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Classifieds

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Directory

Shopping

My Zwire!

Home -> News -> News -> Top Stories

NEWS SEARCH

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Seymour students get glimpse into past with science experiment

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SEYMOUR - Eighth-grade students at Seymour Middle School got a first-hand look at the stone age as classes analyzed sediment recovered from a mastodon excavation site in New York.

The students are recovering and identifying segments that are plant, organic and inorganic remains. Using hand lenses and picking out items such as seeds, bone fragments, rocks and plant parts, students look at what types of plants or animals lived in the area to get an idea of what the environment was like when mastodons were in that part of New York.

Items collected will be sent to researchers in the Paleontological Research Institute at Cornell University.

Science teachers Marian White and Michele Ballard were working with University of Tennessee graduate students Justin Hart and Sara Dean to enhance the eighth-grade science curriculum at the school.

The project was made possible through a \$2 million grant funded by the National Science Foundation to UT. It was designed to enhance science education by funding graduate students to bring active research and activities to area middle schools.

Ten graduate students have been placed in Sevier, Blount, Knox and Jefferson counties.

"Part of the eighth-grade curriculum is earth science. That's a major part of the things we're teaching," White said. "We've already covered fossils and that kind of thing. It's the perfect lab activity for them to follow up what they need to know about fossils and time periods of the earth."

Hart has been coming once a week to the school, either teaching students, conducting hands-on activities with them or discussing his research.

"It's been pretty positive," said Hart, who will receive a doctorate in May. "At least it helps them understand the concepts better when they can actually do the hands-on activities. I get good feedback from them."

Eighth-grader Dalton Bridges was successful in finding items such as sedimentary rocks.

"They're really interesting," he said.

Another eighth-grader, Kelsey Cupp, said she has learned a lot from the project.

"We've been learning about ancient mastodons, and I've always been fascinated with bones and fossils," Kelsey said.

White was optimistic the students will take their studies further.

"Hopefully the students will learn more about what college is like," White said, "and it will inspire some of them to go into the science field and learning the content they need to learn better, because they've got some exciting activities going on."

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