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Gauthier parents meet the staff
Open house gives a peek into school

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When J.F. Gauthier Elementary School reopened its doors last year, it retained the name of the Hurricanes, but almost everything else in the school was new. This year, there continues to be a flurry of activity taking place on the Poydras campus.

The school recently hosted an open house where parents and guardians were invited to meet teachers and visit the campus. It was a standing-room-only crowd as more than 300 people gathered for this informal visit.

Guests were introduced to the entire Gauthier faculty, and then addressed by school principal Lisa Young. This brief welcome was followed by teacher demonstrations, showcasing the varied types of technology utilized in the classroom.

Other visitors making a big impact on the school were volunteers from Kids Around the World, a nonprofit organization committed to bettering the lives of children. Members of this faith-based group are beautifying the campus and creating a huge, colorful mural in the cafeteria.

Local artist Veronica Leandrez and Los Angeles artist Nichole Blackburn have teamed up to create the artwork. With a "blue bayou" theme, the mural depicts scenes of eastern St. Bernard Parish, including oak and cypress trees and the other natural beauty of the area.

And according to Blackburn, the mural also represents something else: hope. "The mural also has kids flying kites, symbolizing the lifting of spirits," she said. Leandrez said it's very rewarding to use art as a healing mechanism.

"Kids are so impressionable; we wanted to give them something beautiful to take their attention away from the rubble. And it feels great to give them something positive and uplifting," she said.

Gauthier Assistant Principal Shellie Hilton said the school is in debt to all the volunteers who have shared their time and talents with the school.

"Kids Around the World built our playground last year, and now they've painted this beautiful mural," Hilton said. "Our school community is really grateful, knowing that they are really helping us help our children."

Some of the best and brightest of these children are practicing for the upcoming Academic Games League, while others look forward to participating in the school's 4H Club.

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District students will learn about the importance of good nutrition and physical fitness through "Body Walk," an innovative program sponsored by Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Louisiana Foundation and the LSU AgCenter.

Students will have the opportunity to explore a walk-through representation of the human body. At each of the Body Walk's 10 stations, a volunteer presenter engages the students in a five-minute activity focused on healthy lifestyle choices such as eating nutritious food and getting plenty of exercise.

The tour begins when students walk through a giant ear into the brain. Inside the huge brain dome, students experience "brain waves" and learn about brain function.

After leaving the brain, each student is each given a bookmark representing a food, such as a carrot or hamburger. The "foods" step into the exhibit's larger-than-life mouth, are "swallowed" through the esophagus tunnel, and move into the stomach dome.

From the stomach, the students travel through the small intestine, where they are "absorbed" by villi into the blood. Then they follow the path of the nutrients to the heart, lungs, bones, muscles, and skin stations. Students leave the body through a cut in the skin.

The Smart Bodies program is entering its fourth year and was developed to address increasing national concern about the lack of physical activity and the declining nutritional status of young children. In Louisiana, childhood obesity has doubled in the past 20 years; almost one in three school-age children is overweight or obese.

"The Body Walk provides a unique and exciting opportunity for Louisiana elementary students to learn about their bodies and the importance of making healthy choices," said Lauren Faust, the local 4H representative.

For information on the Smart Bodies Program or Louisiana Body Walk, visit the Smart Bodies Web site at www.smartbodies.org.

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Caption Mike Young, of Kids Around the World, works on a mural at J.F. Gauthier Elementary School in Poydras.

Volunteers and artists with Kids Around the World, a nonprofit organization committed to bettering the lives of children, who are helping beautify the campus of J.F. Gauthier Elementary School include, from left: Joanna Frye, Dana Brown, Teddy Perez, Mike Young, Nichole Blackburn and Cherisse Sayer.

Artists Veronica Leandrez and Nichole Blackburn have designed a mural at J.F. Gauthier Elementary that depicts the natural beauty of eastern St. Bernard Parish.

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