Living and growing up in the Keys allows children the unique vantage point of being surrounded by a plethora of environmental opportunities, and Ocean Studies Charter School uses those natural resources in our surrounding ecosystems to help children down a pathway towards becoming scientists, guardians of our waters, and responsible citizens of the world.

Founded in 2011, Ocean Studies Charter School teaches children between Kindergarten and 5th grade, and currently has 108 students, with capacity for 116.

The school is an A-rated public school, and produces students who meet or exceed the Florida State Standards. However, the school’s success lies in its marine science program. Weekly field labs allow students to explore and interact with the beautiful Florida Keys environment around them. Through these labs and activities, Ocean Studies stimulates an interest in science, research, and experimentation.

Younger students are taught within the practices of Montessori foundations, which encourages creativity, imagination, as well as encourages children to become independent and self-motivated learners.

“We partner with a lot of environmental related organizations in the Florida Keys. Our students are out doing experiments in conjunction with State Parks, the FWC, and others. They are working on real problems in the real world. And that environmental edge is really what stands us apart from other schools. It’s real hands on, outside the classroom,” says Jessica Martinez, the School and Community Program Coordinator.

Students recently traveled out to Key Biscayne on a vessel with the National Park Service, where they worked with sharks, and other live aquatic creatures, monitoring habitats, identifying species, all while side-by-side with the Park Service in a field lab. Fifth graders also have Everglades camping trips, where they hike, camp, and canoe around the environment. Another larger project includes a trip to the Dry Tortugas to study the habitats of corals, and learn about signs of coral bleaching. It’s not just the older children at the school that are out in the field. “Our youngest ones are in field labs too. We take them to salt ponds, where they monitor habitats throughout the year reflecting on how the environments change depending on the seasons. Even our youngest ones get started early,” says Martinez.

Visiting the school, it’s easy to walk around and see how involved and interactive the education is for children. “We wanted it to be an amazing school, and it is, but we have exciting things coming and we need help with that,” explains Martinez of the growth the school is facing.

Ocean Studies is officially outgrowing the space they are in, and the current cost of renting the older building is high. The school is reaching out to the community to assist in their 2020 Capital Campaign, which encompasses not only room for growth, but a permanent home for the school.

“Our new facility will cut our building costs in half. And although we are a public school, being a charter school sets us apart. We do get state funds, but we have to pay for things traditional schools don’t have to account for, like facilities and transportation. Moving to our own space, that we will own, is a huge fiscal move for us. This frees up more money that we would have spent in rent, that can now go back into the classrooms for teachers and students.” The school will have an updated marine science lab, and child centered classrooms, with flexible seating, hands-on manipulatives, and more, including modernized safety and security.

Martinez explains the easiest way to donate is through their website, <https://www.oceanstudiescharterschool.org/donate>, but she stresses there are also so many opportunities for local businesses to provide things the school will need, like windows, doors, etc. For more information on how to help this local school, that provides a unique and innovative teaching style for children growing up in the Keys, you can visit their website, or contact Jessica Martinez directly at [Jessica.martinez@keysschools.com](mailto:Jessica.martinez@keysschools.com) or 305.852.7700. Those interested in having their children attend Ocean Studies can reach out via the website for more information on the 2020-2021 new student lottery.