

Hundreds of students participate in first annual Paddlefish Festival

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In celebration of the paddlefish released at Caddo Lake and in Jefferson earlier in the year, Collins Academy of Jefferson hosted its first Paddlefish Festival Thursday and Friday

Students from numerous school districts from all over East Texas visited Jefferson Transportation and Visitor Center to partake in the various events.

“We are providing extended educational opportunities with an archery demonstration and lesson,” said Gary Endlsey of Collins Academy. “That provides an outdoor activity that students can take up.”

In addition to testing their aim, students also got an up close look at a variety of exotic animals, such as a chinchilla and a small boa constrictor.

“We also have a Creature Teacher here from Waxahachie that brought a group of animals to show the children that they may not be familiar with,” Endlsey said. “All of this is associated with habitat improvement, the paddlefish release and is aligned with the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills and gives the kids a leg up in giving back to the community, working on STEM and preparing for a bright future.”

The day wasn’t only fun and games; participating students also brought in projects ranging from displays to power points to speeches on a subject of their choosing.

“The kids have developed these projects and presentations that are on display,” Endlsey said. “They got to pick their subjects. Judging of the projects is by their peers. We are like a science fair in that this produces projects, but we are not like one as everyone is a winner.”

The Collins Academy is an independent organization out of Jefferson that focuses on finding ways to offer educationally enriching programs and projects in the area. The academy is sponsored by Today Foundation, which made the Thursday and Friday events possible.

“This is the first,” said Richard Collins, founder and chairman of the Today Foundation. “We’re going to expand it and we’re going to continue to grow it throughout the year. The real thrust is to teach kids the excitement and joy of learning. It’s just been a great day. I couldn’t be happier.”

The first annual Paddlefish Festival was met with overwhelming support from the school district; originally the Collins Academy had only planned to accommodate about five districts. In the end, three times that amount showed interest with hundreds of students.

“This is the first of much more to come,” Endlsey said. “What we intended to do this year was a pilot with up to five districts. The publicity we got with the release brought us much more. There’s something about the paddlefish and its habitat that attracted a lot of attention. So we ended up getting 15 different districts with about 1,500 students. We’re looking at bigger things next year as funding comes in. We will expand the program as rapidly as possible.

“We’ll be hearing more about the paddlefish as well as a few other organisms in the system in the future,” he said.