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STUDENTS BROADEN LEARNING EXPERIENCES



A snapping turtle is placed into a bucket so it can be weighed at the Great Plains Nature Center as part of a field ecology course at North High. Students are capturing and marking turtles at the center to determine the turtle population. Photos by Travis Heying/The Wichita Eagle

GRANTS INSPIRE STUDY

A Koch Foundation mini-grant lets North High students take their field ecology class into the field to study turtles at the Great Plains Nature Center.

BY LORI YOUNT
The Wichita Eagle

Clad in waders and standing on the squishy bank of a river, Antwain Smith lifted a slider turtle out of a trap. "This one isn't as old, but it's bigger," Smith, a sophomore at Wichita North High School, said of how this turtle compared to an older slider turtle measured earlier. "It's definitely a female," Smith said after looking at the turtle's feet and not seeing long, sharp claws.

His teacher, Bill Welch, built on his student's observations.

"The female in this species is bigger — they can be twice as big," he said. This outdoor educational moment was made possible by the Koch Foundation. Welch won a \$1,500 mini-grant from the foundation earlier this school year, which allowed him to buy equipment to expand his field ecology classes' turtle studies to the Great Plains Nature Center.

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.COM
VIDEO**

Find a video showing the outing for slider turtles, attached to this story at Kansas.com.

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LEFT: Bill Welch, a biology teacher at North High, measures a turtle his students have captured at Great Plains Nature Center on Thursday. RIGHT: Turtles trapped at the nature center are measured and marked. Grants fund many learning opportunities such as this one.



GRANTS

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"Without that, we wouldn't be able to do some of this," he said.

The Koch Foundation mini-grant is just one example of mini-grants and larger grants Wichita schools receive that are funded by private corporations or individuals.

More than \$86,000 in Education Edge grants were announced by the district this month.

Although corporate donations can be large sums of money, they must be used for specific purposes — not to plug holes in the budget as state aid is reduced, said Russell Miller, director of grants for the Wichita district.

"The budget crisis we're in will cause us to look more deeply for the opportunity for

grants," he said. "They are typically for specific purposes — not for purposes other than that."

The Koch Foundation mini-grants tend to focus on partnerships with certain community organizations, such as the nature center, Miller said.

Since 1995, Koch family foundations and companies have contributed \$1 million to Wichita schools, Koch spokeswoman Melissa Cohlman said. This includes \$50,000 to the Education Edge fund and \$260,000 in-kind from donating land where the district built Stucky Middle School, she said.

The Education Edge mini-grants are for individual classroom projects, along with athletic and fine-arts improvements.

The fund was started in 2003 by district supporters and consists of donations from private businesses and individuals. Since then, \$1.6 million has been given to the fund and

\$627,000 in grants awarded.

Several area businesses donated \$50,000 each in a corporate campaign to lay the foundation, but now most of the contributions are from school employees and other individuals, Miller said.

He said the Education Edge steering committee is gearing up for some changes in the program, including being more visible in the community.

The recession hasn't changed corporate giving substantially, Miller said.

In fall 2008, Spirit AeroSystems — which has been affected by the downturn in the aviation industry — donated \$200,000 over four years to sponsor the AVID programs at Southeast High School and Coleman Middle School.

Grants for AVID — Advancement Via Individual Determination — programs are some of the largest corporate donations the district receives,

usually totaling \$50,000 each year, Miller said.

Other area businesses that have funded AVID grants are Raytheon and Cargill.

Most of the donations go to paying tutors and materials for the program, which prepares high school and middle school students for college. The district pays teacher salaries and training.

But grants don't need to be big to affect a student's education. Simply buying turtle traps and waders gave a field ecology class a new experience.

North High junior Laralyn Black, who took the class because she loves animals and being outdoors, recorded the measurements of turtles the class will use to estimate turtle population size at the Nature Center.

"You need to . . . learn if the land is fertile," she said. "If it's not, you're not living in a good place."