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Visit to pro field gets kids excited about soil



Director of Grounds Tony Leonard discussed the various components that make up the soil at Lincoln Financial Field. Thanks to their soil studies, students were familiar with terms such as sand, clay and humus.
Photos courtesy of Steve Leyland.

A fortunate group of students from Souderton Charter School, Souderton, Pa., recently had a chance to visit Lincoln Financial Field, home of the Philadelphia Eagles. Thanks to their classroom studies of soil, and a presentation from Tony Leonard, director of grounds at the stadium, this group of first and second-graders learned that growing success starts with the soil.

The opportunity to visit Lincoln Financial Field came after Steve Leyland, a

landscaper and parent with children at Souderton Charter School, posed the idea to Leonard. "Tony had really helped me out by answering some questions I had about a high school sports field I was working on," Leyland recalls. "I had some issues on the field and gave him a call, and he was kind enough to give me some guidance. He was so helpful. When I was talking to him, I told him that my son was studying soils at the Souderton Charter School, and told him a little bit about the detailed information they were learning. I thought it would be neat if Tony could give the kids a demonstration about what he needs to know about soils in order to take care of the field for the Eagles. Tony was delighted to do it. We had a great time."

Jennifer Arevalo, principal at the Souderton Charter School, says the trip to Lincoln Financial Field is in keeping with the school's goal of relating classroom learning to the practical world. "They're not field trips, they're designed to extend the learning students are doing in the classroom," she explains.

The school also places a heavy emphasis on learning about the environment. "First, our first and secondgraders do an extensive soils unit and our sixth to eighth-grade students maintain a butterfly garden that was created in the community from a Merck grant," says Arevalo. "The sixth grade students are out in the environment nearly weekly. One of the ongoing experiences is to visit a local park to observe changes of an environment throughout the seasons. Through the various grades, kids really learn about the environment in various ways."

The classroom work prepared the young students for their visit to Lincoln Financial Field. "We had been learning about sand, clay and humus, the different components of soil. We learned about how important worms are, and did our own worm condos," explains teacher Dawn Farrell of the soils curriculum. "And, [Tony Leonard] really talked about these same things. He described how he has to take care of the different components of soil. We got down on the ground and really investigated the soil. It was at the end of our soils unit, so the students were really comfortable with the vocabulary he was using, as well," says Farrell. "They were able to connect what they had learned with the fact that someone really does do this for their job."

Leonard says it was unusual to meet students at that young age who knew what humus is and that soil is made up of different components. "They had learned in the classroom about the various properties of sand, silt and clay, the basics of soil," he explains. "We tried to incorporate those same lessons, for example, explaining to them why we have sand in our field for drainage and porosity and so the roots can be healthy, but that we can't have too much sand, or we would lose stability."

Leonard pulled a core sample from the field, similar to what he would do for a soil test, and passed that around for the students to examine. "In a lawn soil, we know there is sand silt and clay, but I think it's a little bit easier to see the components when you have a little more sand and particles that they can see," says Leonard of the special soil composition at Lincoln Financial Field. "The kids could even see how the roots attach to the soil, and the depth of the roots. I think it was a good way for them to see the

relationship between plant and soil, how they work together.”

The students had learned about aeration in their studies, and some asked questions about that practice at Lincoln Financial Field. In some ways, he points out, students are more perceptive than adults when it comes to understanding the intricacies of turfgrass. “There’s more to it than going out there, throwing down some water and fertilizer and mowing,” says Leonard. “A lot of people think that’s all there is to it.”



The students learned about the importance of aerating while running on the same field as NFL players. “It was a significant experience that they’ll certainly remember,” says Jennifer Arevalo, principal at the Souderton Charter School.



A visit to Lincoln Financial Field gave students from Souderton Charter School an exciting way to extend their classroom study of soils.

Beyond the soil, Leonard says students also had plenty of questions about how the field is painted, how often the grass is mowed and how fast the water drains. “They also wanted to know where all the players stand and which tunnels they come out of, the kind of stuff everyone wants to know,” he says. Those students got a special treat when Eagles punter Sav Rocca made an appearance on the field to say hello.

Steve Leyland says part of his motivation in helping to arrange the visit to Lincoln Financial Field was to let the students see a professional like Leonard who has to know a lot about the same things they were learning in school. "I had asked my son a little while back if he would ever be interested in getting into turf care and he told me, 'Not really.' I was trying to figure out some way to get him interested in this profession, and I thought it would wow the kids, and it certainly did," says Leyland. "As a result, my son has established an interest in the turf business."

Leonard says that the chance to inspire the next generation of sports turf or landscape professional is particularly gratifying for him. "I personally never thought about this career until I was a freshman in college. I had never heard a lot about it, so I didn't know about it," says Leonard. He adds that he's happy to see more and more schools introduce the principles of soils and turf care to students. "There's a vocational school in the area that focuses on agricultural issues, and some other schools that we take interns from. They're landscape-oriented and they're phenomenal kids. They come in and they've already learned a lot, so we don't have to educate them too much. I think it's great. The green industry is huge and there's a lot of jobs available. Everyone is looking for qualified people."

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