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Education

Potential energy realized

Students learn science lessons outdoors during an overnighter at Camp Max Straus.

By Angela Hokanson

Running and hopping across a grassy field, sixth-graders from Benjamin Franklin Elementary School learned about global warming and solar energy while they released their own youthful energy playing outside Wednesday at Camp Max Straus.

Franklin students visited the camp for an overnight field trip to try out "Big Mountain," the new outdoor education program available there.

About 10 students participated in an activity Wednesday afternoon that showed them how heat from the sun could be trapped within the Earth's atmosphere by greenhouse gases. To demonstrate the point, camp instructors created a game of tag where students designated as "greenhouse gas ninjas" were "it," and the other students – who ran around pretending to be rays of light from the sun and heat from the Earth – had to travel between the Earth and the sun without being tagged. To show the students how heat can be trapped by greenhouse gases, instructors set up the game so that tagging players when they were "heat" was easier than tagging them when they were "light."

After playing a few rounds, 11-year-old Jackson Bramlette said the game provided a good demonstration of how energy was transferred from the sun to the Earth.

"It's harder to catch fast-moving light than slow-moving heat," Jackson said.

Brandon Mazariegos, 11, said he thought the game was a good representation of how solar energy really worked.

"We have everything here: the sun, the atmosphere line and the Earth," Brandon said about the game.

The 30-student sixth-grade class from Franklin arrived at the 112-acre camp, which is in Glendale's Verdugo Mountains, on Wednesday morning. The students are scheduled to stay two nights and two days, leaving the camp midday Friday.

The Glendale Unified School District is exploring the prospect of participating in science field trips at Camp Max Straus, which is run by Jewish Big Brothers Big Sisters of Los Angeles. Franklin students' visit was part of that exploratory process and will give the district more information about how the camp's curriculum would fit in with the California science standards for sixth-graders, Franklin Principal Stephen Williams said.

"The overall experience – that's what we're looking at," Williams said.

The program has great potential for Glendale schools, he added. For one, the camp is closer than other field trip sites, like Catalina Island, which makes some parents more comfortable allowing their children to go.

"This trip, 100% of students attended," Williams said.

The instructors for Camp Max Straus' new program are naturalists from the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority. Teachers from participating schools are able to select which of several lessons they would like the instructors to focus on, depending on the needs of their students.

"We're hoping that it makes more connections for them so that the learning lasts longer," Williams said.

During their 2 ½ days at the camp, Franklin students are going to conduct water quality tests in a small pond, learn a traditional fire-making process and take a three-hour hike, as well as participate in usual camp activities like campfires.

Camp Max Straus normally serves low-income students from around Los Angeles County through its summer programs. Jewish Big Brothers Big Sisters started the new outdoor education program as a way to reach more students throughout the school year.

"This is just a new way that we're serving kids," said Dan Witzling, director of communications for Jewish Big Brothers Big Sisters.

Franklin is only the second school to participate in the camp's new program, which started this fall. Since the program is still in its pilot phase, Jewish Big Brothers Big Sisters paid for the field trip for Franklin students.