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Royal Oak students learn from local wetland

Oct. 5, 2012

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Royal Oak School in north west Calgary was opened in September 2010 and almost immediately, the teachers and students began exploring the nearby wetland, leading to a decision to “adopt it.” Royal Oak strives to be a model of personalized elementary education for its more than 500 kindergarten to Grade 4 students. By using each child’s natural curiosity, the school emphasizes inquiry-based learning and uses it to guide their studies. This direction has worked ideally for their exploration of their local wetland where the natural habitat stimulates constant inquiry. Guided by the students’ questions, each class regularly spends time visiting the local wetland. They then pose their questions and share their observations with the whole school through an interactive bulletin board, located in their central gathering place. Their wetland study efforts are not simply limited to the traditional areas of study, such as science and environment, but include art, poetry, literature, photography and the use of technology.

Some student investigations included:

- Why are there frogs at the Tuscany wetland and not here? Could they live here?
- What other animals or plants are missing from our wetland and why?
- What might happen to our wetland if we don’t protect it?
- How do we let other people know how important it is and what we all need to do?

The students explored the following conservation issues:

- water quality, storm drains, pollutants and how these can affect the wetland;
- invasive plants, such as burdocks and thistles, which then lead to efforts by the Grade 2s to begin the challenging task of removing them; and
- global warming and how it might affect the plants and animals living here.

The students also became passionate about getting involved when the City of Calgary was considering the local wetland for an off-leash dog park. Through letter writing, surveys and, with Grade 1s attending a public meeting, they took an active role in convincing city officials that these areas were special.

The students reached out to their community by:

- contributing artwork depicting water and their wetland to the local RBC bank branch; and
- raising more than \$1,500 for three local charities, through an auction of the kindergarten students’ artwork.

The impact of the nearby wetland is best expressed by Scott MacNeill, principal of Royal Oak School, “When we opened Royal Oak School, we did so under the theme of a picture book titled “Imagine a Place”. I’m not sure that any of us at that time fully imagined that this local wetland

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would emerge as such an engaging outdoor classroom for our students to explore and that it would create such authentic learning opportunities for the entire school community. This could not have happened without the important efforts of our staff, students, volunteers and community partners."

On Oct. 5, 2012 the entire school will be recognized as Newalta Wetland Heroes by Ducks Unlimited Canada, one of Canada's leading conservation organizations, and its corporate partner, Newalta. They will also be the first recipients of the Newalta Wetland Heroes *Award of Merit*, which will allow them to purchase additional resources to help them in their continuing efforts to explore and conserve this local wetland and others in their community.

