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Splash! Grant: A team effort!

Sebring High School's students are getting involved with the environment. Jill Scott, Science teacher for 10th, 11th and 12th grade Earth and Space Science applied for and was awarded a Splash! Grant from Southwest Florida Water Management District. Many agencies are getting involved with this project including the Highlands County School Board, Highlands Soil and Water Conservation District and Highlands County Engineering Department in an effort to provide technical and educational assistance to make the project a success.

The \$3,813.25 grant was originally written for freshwater management which would have included water quality testing and soil sampling of different areas in the County. But Jill came up with an even better idea for the students. "I just decided to create the pond/wetlands due to the fact that it will incorporate the abilities for years of water monitoring on a small scale that can be directly compared and related to all the large scale problems we face today in Florida's water. It is to be an on campus science lab. This will be better than field trips off site and in the end, saves time and money. Campus trips will now be possible and students will take ownership of the area. In addition, the learning impaired and Exceptional Student Education (ESE) and English Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) will be using this area for visual and hands on links to the real world of science."

The design and installation of this wetland/pond water system will provide students with educational opportunities related to nutrient cycling in aquatic ecosystems, native aquatic plant and animal habitat, and wetland water treatment systems for aquaculture.

Hallie Webb, lead agricultural teacher, has provided the plot of land where the pond is to be installed. Without his agreement to share his agriculture land area, this project would not be possible. In addition to the generosity of the land, Hallie has orchestrated the pond/wetland layout. Other teachers signed on as support and will utilize the area for their Physics, Chemistry, Biology, Anatomy, Earth Space Science and Agriculture classes.

On March 4th, staff from Highlands Soil and Water Conservation District (HSWCD) met with teachers and students to obtain technical information for the pond. Equipped with laser level to measure the fall of the land, HSWCD staff instructed the students on how to take measurements, read the range pole, record the data and calculate the information. It was nice to have the opportunity not only to perform the work for the pond, but to have hands on training for the students. Now they can actually see that a pond is more than just a hole in the ground. Students hung around after the data was collected and asked some excellent questions about the pond and its preparation. It's so exciting to see these kids taking such an interest and volunteering to help with the pond construction.

Jill Scott believes that science careers and science interests need to be encouraged. “We need to focus on making the science FCAT a successful part of our student’s science education and any additional science programs that really hook a kid’s interest. Kids love outdoors, nature, creatures and direct involvement with real world issues. Our students will get this and we will help them process and apply it.”

“Science careers are not on the upswing and we, as a nation, cannot afford for our science literacy to decline. We must be able to keep up with other nations in order to advance our abilities and improve our technology. Ag/Science is a huge economic occurrence in Florida and many students will be learning aquaculture techniques as part of our project. We will provide our students with the awareness of how to apply their knowledge to a career in science.”

The students are already learning how to prepare a site for construction, how to survey (laser level) and process the data and the pond isn’t even being dug yet! Jill plans to continue applying for these grants on an annual basis. “It will enhance our science and agricultural programs for the kids. Constant additions and improvements to our project will be made to keep up with new data and advances in science.”

Jill isn’t one to take the credit, “I have gotten so much support from Highlands County School Board’s Frank Brown, the Highlands Soil and Water Conservation District, the Highlands County Engineering Department, Angela Mann – the core rock that stabilizes our department and makes all this possible, and all of the teachers that plan to use the pond/wetland area for their classes.”

The Highlands Soil and Water Conservation District staff is certainly looking forward to working with school staff and students in the future. This project is so wonderful for many reasons; not only does it bring different agencies together to work toward a common goal, but it involves the students in the project and makes them feel like they are part of it. It is vital that we teach today’s youth about their environment so that the future of our earth will be in good hands.