

Secretary of Natural Resources to Host Norfolk Educators for Pioneering River Curriculum



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RICHMOND, Va. – On December 9, Virginia Secretary of Natural Resources Molly Ward will host the Elizabeth River Project and a delegation of Norfolk teachers at the Patrick Henry Building for a conversation about environmental challenges, policies, and programs within the Commonwealth. The group will receive a warm welcome from Governor Terry McAuliffe before heading to the Capitol to begin development of a pioneering curriculum focused on the Elizabeth River and Chesapeake Bay.

The curriculum will take all Norfolk fourth-graders outside on a regular basis for hands-on study of the rich environment that surround them. With planned visits to the Elizabeth River Project’s 132-foot Dominion Virginia Power Learning Barge – complete with its fully functional, floating wetland – and ample opportunities to get muddy while replanting damaged ecosystems, the new program will inspire the next generation of environmental leaders to begin exploring the ecology of their school yards and communities.

“They will be stepping out of the classroom into the community to become empowered to make decisions that have a positive impact on our watershed,” said Robin Dunbar, Education Director at the Elizabeth River Project and coordinator of the curriculum development effort.

Thanks to a Bay Watershed Education and Training (B-WET) Grant from NOAA to the Elizabeth River Project, a select group of Norfolk Public Schools teachers, administrators and advisors will have the chance to travel the Eastern seaboard to investigate the best techniques and topics for inclusion in the cutting-edge curriculum.

Encouraging schools to commit to significant numbers of field-based environmental investigations and meaningful outdoor experiences is central to the Governor’s recent Executive Order, “Establishing the Virginia Environmental Literacy Challenge.” When Virginia Secretary of Natural Resources Molly Ward learned of the Elizabeth River effort, she immediately invited the self-described “Dream Team” from Norfolk for a day-long conversation with top environmental officials in Richmond.

“There is simply no better way to cultivate an ethic of stewardship in our children than meaningful, personal experiences with the great outdoors. I’m beyond thrilled that so many young Virginians will soon have so many opportunities to study and protect the natural bounty in their backyard,” said Secretary Ward.

“The coolest thing is, how many people get to have a room in the Capitol to launch a project? The Secretary recognizes the importance of environmental education, and the governor also. It’s special and heartwarming,” said Dunbar.

This year’s pilot of the new curriculum will begin with 10 Norfolk schools and, over the course of the next three years, will expand to all Norfolk elementary schools. The curriculum will be closely linked to Virginia Standards of Learning and the unique educational opportunities provided by the Elizabeth River and Chesapeake Bay.

"Over the next three years, we hope to achieve the best fourth grade environmental education in the country at Norfolk public schools," said Marjorie Mayfield Jackson, Executive Director, Elizabeth River Project, "with special thanks to NOAA and the governor."

When finished, the team plans to offer the curriculum for adoption in all the cities in the Elizabeth River watershed: Chesapeake, Norfolk, Portsmouth and Virginia Beach.

“I am excited for our teachers to participate in this cutting-edge curriculum that exposes our students to environmental lessons and hands-on learning through the Elizabeth River Project,” said Norfolk Public School’s Superintendent Dr. Melinda Boone.

The Elizabeth River Project is a non-profit organization leading the restoration of the Elizabeth River through education and restoration. More information: elizabethriver.org.

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