

Students fight coastal erosion

BY JAMES MINTON
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ZACHARY
Some Zachary Elementary School students, after a recent field trip to Grand Isle, now have a better understanding of coastal erosion and the destructive effects of this year's massive BP oil leak in the Gulf of Mexico.

The students planted 503 new stalks of beach grass — bitter panicum — in the sands on Grand Isle State Park's beach and low sand dunes as part of the LSU Coastal Roots program, which works with schools to combat land erosion and encourage habitat restora-

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BREIGH RAINEY, teacher

tion.

Members of the school's Gifted Program classes taught by Breigh Rainey and Kristy Gilpin planted the grass in a custom-made enclosure on the campus last spring.

The grass sprouted not from seeds, but in long tubes from cuttings taken from the joints of mature grass stems.

The plant, also called "running beachgrass," is tolerant to salt and has a strong root sys-

tem that enables it to hold sand dunes together, Gilpin said.

The second- and third-graders in this year's gifted classes, along with three representatives of each of the school's other third-grade classes, traveled to Grand Isle Nov. 18 to plant the stalks.

There, they ran into visual evidence of the oil leak and watched at a distance as workers contracted by the oil company continued cleaning up oil

that had washed ashore on the island.

Some of the children picked up tar balls from the beach, along with shells, for display in their classes.

Rainey said about 75 students made the trip, along with a group of parents.

"I want us to be able to take every third-grader," Rainey said, adding that not many third-graders are aware of Grand Isle and the importance of it and other barrier islands along Louisiana's coast.

"There's nothing that can substitute for that, giving kids

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Third-grader Jacob Vidrine jumps on his shovel to deepen a hole to plant a stalk of beach grass held by his mother, Deanne Vidrine, during a recent Zachary Elementary School field trip to Grand Isle State Park. Students at the school, when they were second-graders, planted the grass in a nursery on their campus for transplanting this month on the barrier island for erosion control.

Photo provided by Breigh Rainey

A school's entry into the LSU Coastal Roots program requires a one-time fee of \$1,200 to cover nursery yard materials and installation costs.

Zachary Elementary third-grader William Sanford, standing, watches as classmate Nick Nalepa finishes planting a stalk of salt-tolerant grass on the beach at Grand Isle State Park. Students planted more than 500 grass cuttings at their school last spring and took a field trip to the barrier island to plant the resulting mature grass for erosion control.



Photo provided by Breigh Rainey

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that experience," she said.

The two teachers plan to continue the plantings in annual cycles.

"Physically, we aren't putting much in plants," Gilpin said.

The bigger contribution is making children aware of coastal features and the problems that Louisiana's coast faces; getting them to understand that not all of the coast looks like Gulf Shores, Ala., Gilpin said.

"Our kids realize that a lot of the problems we are facing are problems that we created," Rainey added.

A school's entry into the LSU Coastal Roots program requires a one-time fee of \$1,200 to cover nursery yard materials and installation costs, but the teachers said program Director Pam Blanchard would help teachers find funding sources.

Gilpin said she got a grant to help with the fee, and Principal Jennifer Marangos helped find another \$500 to run a water line to the plant nursery.