

RIVER PARISHES PICAYUNE
Students learn about life sciences

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J. Craig Venter's "Discover Genomics" van housing a mobile DNA laboratory recently visited LaPlace Elementary School.

Venter, a scientist who spearheaded the private effort to decode the human genome, has been promoting bioscience in schools affected by Hurricane Katrina.

Students entered the van and participated in a two-hour "Mystery of the Crooked Cell" module that taught them how DNA analysis can distinguish between hereditary sickle cell disease, viral disease and normal cells.

The DNA bus accommodates up to 30 students, their teachers and two mobile laboratory instructors. Work stations are equipped with centrifuges, pipettes, electrophoresis supplies and temperature and pH probes. The mobile lab is self-sufficient, with a water supply, electricity and Internet capability.

The J. Craig Venter Institute, a nonprofit organization focusing on genomics research, launched the bus program in January in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area, where the bus has taught thousands of teachers and students about the life sciences and how to use sophisticated laboratory equipment.

Kenna Shaw, education director for The **American Society of Human Genetics**, or ASHG, had heard about the bus' success, and worked with the Venter Institute to bring the mobile lab to the New Orleans area during the ASHG's annual meeting, held in the city last week.

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Caption: Drewcilla Steib, left, and Sarah Lewis, students at LaPlace Elementary, conduct an experiment on J. Craig Venter's DNA bus.

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