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Idaho schools chief Luna and state Rep. Cronin have tense debate over K-

Nampa students dive in as the city and schools partner up for stormwater and water quality education efforts

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An underwater survey of the Boise River by students is part of a three-year effort by the city of Nampa and the Nampa School District. Similar efforts are under way in Boise schools. Students donning wetsuits earlier this week included Timberline High School senior Lucas Swope, 17.

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Three Nampa High School students were cold, weary and exhilarated this week after they snorkeled several miles down the Boise River.

They also were sobered by what they saw.

At Barber Park, the students and some peers from Boise's Timberline High School saw crawdads, trout, sculpin and other fish. They saw a mink along the shore. The water was clear.

By the time they got to Ann Morrison Park some three hours later, “algae covered everything, and we saw a lot less fish,” Nampa High senior Adam Quintana said. “There was a lot less life. The visibility wasn’t as good.”

Wait until you plunge into the river below Caldwell, environmental science teacher Nick Gastelecutto said, referring to a future outing.

“These guys are in for a shock,” Gastelecutto said with a grin, predicting visibility of a few inches compared to a little over a yard at Ann Morrison Park.

Between Ann Morrison and Caldwell, there are countless miles of gutters and storm drains, each funneling water, untreated, into the river along with whatever soap, oil or fertilizer humans have discarded in yards and streets along the way.

“The streams across the entire Valley eventually meet in the Boise River,” Gastelecutto said. Most people don’t realize the cumulative effect of small splats of pollutants here and there.

“Nampa is, unfortunately, one of the worst contributors” to stormwater pollution, he said.

Gastelecutto and his students aim to help change that through a new partnership with the city.

They will study and test water from the river and the creeks that feed it. Next week a larger group of students will plunge into Wilson Creek near campus to examine conditions there. And on Sept. 29, at least 60 Nampa students are expected to participate in the city’s Stormwater Community Cleanup Day by helping clean up Wilson Creek and putting stencils near storm drains to remind community members that what they dump goes straight to local waterways.

Students will spread the word to their families and other community members about stormwater pollution and ways to prevent it.

The program’s slogan: “We all live downstream.”

PARTNERSHIP WITH CITY

It’s all part of the city stormwater program’s public education and outreach component, which Nampa schools are heading under a three-year, \$25,000-per-year contract with the city. Education is an essential component of satisfying the city’s storm sewer system permit from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

“We can meet the needs of the community and meet the needs of our permit,” said Nampa Stormwater Program Manager Cheryl Jenkins. “By working with the schools, we don’t have to reinvent the wheel ... These teachers are experienced on lesson plans and environmental education.”

“It saves the city a tremendous amount of money, and it’s an incredible learning opportunity for the kids,” said Nampa spokeswoman Sharla Arledge.

Much of this year’s money from the city went to buy the necessary supplies, from wetsuits and cameras to water-testing equipment, Gastelecutto said.

Students learn the issues and the science in the classroom, then take the plunge to experience local waterways. Next week a larger group of students will dive into Wilson Creek adjacent to the Nampa High campus. Later they plan a downstream excursion in Caldwell.

“It’s a rush to see firsthand how we affect the environment,” Quintana said.

“You have fun doing it, but I learned a lot more than I thought I would,” said Nampa senior Kailee Clark, who also took part in the snorkeling trip.

JUST GETTING STARTED

Clark, Quintana and Eduardo Estrada said the stormwater education program has made them really think about how individuals' actions affect the area's water quality.

"It may seem like you're not doing a lot to affect the environment, but you're not the only person," Quintana said, adding that everything from working on your car in the street to over-fertilizing your lawn can make a difference.

Gastelecutto, a former Idaho Fish and Game fisheries technician who joined Nampa's teaching staff in 2008 and introduced the district's first environmental science program, has high hopes for the school/city collaboration.

Nampa elementary and middle school teachers are developing stormwater education curricula for younger students, and Gastelecutto will develop lesson plans that other high schools can adopt. By next year, he said, the project will spread across the entire school district and, he hopes, permeate the thinking of residents throughout the community and beyond.

The district's three-year contract with the city lasts until June 2015.

Other high schools in the Valley have similar projects. Timberline students working on the Boise Watershed Project were out at Barber Park Monday with Gastelecutto's students.

"We're trying to bring awareness to the entire Valley of water quality issues," Gastelecutto said. "I hope this program catches fire."

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