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 YORKT
The Wichita Eagle

Cled in waders and standing on the sandy bank of a river, Autumn 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 class' turtle studies to the Great Plains Nature Center.

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.

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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 foundations or individuals.

More than $46,000 in Education Edge grants were announced by the district this month.

Although corporate donations can be a large source 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. "But we're not looking 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 1999, Koch family foundations and companies have contributed $1 million to Wichita schools, Koch spokeswoman Melissa Gobin said.

This includes $50,000 to the Education Edge fund and $250,000 in aid from donating land where the district built Staley Middle School, she said.

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

"It 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 $25,000 in grants awarded.

Several area businesses donated $27,000 each in a corporate campaign to buy shoes for the foundation, but now most of the contributions are from school employees and other individuals, Miller said.

He said the Education Edge meeting committee is gearing up for some changes in the program, including making it more visible to the community.

The recreation 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 among 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 teachers salaries and training.

"Our grants don't need to be big to affect a student's education," Cargill said. Simply buying tutoring materials and teachers gave a field ecology class a new experience.

North High junior Karlynn 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. "It's not, you're not living in a good place."

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