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Shaler students win first place in Fairchild Challenge at Phipps competition

by Bethany Hofstetter Staff Writer
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What started as a desire to put a plant in every classroom has grown into an award-winning initiative at Shaler Area High School.

Students involved in the Shaler Area Green Initiative put all of their momentum into the Fairchild Challenge at Phipps, a year-long environmental competition, sponsored by the conservatory, and won first place overall, beating out 12 other area high schools.

"I think it shows we're serious about this," said Andrew Abt, a Shaler Area junior.

"We put the time into it. ... I think this was a good challenge to put the Green Initiative and school on the map."

The Fairchild Challenge was designed by and started at the Fairchild Tropical and Botanic Garden in Miami, Fla., and came to Phipps Conservatory in 2008. Participating students had to complete tasks each month during the school year to accumulate points.

The tasks were multidisciplinary and included creating a "green" menu; designing a Fairchild at Phipps logo; writing a letter to a legislator on an environmental issue; creating a nature poem; developing a multimedia message, such as a film; writing a seven- to eight-page opinion paper on an issue and based on research; creating a performing arts piece on alternative energy; and developing and carrying out an environmental action plan.

"We worked and put a lot of time into each and every one of them and we worked in a team," said Rebecca Wakeley, a junior. "Everyone's different and their strengths could be shown in the different challenges."

For the group's final challenge, the environmental action plan, the students developed a program to affect the environment at their school, at home and in the community. The students led a week-long composting drive to collect organic waste at the school and from home to compost in the school's compost bins.

"I'm really excited by what we were doing, but to get everyone behind us was really exciting," said Derek Reno, a junior.

"The lunch ladies were especially helpful."

The team collected about 80 pounds of compost waste.

The students also led workshops for elementary school students and Life Skills students to teach them about planting and composting.

To further impact the community, Alexis Werner, a freshman, developed Seeds of Hope, a program that will raise vegetable crops to be donated to families with family members who are deployed.

About 30 Shaler Area students were involved in the Fairchild Challenge.

While the school won first place overall for their cumulative points earned, they also earned first place for their environmental action plan. Rebecca Wakeley won first place for her Fairchild Challenge logo design. Andrew Abt and Nathan McIntire won first place for their multimedia video, and Caitlyn Braun won an honorable mention for her opinion paper on nature deficit disorder.

The school won \$1,000 for its first place award which will be put back into the program.

Christina Palladino and David DiPasquale, the teacher coordinators for the Gifted and Talented Education (GATE) program and Green Initiative at the school, said while the initiative started three years ago as a way to bring more plants into the classrooms and hallways of the school, it has quickly grown.

"Because we had such a student based interest in it and administrative support, one thing led to another," Palladino said of the Green Initiative.

"It led to a really big undertaking and a successful one (with winning the Fairchild Challenge). We never imagined this when we started growing plants."