GALLOWAY – It’s not the old shell game.

Students at Assumption Regional Catholic School are learning about oysters.

And the way that’s done today is by participating in Project PORTS. PORTS is an acronym for Promoting Oyster Restoration Through Schools.

Students from grades PreK-8 are participating in the project to replenish the New Jersey oyster population.

Wednesday, March 20th

Students were introduced to the lifecycle of oysters and learned their roles going forward Wednesday, March 20. Following up Monday, March 25, students dissected oysters, and learned more about their life cycles.

Students, families and people from the community will be able to work as environmental stewards - filling shell bags for the oyster restoration project. The students will fill more than 400 mesh bags with clamshell that will be spread in the lower Delaware Bay where they will provide habitat for baby oysters which they will be transplanted to conservation and fishery areas in the upper bay during the summer.

Project PORTS is an education- and community-based oyster restoration program of the Cousteau Center at Bridgeton and the Haskin Shellfish Research Laboratory of Rutgers University and partner organization, the American Littoral Society.
The goal is to increase awareness and understanding of the oyster as a critical resource of the Bay, to promote a basic understanding of important scientific concepts and stewardship values and to contribute to the revitalization of Delaware Bay oyster populations.

Since 2007 more than 7,000 students have participated in Project PORTS.

Aside from classroom knowledge, the students constructed 7,500 shell bags, which provided foundational habitat for more than 15 million young oysters.

The oysters are repopulating a conservation area in the upper Delaware Bay.

This year students will fill more than 2,000 shell bags. Nine area schools are participating in Project PORTS this year.

Project PORTS is sponsored by the Geraldine Dodge Foundation, DuPont Clear Into the Future Initiative, and the American Littoral Society NOAA-RAE Partnership.

“If there was a community service award for the creatures in our bays and estuaries, there would be no more deserving recipient than the oyster,” said project manager Lisa Calvo. “They may be small, but these bottom dwelling filter feeders can filter up to 50 gallons of water a day. While pumping water through their gills, oysters obtain plankton, but also filter out particles, suspended sediments and contaminants, keeping the water clean for bay grasses and underwater life.”

Oysters also open their reefs and provide habitat for several species of fish and breeding grounds for others, according to Calvo. Other young invertebrates such as barnacles and sponges thrive there. The reefs also help prevent shore erosion. And oyster shells contain calcium carbonate, a known buffer that can help offset ocean acidification.

People hold the oyster in high esteem and consider it a delicacy, she said.

“Oysters are rich in nutrients and are a good source of magnesium and phosphorus, and a very good source of protein, vitamin D, vitamin B12, iron, zinc, copper, manganese and selenium,” Calvo said. “A healthy oyster industry is a boon to the local economy and creates jobs such as boat and dock workers, shuckers, packers, and truck drivers.”

New Jersey once had a thriving oyster industry, she said. Due to oyster disease, historical overfishing, pollution and sedimentation from inland runoff, the New Jersey oyster population has declined dramatically, to the point where most bays no longer maintain a commercial oyster fishery.

New Jersey's major remaining oyster fishery is in the Delaware Bay, where the students are making their contributions.