

News-Herald

Things To Do

St. Stephen Catholic School in New Boston launches STEM program

Students get hands-on experience in several areas of learning

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Kindergarteners Emma Brock and Roch Marvaso get a close look at a red-eared slider turtle in the school's STEM lab. (Photo courtesy of Patrick Bevier)

By [Scott Bolthouse](#) |

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Students at St. Stephen Catholic School in New Boston are furthering their education in the realm of life sciences through a newly launched STEM program this year.

STEM, an acronym that stands for science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, offers hands-on learning experiences that help develop a variety of skills, including creativity, math proficiency, critical thinking, student collaboration, and more.

The STEM program at St. Stephen was launched and is instructed by Principal Patrick Bevier, also in his first year at the school.

Bevier, who has a background in teaching science and biology at various levels of education, said that currently the program is focusing on live animals and life science.

“The majority of our time so far has been focused on life science. This year so far, the students have met a grey tree frog, a hognose snake, an American toad, and this week they’re going to meet a blue spotted salamander,” Bevier said.

During the class that is taught to kindergarten through eighth grade, students not only learn about the animals, but they also get to safely handle them, lending to the hands-on experience that the class encourages.

“The kids get to handle the critters, and that’s something that has been very popular,” Bevier said.



St. Stephen Catholic School second graders Lacey MacOn (bottom left), Novela Wisniewski, Arabella Merkel, Charley Naquin, and Jackson Glaab get up and close to a hog-nosed snake named Wilbur during a STEM class at the school. (Photo courtesy of Patrick Bevier)

Students have the chance to use microscopes during live animal instruction, and they engage in station labs, where students get to move around the room and learn through a wide variety of hands-on activity.

Also instructed is the ecology of each animal, as well as preservation of the animals and the importance of each animal to an ecosystem.

“We teach a lot of different information about each animal,” Bevier said. “It’s a great opportunity to acknowledge science and have that be part of the elementary experience.”

When students arrive to the class, Bevier said they can hardly hold back their excitement to learn.

“When the students come in, they are immediately asking what the animal of the week is. They start asking about the animal, if it bites, can we hold it, and then we let the kids handle the animals,” Bevier said.

Bevier said that all of the animals are safe to handle and they pose no risk to the students. If a student isn't comfortable with handling a critter, they are asked to put their arms across their chest as a sign that they're not comfortable with holding it.

"I'm very respectful of students that don't want to hold the animals," Bevier said. "I would say about 90-percent of the kids are eager to hold the animals."

At the end of the session, the students go to the back of the room and engage in some fun activities.

"I'll have the kids sit in a circle and put the animal in the middle, and whoever it crawls up to we joke and say 'oh you've just been eaten by the snake!'"

Bevier said that while STEM is an important part of a student's curriculum, in some cases it's an inadequate part of a student's education at the elementary level.

"I think that science and STEM are often underserved at the elementary level. It's nobody's fault, but I don't think it's a strength of most elementary teachers," Bevier said. "It's often a topic that gets set aside because of time limitations."

Bevier said St. Stephen school has many teachers who come from a strong science background, and that they all were very enthusiastic to be involved in the STEM program.

"As a science teacher, I offered this program to my teachers, and they jumped on it," Bevier said. "This program is really a nice supplement to what they're doing in their classes. We're very fortunate to have some very strong science teachers at St. Stephen."

Although the program is focusing so far on animal and life science, the ability to expand the program into various other fields of science is in the works for the course.

"We will definitely go into physical science and some other science related topics as we go through the year," Bevier said. "We're going to be doing a lot more physics and earth science throughout the winter."

Bevier said that regardless of the curriculum being taught, the school tries to make a connection to their faith during instruction.

"We try to bring our faith into everything we teach here at St. Stephen. We talk about what a wonderful creation this animal is, as well as its value and how they should always be treated safely and never harmed," he said.

"It's just been a lot of fun and has been interesting for the kids," he said. "It's new and different, they've never done this before."



Olly Volz, first grade student at St. Stephen Catholic School, examines a snake's skin under a microscope during the school's STEM experience. (Photo courtesy of Patrick Bevier)