

CLASSIFICATION CADETS

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In Racine Unified School District (RUSD), many students do not get the opportunity to see exotic animals throughout their schooling. This can lead to having a loss of empathy for animal care and conservation later in life. The AmeriCorps program aims to combat that by introducing underprivileged students to animals like this at an early stage in life. RUSD has a demographic of 28.2% Hispanic/Latinx students and 26.2% African American students, making it a school district that emphasizes on cultural diversity and preparing students to thrive in a global community. However, many of these students do not get the chance to experience all that the Racine community has to offer. RUSD has 13 Title I elementary schools, meaning that a majority of the students attending these schools are experiencing high poverty, where they would not have the opportunity to go to the Racine Zoo, where conservation education and animal empathy are emphasized on. That is where the AmeriCorps Classification Cadets program comes in.

Classification Cadets is a two-hour long program where AmeriCorps members travel to a Kindergarten class, diving into the differences between animal classifications. Engaging and hands-on games, crafts, activities, and live animal presentations accompany

this program, where students get the opportunity to not only learn about animal Classifications, but also form empathy towards animals. Commonly perceived “creepy” or “scary” animals such as cockroaches and snakes are brought to programs like this, and students are taught about those animals in a safe and comfortable environment so that they can empathize with animals like this and hopefully be inspired to pursue environmental stewardship.

One of the hands-on crafts that the students experience in this program is learning about Amphibian skin. Amphibians have extremely permeable skin that allows them to absorb water and breathe through their skin. This makes water extremely important to amphibians, and students are taught this through a fun craft. During this activity, students use a marker to color a coffee filter, which represents their “amphibian skin”. When the filter is dry, the students see that the marker color cannot permeate the filter. Then the AmeriCorps educator sprays their coffee filter with water, allowing the marker color to seep through the “amphibian skin” to the paper below. This teaches children about the permeability of amphibian skin, and how water is required for amphibians to breathe and drink through their skin, which is why freshwater conservation



is such an important effort. At age five, these students can already learn about the importance to water for amphibians. In later programs, that will form a basis for further conservation education, where students will learn about seeing amphibians as indicator species because they are the first to be adversely affected by water pollution. This knowledge and stewardship requires a strong basis in animal knowledge and empathy, which is what Classification Cadets succeeds in bringing to the underprivileged students of Racine County.

AmeriCorps member Noah Harris at Jefferson Lighthouse Elementary School doing the amphibian craft, students are excited to see what happens when their colored filter gets wet.

