue in a press release.

In the same press release, UGA President Jere Morehead hailed the new field trip agreement.

“I believe that Experience UGA will change the lives of many of the Clarke County students who come to this campus,” Morehead said.

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