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New bill promises more outdoor programs for kids

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Stormy weather prevented 24 Watsonville sixth-graders aboard a "Team O'Neill" catamaran from venturing out of Santa Cruz harbor Wednesday afternoon, but it didn't dampen the Sierra Club's announcement of a groundbreaking study.

"We're here to celebrate a victory for the children of California," said Martin LeBlanc, a Sierra Club youth services representative, referring to the recent passage of Assembly Bill 1330, which puts in motion a statewide study on outdoor education programs for underserved youth.

Among those joining LeBlanc at a press conference was state Assemblyman Joe Simitian, D-Palo Alto, who wrote the bill.

"We know intuitively that outdoor education programs can bring out the best in our students," Simitian said. "They can boost self-esteem at the same time they boost commitment to conservation."

Signed into law by former Gov. Gray Davis in October, the bill enables outdoor education programs to be systematically developed, privately funded and evaluated for their impact on student behavior and learning. The evaluation — which will track improvements in student behavior, attendance and scientific knowledge — will be completed by February 2005.

The students aboard the 65-foot catamaran Wednesday were participating in O'Neill Sea Odyssey, a hands-on educational program run by the nonprofit to promote appreciation and preservation of marine communities. Since 1996, the O'Neill program has brought 23,000 students into its three learning stations for educational programs about navigation, marine-life sampling and ecology.

Executive Director Dan Haifley said O'Neill Sea Odyssey will apply for funding under the recent bill in hopes of expanding its programs to low-income youth. Haifley's testimony at a Senate hearing describing the O'Neill program was instrumental to the bill's passage, Simitian said.

"They're making learning fun," said Ariel Benson, an Alianza School sixth-grade teacher whose students participated Wednesday.

And, more importantly, O'Neill's program is affordable for her students' families, Benson said. Ninety-seven percent of the students at the Watsonville bilingual charter school receive free or reduced-fee lunches.

"It was really fun going inside the boat and looking at the radars and stuff," said Niko Delgado, 11. "And it was fun being on the net — you could crawl around."

After about an hour on the boat, the students returned to O'Neill's shoreside education center with seawater samples. At one station, they peered into microscopes, scrutinizing their samples for tiny marine creatures.

"I didn't know you could see the zooplankton and other things under the microscope," another sixth-grader, Irene Quintero, said.

As a "prerequisite" for the Odyssey, each group designs and performs a community service project. Benson's class participated in the September California Coastal Clean-Up, picking up trash in the Watsonville Slough behind Ramsey Park.

"Most live in that neighborhood where we did the clean-up," Benson said. "The way to keep our oceans clean is to be aware of our immediate surroundings. There's got to be that community connection."

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