

THURSDAY, April 21, 2005

Nonprofit pushes water education in school

B. POOLE

Tucson Citizen

Water can be a pretty dry topic in the classroom.

It's tough to get kids excited about that old familiar diagram of the water cycle - arrows swooping in a circle from ocean to cloud to rain and back again.

But Project WET, a nonprofit national water education program run locally out of the University of Arizona Water Resources Research Center, is finding ways to sneak water education into the classroom through hands-on exercises and lively discussion.

"Even though they're not seeing the water lesson, it's there," said Sandra Suarez-Hairgrove, who was using Project WET yesterday to teach about pollution at Valencia Middle School, 4400 W. Irvington Road. "These are exciting ways to teach the same things people are using lectures for."

After drawing what they would build for \$1 million on a hypothetical riverfront property, the seventh- and eighth-graders went outside to line up their drawings end-to-end on a basketball court.

The kids then explained how their dream properties would use water and what pollution they would pass downstream.

The objective: teach kids that everyone's water use affects others and that we are all responsible for what we put into our rivers, streams and lakes.

Eighth-grader Leo Valenzuela, 14, likes the change of pace the lessons offer, and he appreciated the chance to step away from pen and paper.

"It's a lot of hands-on," he said.

Hydrologist Kerry Schwartz is the statewide coordinator for Project WET. The program tries to take kids beyond the standard message that we shouldn't run the tap while we brush our teeth, she said.

"Water education is so important. We've got a bunch of people living in a place that's very dry. We've been very good at water conservation, but we need to be aware, for instance, of the consequences of taking water from other places," Schwartz said.

The project publishes teacher guides that touch on pollution, watersheds, history, health and other water-related topics.

The lesson plans - compiled in a 2-inch thick manual for teachers - cut across all aspects of the curriculum.

"They're all on water, but some develop reading or writing skills and some are math," Schwartz said.

Suarez-Hairgrove has used WET lessons to teach math, science, social studies - even law.

The program started in Bozeman, Mont., in the early 1990s but quickly spread across the nation and international borders, Schwartz said.

WET subject matter



Alma Rosa Hernandez, a seventh-grader at Valencia Middle School, 4400 W. Irvington Road, draws her plan for a million-dollar riverfront development. She and fellow students learned about the water pollution that would result from building near a river.

"It's in Cameroon, Uganda. They just went to Costa Rica. It's just going crazy internationally," she said.

There are about 2,100 Arizona teachers in the Project WET database.

Schwartz takes a cargo van when she travels across Arizona preaching the water gospel. She uses antique ice tongs and washboards and hands-on displays to teach history, social implications and hydrology.

Last year the lessons were adjusted to match state education standards. Each lesson now includes skills Arizona teachers are required to teach. Teachers can search online for lesson plans that encompass any standard they want to

address.

The roughly \$400,000 that funds the work annually in the state is culled from a smorgasbord of sources.

"Their standards correlate to what I'm teaching, plus it's fun," Suarez-Hairgrove said.

"We have lots of companies involved in the program that don't give money but they donate goods and services," said Chrissy Mance, coordinator for Project WET water festivals, which run simultaneously across the state in September.

State and federal grants come through the state departments of Water Resources and Environmental Quality. Local governments also help.

But kids are the real key players, and Valencia student Araceli Vidal, 13, boiled the value she sees in Project WET down to seven words.

"We learn to keep the water clean," she said.



To learn more

For more information see the national Project WET Web site at:

www.projectwet.org or the Arizona site at:

www.ag.arizona.edu/AZWATER/wet/index.html