Shavonn Whiten, front center, shows off some of the plants grown in the Westdale Elementary Metamorphosis Children’s Garden. Daniel Hennessy, Darryl Huey and Kal Gunasingha, from left, stand behind her. The students gave the plants to participants at the Community Action for Children meeting as an example of what children can accomplish.

Mayor recognizes CAFC for its work with youth

By MICHELLE MILLHOLLON

Community Action for Children was launched nearly two years ago with a pledge to make things better for the youth of Baton Rouge.

Mayor Tom Ed McHugh made the group one of his initiatives and asked area leaders to embrace its efforts.

Eighteen months later, CAFC is making a difference in children’s lives, but more must be done, McHugh said Tuesday. McHugh and other civic leaders delivered a progress report at the Old State Capitol on the group’s accomplishments.

“We need to build character in our youth and leave no child spiritually abandoned,” McHugh said.

CAFC was modeled on America’s Promise, a national initiative spearheaded by retired Gen. Colin Powell. The groups aim to help children overcome poverty by providing them with five resources — a caring community, education, health, safety and service.

In Louisiana in 1998, an estimated 35 percent of children were living below the federal poverty threshold of $14,625 for a family of four, according to the Kids Count survey by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. That’s higher than the national average of 21 percent.

But Baton Rouge residents have answered CAFC’s call for action by volunteering at schools and clinics, organizing service projects and pulling together resources, organizers said Tuesday.

Future goals include placing youths on community boards, underwriting children’s visits to the dentist or eye doctor, holding a baby food drive and expanding a reading program.

More than 60 city-parish workers have teamed up with second- and third-graders to help the children with their reading skills. The program will be expanded this year to turn police officers into reading partners, McHugh said.

Volunteers also are going into doctor’s clinics to read to children, waiting for well-child checkups, said Janie Starks, education team leader.

Health team leaders Jan Kasofsky and Virginia Pearson helped compile a pocket-sized resource guide for emergency workers. The pamphlet lists the phone numbers of shelters, hospitals, halfway houses and other care organizations.

One team distributed coloring books on safety, another team spearheaded anti-violence efforts and another increased service opportunities for youth, leaders said.

The efforts affect the community’s future, said Jimmy Lyles, president and chief executive officer of the Greater Baton Rouge Chamber of Commerce.

“I’m tired of hearing Louisiana being last in everything,” Lyles said. “Let’s go from last to first.”