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Waters Elementary School Wins National Environmental Education Award

Merit Prize for Greening Initiatives Awarded for Transforming School's Ecological Environment

Chicago – Waters Elementary School has won a 2011 Green Prize Merit Award in Public Education http://neefusa.org/grants/green_prize.htm, which includes a \$5,000 award for its work in transforming its asphalt-covered campus into a natural green environment that serves as a medium for ecological education and an inspiration to the community.

The National Environmental Education Foundation (NEEF, <http://neefusa.org>) awarded the Green Prize Merit Award in Public Education to two outstanding schools that have demonstrated how they have successfully engaged the entire school as well as the community in greening the curriculum, facilities and grounds to improve student learning and cultivate environmental responsibility. The award winners were announced during National Environmental Education Week (EE Week) <http://www.eeweek.org/>, the single largest organized environmental education event in the United States.

Waters was an underachieving Chicago Public School located on a city block covered from end to end with asphalt. At one end of the block, four colossal bur oaks with asphalt packed around their trunks were the only remaining natural features from the time when the Chicago River once flowed past the site over a hundred years before.

In 1991, a Local School Council (LSC) was convened and a planning document was developed that called for the asphalt desert to be replaced with natural plants to green the school grounds for the children.

Community member Pete Leki chaired that first LSC meeting, and, with the support and encouragement of Waters School administration, he has led the way in creating what are now expansive school gardens. Leki also began teaching Field Ecology at Waters, creating age-appropriate curricula – both in and out of the garden – so that every student, pre-kindergarten through eighth grade, could become engaged in environmental studies and conservation.

“The work undertaken by the Waters Elementary community is truly fabulous,” said NEEF President Diane Wood. “Seeing their efforts flourish and the role they are now

playing as mentors to other schools in Chicago and beyond is exactly what this prize was designed to honor.”

The school has initiated many innovative ecology projects and programs not found at other schools and recently the Chicago Public School Board contracted Waters Elementary to officially mentor other schools in lunchroom waste composting – a first in the city. Public and private schools now turn to Waters for advice and training, and various aspects of their program are flourishing at nearby schools as a result of their mentoring.

“The Ecology programs at Waters serve as prototypes and have often paved the way for schools wanting to make environmental learning and stewardship a priority. The school garden itself serves as a premier showcase and professional development site for interested schools and other organizations, including the Botanic Garden,” Waters officials said in their Green Prize submission.

According to their application, Waters’ teachers are committed to these environmental efforts, participating in a range of related field trips and integrating environmental topics throughout their teaching content. “These concepts are represented in multiple classes. Students learn to do the math of rainwater runoff per square foot of asphalt, for example, or music class may consist of the creation of a song detailing the students’ collective experience from a recent fieldtrip to the forest preserve.”

“We are thrilled to be the recipient of this award,” said Titia Kipp, school principal. “This award will allow us to sustain our unique ecology program which offers our urban youth exposure to the natural world.”

The first-place 2011 Green Prize was awarded to New Vista High School in Boulder, Colo. The other 2011 merit award went to Common Ground High School in New Haven, Conn.

The National Environmental Education Foundation, with major support from the NEA Foundation <http://www.neafoundation.org/> and in partnership with EarthEcho International <http://www.earthecho.org/>, recognizes and celebrates outstanding K-12 public schools that have successfully taken on the challenge of becoming green schools through the Green Prize in Public Education.

The Green Prize in Public Education awards \$10,000 to a K-12 public school that has most successfully implemented an innovative, sustainable and replicable school-wide greening effort that has involved and benefitted students, teachers, educators, maintenance staff, parents and the local community. Ultimately, a green school increases students’ environmental literacy, and empowers and inspires them to be more socially and environmentally responsible.

For more information about the Green Prize in Public Education, visit http://neefusa.org/grants/green_prize.htm.

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