EPA head Lisa Jackson visits students at Metairie Academy

Published: Thursday, August 26, 2010, 11:55 PM

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The display near the office at Metairie Academy for Advanced Studies says it all. Beginning as early as pre-kindergarten, students are immersed in the ways of saving the planet, from recycling Christmas trees to helping restore Louisiana’s fragile wetlands.
EPA administrator Lisa Jackson speaks to students at Metairie Academy for Advanced Studies on Thursday.

So proud has teacher Mona Herbert been of their work that she recently sent an e-mail asking the administrator of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Lisa Jackson, to stop by Metairie Academy on Jackson’s next visit to New Orleans.

Jackson, a New Orleans native and Tulane University graduate who has made frequent trips to New Orleans since the BP oil well blowout, gladly obliged. On her way to a speaking engagement Thursday at Tulane, she visited with the fourth- and fifth-graders at the magnet school for high achievers and told them how proud she is of what they are doing to help the environment.

"I'm here today just to say thank you," she said. "For once, I don't have to do my job because you're doing such a good job already."

Metairie Academy is one of 40 Louisiana schools participating in Coastal Roots, a Louisiana State University initiative to restore the state's disintegrating coast. As part of the program, upper elementary students raise baby red maple and bald cypress trees at their school until large enough to be transplanted at Jean Lafitte National Park's Barataria Preserve.

In many ways, Jackson said, such activities are just as important, if not more so, than anything she does as head of the EPA.

"We can't get anything done if you don't care," she said. "My best advice is to keep doing what you're doing."

Jackson spent about 45 minutes with students, sharing stories about her childhood in New Orleans as the daughter of a secretary and a letter carrier who taught her the importance of working hard in school. She said she always excelled at science and mathematics and eventually took that passion to college, earning a bachelor's degree in chemical engineering from Tulane and a master's in chemical engineering from Princeton University.

When she invited questions from students, dozens of arms shot up.

"What is the favorite part of your job," one student asked.
Metairie Academy for Advanced Studies fourth-graders Molly Gaffney, left, Yvonne Antoine, center, Nia Evangeloulis, right, and Bailey Andras, top right, take photos of EPA administrator Lisa Jackson on Thursday, August 26, 2010.

"Going around and talking to young people because the earth really belongs to you."

"Did you participate in nature programs when you were young?"

"I did fish with my dad," she said, "but I wasn't really the most outdoors person."

"How much time have you spent on the BP oil spill?"

"I'd say easily 30 percent of my time," she said. "It's the biggest environmental disaster that this country has ever seen."

Rose Koochekpour, 10, a fifth grader, said she was thrilled with Jackson's visit. "It was so educational," she said.

To prepare for it, Rose researched Jackson and learned that not everyone thinks she is doing a good job, especially with the oil gusher.

"Some people want her out, but that isn't fair because she is doing all she can," Rose said. Hasala Rannulu, 10, said he found Jackson's talk inspiring. "I learned that the earth is a very important thing and that we should do all we can to preserve it, be earth friendly and not pollute the air."

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