

School goes to the park

Third-graders from City Heights take part in space-saving pilot program

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It's 10 a.m. on a weekday, and Luis Cabrales and a classmate from Rosa Parks Elementary School are searching the sculpture garden in Balboa Park for a piece called "Mother and Daughter."

Across the prado at the San Diego Historical Society, another group of children studies maps with historians and cartographers. Yet another class is bound for the Reuben H. Fleet Science Center for a lesson on the properties of matter.

While third-graders across the city learn the three R's the old-fashioned way -- behind a desk -- more than 100 City Heights schoolchildren spend weeks at a time deep inside the archives and institutions of Balboa Park.

Started this year, "School in the Park" is a pilot program that saves scarce classroom space at the overcrowded Rosa Parks campus. More important to educators, the program immerses inner-city students in the cultural offerings of San Diego's museums and zoo.

"This is definitely not a field trip," said program director Susan Wachowick. "We cover all of the standards and regular curriculum. The only difference -- we do it in museums and in the park."

Six of the school's 14 third-grade classes -- about 120 children and their teachers -- spend two weeks in school and a week at an institution in the park. They repeat the cycle until they've hit the three participating museums -- the historical society, the science center and the San Diego Museum of Art -- and the zoo.

School in the Park begins with a bus ride to Balboa Park. Most museums have classrooms, but lessons can take place just about anywhere -- from the sculpture garden to a courtyard.

Curriculum is taken from the San Diego Unified School District's academic standards. But the school has been given some flexibility when it comes to the district's strict three-hour literacy bloc. And class assignments are more innovative and hands-on than traditional school work.

For example, students have measured and mapped parts of the sprawling park. They

have examined historical documents. They've interviewed a host of museum employees. They document their experiences in journals, hand-craft maps of San Diego from salt, flour and water, and engage in hands-on science demonstrations.

Tam Huynh, 8, said he has persuaded his family to check out what he's discovered at Balboa Park. Donning the official Rosa Parks uniform of navy trousers and a white Polo shirt, the City Heights boy carefully paints his relief map of San Diego in a spacious classroom inside the historical society museum.

"I told my dad I really like the museums," he said while dragging his blue-dipped paintbrush along his version of the San Diego River. "I know this place almost as well as I know my school."

Less than two months into the school year, Roberta Dawson said her children already have benefited from the experience.

"I had concerns at first. I wasn't sure if this would disrupt school or (add to it)," Dawson said. "It's been wonderful. It's really a carry-over from what we do in the classroom. And the kids get so much out of it. They really feel like this is their park, much more than they would if they came for a one-day visit."

Meanwhile, as students study at the park, their classrooms at Rosa Parks are snatched up by San Diego State University students working with the City Heights Educational Pilot, a three-campus project designed to give university students hands-on experience while improving education for children.

Financed by an \$18 million donation from local philanthropist Sol Price, the project has turned Rosa Parks into a sort of educational version of a teaching hospital. San Diego State sends students, faculty and resources from its education, health science and business departments to the school.

Still, overcrowding at Rosa Parks made it difficult for university students to attend courses or meet at the school -- until School in the Park came along.

"I think, first and foremost, everything we are trying to do is focused on providing a better educational program," said Ian Pumpian, director of the City Heights project. "Anything that allows us more elbowroom is an added benefit."

The experimental museum exchange program costs about \$200,000, a budget that includes daily bus transportation, curriculum and supplies, museum assistance and a full-time director.

Educators hope the experience will improve student attendance and academics. At the end of the school year, Rosa Parks officials will compare the museum exchange students' grades, test scores and attendance with those of their peers who remained on campus. If the results are positive, they may consider expanding the program next

year.

"A lot of this is about motivation. We believe that, if the kids are more engaged, they will be pushing to go back to school when they typically might have said, 'I don't feel well -- I want to stay home,' " Pumpian said.

For many of the students, School in the Park offers their first trips to the park and its museums. Said Pumpian: "Going to Balboa Park for many of these families is like affluent families going to Europe."

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