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Bonita Street Elementary STEAM Academy Fourth-Graders Win 2022 Cal Water H₂O Classroom Challenge

Students' Winning Project Reduces Water Pollution with New School Recycling Club

SAN JOSE, Calif., April 26, 2022 (GLOBE NEWSWIRE) -- Tiffany Rachal's fourth-grade students at Bonita Street Elementary STEAM Academy in Carson, Calif., were announced as the 2022 Cal Water H₂O Challenge grand-prize winners today at a school-wide surprise assembly. Their project, "Mission: Make Our Oceans Blue Again," earned them first place in the eighth annual competition. The grand prize includes a \$3,500 classroom grant, a \$1,000 scholarship for each participating student, and gift cards for the teacher and students.

The Cal Water H₂O Challenge (challenge.calwater.com) is a collaboration between California Water Service (Cal Water), the California Association of Science Educators (CASE), the WestEd K-12 Alliance, and DoGoodery. This free, project-based competition invites fourth-, fifth-, and sixth-grade classrooms in Cal Water service areas to develop and implement solutions to local water issues.

Polluted water in the Dominguez Channel made headlines in the fall of 2021, as strong odors emanating from hydrogen sulfide gas in the channel affected Carson and neighboring cities. Many residents reportedly became ill with asthma attacks, respiratory infections, and ER visits. Even before it came time to brainstorm their topic for the Cal Water H₂O Challenge, the water pollution and toxic air from the Dominguez Channel were identified by Rachal's class as the top issue within their community, and the students were eager to find a way to take action and help their community. Cal Water does not draw water from the Dominguez Channel for drinking water.

Rachal's students began their project by researching local water issues and speaking with area nonprofit organizations. They then began tracking waste activity in their own homes, at school, and in the school cafeteria. The students also experimented with a model landfill to further understand decomposition properties of common waste items. Their research led them to purchase a composting tumbler for the school and form a new recycling and composting club called C.A.T. (Cleaning and Teaching) CREW at school.

"Our students witnessed the effects of pollution on their friends and family members, and the need to take action is real and authentic for them," Rachal said.

Her students were excited to work on their project and implement change in the community. "My students shrieked with excitement every time I announced, 'Time for CAL WATER!' They were eager to get to work, solve problems, and collaborate for our common good," Rachal added.

This year's theme, like last year, focused on designing solutions to care for water. Rachal's students took their project to the next level by launching the C.A.T. Crew. The class presented to fellow students, gathered pledges, and recruited new club members. The project promises lasting benefits, as other students across grade levels become engaged through the club in diverting trash from landfills and pollution from the nearby Dominguez Channel.

Rachal and her students are eager to continue applying what they have learned through the Challenge. She said, "The past eight weeks of facilitating learning with a focus on water conservation have been so enjoyable. I am now figuring out our next project-based learning assignment to keep this 'World Changer' mindset and momentum going."

"Ms. Rachal's fourth-grade class exceeded expectations with their project related to pollution of the Dominguez Channel and efforts to educate their peers on keeping our waterways clean," said Martin A. Kropelnicki, Cal Water President and Chief Executive Officer. Reflecting on this year's competition, Kropelnicki said, "This year, students have proved their resiliency in designing creative solutions to their local water issues and coming together to make positive change in our community."

During the pandemic, Cal Water evolved its model to help bring students a project-based learning opportunity, regardless of whether the class is in a remote, in-person, or hybrid learning style. The Challenge continues to evolve in order to make the competition more equitable and accessible amid changing coronavirus restrictions. Despite the unprecedented challenges the pandemic has presented, by integrating water conservation, educational programs, and school curriculum, DoGoodery and Cal Water's partnership provided a space to connect with students and bring STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) and NGSS (Next-Generation Science Standards) into classrooms with diverse learning styles.

About Cal Water

California Water Service serves about 2 million people through 494,500 service connections in California. The utility has provided water service in the state since 1926. Additional information may be obtained online at www.calwater.com.

About CASE

The California Association of Science Educators (CASE) is a non-profit 501(c)(3) member-based community that works to lead the promotion of high-quality, equitable science education through advocacy, collaboration, and communication. Recognizing that science has a profound influence on our lives, our local environments, and our world. CASE fosters a community focused on enhancing scientific and environmental literacy and agency for all. For more information, visit www.cascience.org.

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