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Elementary students up to the Fairchild Botanic Garden challenge

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First grade student Mia Wells, age 6, on right, and fellow students and teachers from Saint Thomas Episcopal Parish School who compete in the Fairchild Challenge educational activities throughout the school year look around the garden for flowers, leaves, and roots found on their scavenger hunt list as they participate in the Explorer Program at Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden on Friday, Oct. 22, 2010, enjoying interactive, hands-on field studies at the garden.

From a seed planted eight years ago in Coral Gables, the Fairchild Challenge has grown to include middle and high school students from Miami-Dade and Broward, encouraging them to compete in a program that focuses on a creative approach to environmental issues.

This year, that Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden program blooms ever larger as the Fairchild Challenge expands to include all elementary-age students, from pre-kindergarten to fifth-grade students.

More than 150 public and private schools, 70,000 students and teachers participate in the Fairchild Challenge in Miami-Dade and Broward.

Some elementary schools had already participated in a pilot program during the past three years. But this year organizers opened it

to all.

"We wanted to expand the elementary challenge . . . to get kids involved earlier in the sciences, environmental education and provide lifelong conservation opportunities," said Amy Padolf, Fairchild's director of education.

Padolf took over the challenge from its founder, Caroline Lewis, after the garden fired Lewis last year, spawning protests over her dismissal from some supporters.

The mission of the Fairchild Challenge is to foster an interest in the environment by encouraging students to appreciate nature and conservation, develop critical thinking and to become actively engaged in the community in an environmental sense.

To advance within the competition, students take part in four "options," with points awarded to the schools by a judging committee. The winning school earns \$1,000 to reinvest in its environmental program. Second and third places earn \$500 and \$250, respectively.

Leaves are a theme this year, so for the art and writing options students research leaves and learn how they play a role in the life of a plant.

But it's not so simple.

“It's not just a picture of a leaf on a plant, they learn about the plant and draw it as it relates to science,” Padolf said.

The creative writing option will depict a day in the life of a leaf.

The third option, environmental action, requires the entire school to adopt some program, be it recycling, water conservation or even environmental fashion shows or letter-writing campaigns to public officials in green matters.

“Even the littlest kids are able to do this and it gets them thinking as environmental stewards,” Padolf said. “They feel like they are being heard.”

The fourth option is to design and grow a school garden.

“They can see it and touch it and smell it, they take ownership,” said Maria Sandoval, who teaches math and science at Sunset Elementary in South Miami.

Of the 71 participating elementary schools, 66 percent are lower-income Title 1 schools and 12 of them are C-grade or below. Fairchild offers the schools \$250 grants to plant gardens on their grounds.

“Many adults would be surprised to learn that many of the students I encounter have never smelled a flower, touched a butterfly, or even been to the beach. If schools do not expose children to the diversities that exist in nature, they may never have that opportunity outside of school,” said Kim Allen, science department chairperson at Homestead's Gateway Environmental K-8 Learning Center.

“A lot of schools don't have resources and we're trying to give them everything possible to level the playing field so the lowest resource school has the same opportunity to make it work and be successful at it,” Padolf said.

Ann Bussel, a longtime donor to Fairchild programs, has recently moved to Bay Harbor Island, where Ruth K. Broad Bay Harbor K-8 took part in the pilot program and once again competes in the challenge this year. Bussel fondly recalls her 36 years as a next-door neighbor of Fairchild in the Gables.

“Great admirer,” she said.

Bussel donated money to support the challenge this year but declined to say how much. “Fairchild instills in young people a love of nature and things beautiful.”

She supports the program, she said, because it can help introduce children of all backgrounds to careers in agriculture and science.

“When children get used to cultivating beautiful things the whole community benefits. It's a

good equalizer of talents."

Teachers say the challenge's design provides an opportunity to integrate environmental learning into the core curriculum.

"The best thing about this program is it encourages interdisciplinary studies," said M. Francesca Violich, a pre-K teacher at North Miami's Hubert O. Sibley Elementary.

"I believe children don't learn with everything separated out," she said. "Real learning takes place when everything is integrated."
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