

from founder Caroline Lewis, who departed acrimoniously in 2009.

To date, 239 schools, including Homestead's Gateway Environmental K-8 Learning Center, Miami's Norland Middle Community School and Pinecrest's Gulliver Preparatory have signed on for the Challenge, up from 150 last year.

The program began incorporating elementary schools last year; it now has 240 elementary school teachers and their classes. "The idea is that basic science and environmental concepts have to be introduced early and reinforced," Padolf says.

This year the Challenge added a mentorship component, drawing on grad students from the University of Miami and Florida International University who will work with the grade school students, as well as scientists attached to Fairchild. The hope is that the mentors can inspire the younger students who, in turn, would teach the grads how to communicate scientific information so that lay people can understand technical terms and theories.

"Mentorship is critical and crucial for engaging students, especially for underrepresented communities," Padolf says.

Students and their schools advance in the program by taking part in several activities, including creative writing assignments, debating, and field studies. One other option is to design and grow a school garden. Many of the participating public schools are Title 1.

Participants' work is evaluated by a panel of judges who reward winning schools with cash prizes ranging from \$1,000 to \$250. Last year the debate topic was the oil spill in the Gulf. This year's theme is similarly topical: water issues. From too much water (thanks Irene) to too little (the Texas droughts) local, national and international water issues, such as conservation and biodiversity, will be studied and debated.

Also new this year: Elementary school students will participate into the popular fashion show. Students have to create a fashion design out of plant parts while the little ones will create face masks to represent a parade of species using only natural or recycled material.

For TERRA Environmental Research Institute, a green high school in Kendall of more than 1,350 students, taking up the Challenge was a natural. Indeed, TERRA students recently engaged in a Skype session with younger Challenge students.

"That is what the school is about, just the name itself says it all. We are a magnet school dedicated to the environment," says principal Caridad Montano.

One of TERRA's environmental teachers, Surey Rios, went so far as to become a park ranger at Everglades National Park over her summer vacation.

On freshman orientation day, Rios arrived decked out in her ranger gear. "The kids were so proud of her," Montano says.

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