



Media Contact:
Jennifer Sams
Director of Marketing & Communications
jsams@edfoundationsrq.org
941.927.0965 (office) 941.281.9883 (mobile)

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Middle school students investigate possible crop duster damage to watershed Education Foundation creates immersive scientific educational scenario

Sarasota, Fla. (Jan. 15, 2019) – Sarasota Middle School (SMS) students returned from winter break to discover taped-off sites on campus where containment and excavation experts were removing and analyzing potentially hazardous objects from dig sites.

The simulated immersive learning scenario was created by the Education Foundation of Sarasota County and University of South Florida professors to help students attain a higher level of scientific literacy, develop inquiry skills and model authentic academic habits.

The “H₂ Oh No!” project was a weeklong cross-curricular exercise that involved all sixth through eighth grade SMS students.

The project’s premise was that school workers testing for a location for the school’s future garden plot discovered scraps from an old crop duster and fertilizer, pesticide and fuel containers indicating that the campus was located on a historical farm.

USF professors and on-site scientists Mitch Ruzek and Dana Zeidler removed artifacts and processed the area much like HAZMAT, first responder and research teams would do while investigating the possibility of chemicals leaching into the ground and affecting the watershed.

Multiple sites had been prepared with plane parts, rusty containers, old farming equipment, fossils, rubble and vintage advertising posters, all designed to spark students’ curiosity about the environment, historical agriculture, flight and human civilizations.

During the week, area subject matter experts made presentations relating to and expanding on issues and questions raised by the simulated discovery. Speakers from Suncoast Waterkeeper and University of Florida’s Institute of Food and Agriculture Extension talked about protecting and restoring our waterways and the effect of chemicals on the environment.

Other guest speakers included historian John McCarthy, executive director of Historic Spanish Point, who described Sarasota in the 1940s when the crop duster would have flown; Jake Martin, education specialist at Mote Marine Laboratory, who spoke about red tide; and Elizabeth Djinis, education reporter at the Sarasota Herald-Tribune, who discussed how to turn observations into a story.

The investigation of the potentially damaged site was the Education Foundation’s second immersive learning experience of the 2018-19 school year. Kati Burns, director of programs at the Education Foundation, said three more immersive scenarios are planned this academic year. All are surprise events for the students.

Schoolwide immersive grants are awarded through the Education Foundation EducateSRQ grants program, which also approved approximately 175 classroom and schoolwide grants for a total of \$316,468 in funds awarded this school year.

More information about the Education Foundation and the EducateSRQ grants programs is available at www.EdFoundationSRQ.org.

About the Education Foundation

The Education Foundation of Sarasota County is an independent partner working to advance philanthropic support for Sarasota County Schools. Its mission is to enhance the potential of students, promote excellence in teaching and inspire innovation in education. Guided by the belief that education changes lives, the Education Foundation strives to match each donor's passion with high-impact projects created to ensure students graduate with purpose and are prepared for a postsecondary pathway. The Education Foundation of Sarasota County and its philanthropic investors are champions for students, teachers and schools. For more information on how to be a champion for education, visit EdFoundationSRQ.org.

-end-

PHOTO CAPTIONS:

1. USF professor Dr. Mitch Ruzek joins Sarasota Middle School students to examine an unidentified metal barrel found at the dig site.
2. Sarasota Middle students record their dig site discoveries and theories.
3. Sarasota Middle student examines an authentic, vintage insecticide container found at the dig site.
4. USF professor Dr. Dana Zeidler shares the latest dig site discoveries with a Sarasota Middle School class.