



Lessons Learned During Nine-Mile Trek
By: Christy Campbell, The Roanoke Times
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Memories from gym class bring to mind a variety of images - picking team members, avoiding dodge balls, climbing knotted ropes. Many years from now, last month's field trip to the New River Trail could be the first recollection that many Claremont Elementary School fifth-graders have from the physical education of their childhood.

"Every one of them voted to go nine miles," said Claremont P.E. teacher Joel Burchett of a unanimous class decision that added four miles to the hike taken by last year's fifth-graders. "So we saw that as an opportunity to teach them character."

Every pupil reached the finish point at an old railroad bridge near Hiwassee, where they feasted on a cookout-style luncheon compliments of the Pulaski locations of Sonic Drive-In, Skyline Beverage, Food City, Food Lion, Kroger and Wal-Mart. The students' hard work during practice laps had paid off and the goal they had set was achieved.

"When we were riding home on the bus, I saw how long we had walked," wrote fifth-grader Natasha Vaughan in an assignment to describe the experience. "I accomplished a lot that I had never thought I could. I think the trip helped us believe in ourselves."

Vaughan's classmate, Amanda Whittaker, wrote, "I was nervous the night before because I have asthma. I was very happy to finish and I want to go back."

Burchett explained that many pupils had never been on the New River Trail State Park, which stretches 57 miles from Pulaski to Galax, and were unaware of what they have in their own back yard. Introducing them to the trail taught an appreciation of the surrounding community, and also incorporated new Virginia Standards of Learning for physical education that emphasize lifetime recreation and fitness activities.

"Hopefully it'll give them motivation for the rest of their lives to work to achieve goals," said Michael Scott, who also teaches physical education at Claremont. Scott said he has already witnessed that determination in one pupil who misunderstood instructions to use backpacks for snacks and drinks instead of textbooks. Scott said the child - who wore a knit cap and winter jacket throughout the Oct. 19 hike despite the day's unseasonably warm temperatures - repeatedly refused offers to assist with the 15- to 20-pound backpack and carried it for nine miles.

"He hiked the whole way like that. He was a real trouper."