



district five

OF LEXINGTON & RICHLAND COUNTIES

Media Release

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A CHOICE School: Dutch Fork Elementary School Academy of Environmental Sciences

IRMO – All students can learn, but not every student learns in the same way. School District Five of Lexington and Richland Counties has placed a priority on offering and growing academic options. The CHOICE program offers families the choices they need to make their students successful in school and future careers. CHOICE includes the option to select any school in District Five that has space available to accommodate additional students or to select a magnet school or program.

One magnet school of CHOICE is Dutch Fork Elementary School Academy of Environmental Sciences. The Academy of Environmental Sciences focuses on the natural environment and the world around us. An emphasis is placed on inquiry-based learning and giving students opportunities to explore and discover.

Principal Julius Scott explained, “We take things from an inquiry stance, where you’re posing questions. You’re wondering. You’re allowing questions to lead your learning.”

When learning a new topic, students adopt the perspective of a professional in that area of study. If studying fish, they become ichthyologists. If studying birds, they become ornithologists. This captivates students and makes them active participant learners.

Parent Kathy Antley noted her son’s engagement, “In kindergarten, they were teaching them about hurricanes. Even now in the second grade, he gets his map out to track hurricanes.”

Each grade level studies a different region of South Carolina throughout the year and the school’s Resident Scientist, Amy Umberger, helps teachers integrate environmental sciences across the curriculum. Students use the scientific process, infer and interpret conclusions, support arguments with evidence, and communicate results. Third grader Zion Allen emphasized, “We don’t just solve a problem, we learn how to solve problems.”

Beyond the sciences, inquiry-based learning provides a unique perspective to approach all subjects. Literacy Coach Sally Somerall said, “We try to help kids see and observe the world around them, and analyze and interpret those observations to make sense of the world. It’s not so much science as a content area, but being a scientist. You can be a scientist in any content area. We want that kind of thinking and problem solving to transfer over to other content areas.”

With this philosophy, students participate in hands-on activities including gardening and raising animals. The school gardens are planted, weeded, and cultivated year-round boasting vegetables, blueberries, and butterfly bushes. The nature trail and secret garden courtyard are places for students to learn outside of the classroom. Kindergartners raise trout from eggs and release them in the Saluda River. For a close up look, students can visit the observational beehive in the media center or freshwater and saltwater aquariums in the hallways. This year, the Academy of Environmental Sciences is adding an aquaponics pond to show the symbiotic relationship between fish, plants, and bacteria.

Around seventeen community partnerships support the Academy of Environmental Sciences as well. They offer engaging field studies at parks and nature areas and have helped build the school’s outdoor spaces. Two University of South Carolina professors teach courses from inside the school giving students access to higher education professionals.

Umberger explained, “Our kids are highly engaged in real-world relevant experiences, way beyond a traditional school. They weed, they clean up, they recycle, they turn off lights. They’re really responsible in taking care of our school. It’s not just about the sciences, it encompasses social responsibility.”

Students take their lessons to heart and strive to make a difference. Fifth graders initiated a carpool line awareness campaign about engine idling prompting parents to reduce emissions. Students play an active role in the recycling program and the school was recognized by the South Carolina Wildlife Federation for their efforts in conservation. The entire school is forging forward this year with a new Food Waste Grant, becoming the first school in the midlands to compost breakfast and lunch. The compost will be used as fertilizer in the gardens.

Principal Scott said, “We want to make our school, our world, our community a better place.”

The CHOICE program provides many options for students to find their best fit, and Dutch Fork Elementary School Academy of Environmental Sciences fosters an environment of exploration, discovery, and action. It’s a place where wonders, and students, grow.