

The Earth in the round

Giant balloon gives students new perspective on planet

By **Andy Gammill**

andy.gammill@indystar.com

Students at the 21st Century Charter School got a rare chance Monday: To step inside the Earth and take a look at geography from the inside out.



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View from space: John Bilotta, Earth Adventure's director of education, used a giant balloon of the Earth to give students at the 21st Century Charter School insight about the planet. Students marveled at how far apart land masses seemed and how big the oceans are. - HEATHER CHARLES / The Star

The nonprofit group Earth Adventure brought the 20-foot-wide planet Earth balloon to the school, along with its curriculum of geography and science, which it takes to schools across the country.

Kids seem to like geography more when they step inside a room-sized version of the planet, said David Knutson, executive director of Earth Adventure.

"People are pretty geography illiterate in this country," he said. "This is not map memorization; this is not a textbook. This is something they can touch and see."

Students at the school, 2540 N. Capitol Ave., started by walking around the outside of the planet, craning to see Indianapolis far up in the Northern Hemisphere and marveling at

the Sahara Desert.

Kristin Brown, 11, said she was excited by the geography lesson.

"I never really liked the subject, but when he started explaining that way, it got more fun," she said. "It's more fun when you learn it with a big balloon."

Then, right at the International Dateline, instructor John Bilotta pulled back a Velcro strip and unzipped the balloon, giving way to the center of the Earth.

From the inside, everything looks different. Once you find North America -- a tricky task given that it's a mirror image -- you see Florida to your left and California to the right.

The experience is jarring after seeing flat maps.

De'Airra Nunley, 11, was surprised by how big the planet is, how much is covered by oceans and how far apart everything is.

"It was really cool how we learned different things," she said. "Some people were like, 'Wow, I didn't know this,' like, this continent is so far away from this continent, and we learned how the time changes."

Call Star reporter Andy Gammill at (317) 444-6494.