

We're going to need a bigger boat?

By Ruth Campbell rcampbell@oaoa.com | Posted: Wednesday, June 12, 2019 12:45 am

The SharkFinder program used at Ector County ISD, which lets students act as citizen scientists, will be expanding to all elementary schools in the fall and creating more opportunities for teachers to tie it into other curriculum.

In the program, under the umbrella of PICK Education and the ECISD Innovation Department, students sift through “highly concentrated fossil-bearing media to find and report on shark fossils,” a SharkFinder brochure said.

The findings are sent to principal investigator and vertebrate paleontologist Shawn Hamm, who curates them. Based on that information, students receive a certificate. Hamm is working in partnership with Southern Methodist University, Research and Innovation Strategist Gabriela Granado said.

“Those findings will be further researched for the possibility of scientifically significant material that could be published.

If that gets published, then the students will get recognition for that,” Chief Innovation Officer Jason Osborne said. “That’s going to be pretty exciting.”

At the end of the school year, representatives from the Innovation Office at ECISD awarded certificates to about 220 students.

“It looks like maybe another 200 more came in after that, so I’m working on that right now,” Granado said.

Granado added that 15 campuses and nearly 4,000 students were involved in SharkFinder this year. Next year, it will be 28 campuses.

“We sent, so far, about 1,500 samples, which are the tubes that could include multiple teeth. Those are team samples,” she said.

The program will expand to all ECISD elementary campuses in the fall and each campus will have microscopes, iPads, sieves and other tools they need to process the material.

Between Granado, Innovation Department Science Consultant Bridgett Casas, and Executive Administrative Assistant Griselda Flores, Osborne said, they work on a database that’s just for student findings.

“That way, if we have a number that’s associated with the students, just an arbitrary number, we can reference that in our database. That way, if a certain student finds something that’s of interest then we can credit that student and we can find them within that database,” Osborne said.



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5 year-old Janiyah Holguin looks at a chart to identify shark teeth. Noel Elementary School students look for 89 million year-old marine fossils, in their SharkFinder Citizen Science program Wednesday, March 7, 2018.

Osborne said the Innovation Department tries to make sure students use the same materials that a geologist would to process the fossils.

“We’ve learned throughout the experience that it’s really opened the minds of kids to go into different fields than they would have considered, or didn’t know existed,” Granado said.

Osborne said teachers are using SharkFinder across the curriculum.

“We have some kick start lesson plans and then they get the ownership of taking it where they want to take it ...,” Osborne said.

Casas, a retired teacher with more than three decades of experience, said the greatest thing is seeing the students faces light up and the fact that they don’t want to be absent.

“When they know we’re coming, they want to be present and if I’m out and about in Odessa and they see me, I mean they just get so excited. They come up to me. They start talking to me; they introduce me to their parents; and they tell their parents about SharkFinder and this the lady that teaches it. They call me Sharky now,” Casas said.

She added that if this is promoting the cross curricular method of teaching, she’s all for it. This way, students can see the connections between the different subjects.

“... It’s so much easier to do it that way when you can take all subjects and then join them together and teach them all at one time. You just get so much more accomplished and I think we need to get back to that because it’s so vital,” Casas said.