At groundwater event, McHenry Co. kids learn water from the ground up

By Mike Neumann
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Sixth-graders at four middle schools throughout the county — including St. Mary School — attended the first ever McHenry County Youth Groundwater Festival last week.

The Loyola University Chicago Retreat and Ecology Campus was the setting of the festival, which allowed 120 students to take part in four 40-minute hands-on workshops and activities.

Bethany Gola, director of the McHenry County Schools Environmental Program, which is housed under the county’s department of planning and development, said the idea for the festival has been in the works for many months.

“Our goal is to support these teachers with their curriculum,” Gola said, noting groundwater is part of sixth-grade curriculum. “It gives them a better look at [the importance groundwater plays in our lives] through hands-on learning.”

Whether through a game of “Dripial Pursuit” or the testing of surface water using samples from the campus pond, the students stayed busy throughout their three hours at the festival.

In one exercise, Woodstock High School students, who are part of the Envirothon Team, scooped up water and mud from the pond to determine the lifeforms in it.

“We found lots of snails and a couple of larva bugs,” said Maureen Keisling, a St. Mary student. “[It was fun] digging up the bugs in the water.”

With the help of WHS students, the sixth-graders determined if the organisms showed signs of tolerance to water pollution. If they did, it meant the water had at least some form of pollution. The WHS students explained that if surface water is polluted, it is possible nearby groundwater is polluted as well.

“The groups [of students] are very good,” said WHS senior Wyatt Meyer. “They seemed willing to learn.”

He said being able to educate youth about the importance of groundwater protection is rewarding and something he is happy to do as part of the Envirothon Team.

Bill Donato, adviser to the team and a science teacher at WHS, said he used to take part in a grant program in the 1990s that taught students about groundwater, but funding for that program ran out after a few years.
“[The groundwater festival] is a way for us to stay in the loop,” Donato said. “We’re already talking about ways to expand it.”

Hillary Russel, a teacher at St. Mary School, said the firsthand learning experience is exactly the type of engaging education needed to teach youth about these important issues. She said from an educator’s standpoint, she appreciates the interaction between the middle and high school students as well as the interaction of students from different schools.