

Pam

# COMMENTARY

## KEEPING IT REAL

# Schoolyards are becoming planting fields

The state's future does appear greener. School grounds are fast turning into planting fields and incubator sites for cypress, oak and pine trees.



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Students in turn are becoming active stewards of the state's native plants, educators say.

Central High School students are among thousands of Louisiana students who have planted school-grown restoration plants in schoolyards as part of the LSU Coastal Roots Program.

The program provides an active learning situation in which students can explore strategies for sustaining coastal ecosystems, said Pam Blanchard, LSU

Coastal Roots Program director.

Central students soon will transplant their cypress and oak tree seedlings into the soil at BREC's Blackwater Conservation area, where plants will be used to provide food and habitat for the site's animals, and stabilize the soil as well, Central High Principal Bob Wales said.

"It was a tremendous experience for our students," Wales said. "When they grow up, they can bring their kids by and see that this is what I've done to do my part."

Blanchard said the program involves 40 schools in 18 parishes. Since plantings began in 2001, 3,600 students have transplanted more than 29,000 school-grown restoration plants on 90 trips throughout the state.

Fontainebleau State Park in St. Tammany Parish is one location where students have transplanted cypress and pine trees. The park lost about 90 percent of its trees during hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005.

The LSU Coastal Roots Program is an initiative of the LSU College of Education Department of Educational Theory, Policy and Practice, said Blanchard, who is also an LSU College of Education assistant professor.

"Students participating in the LSU Coastal Roots Program are learning to be stewards of our natural resources," Blanchard said.

The program aims to help students develop an attitude of ownership toward natural resources and to participate in coastal and wetland restoration projects, Blanchard said.

Last spring, Central High students began restoration work that involved seed preparation, planting, germination of the seeds and maintenance of the seedlings and the nursery, Wales said.

The students' work at Blackwater Conservation Area will help restore the area near the intersection of Hooper Road and Blackwater Road near the Comite River.

The area was once an abandoned and neglected dirt mine, according to BREC's Web site. The soil was acidic and low in fertility, and aquatic resources had been lost at one point, according to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Web site.

Many of those problems have been addressed, including the correction of soil acidity, the site said.

The conservation area opened in 2002 as a riverside retreat containing two large fishing lakes and aquatic wildlife. More than 7,000 new trees have since been planted, according to BREC's Web site.

Wales said students' tree plantings will continue to make a difference there.

"Going to the conservation area and getting dirty planting the seedlings helps them to see that they really can make a difference. I am sure in the years to come, as they drive by, they will be looking to see the progress of the trees," Wales said.

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