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Nonprofit teaches students ways to address climate change

by Seth Pensa

Pop quiz: What is the difference between weather and climate?

If the answer was “I don’t know,” ask any of 175 Fairfield County students who participated last year in an after-school program sponsored by Clean Air-Cool Planet.

Clean Air-Cool Planet is a nonprofit organization that, among other functions, develops programs to help educate people of all ages about climate change. It has offices in Portsmouth, N.H., Boston and New Canaan.

In association with the Connecticut Science Center Collaborative of New Canaan funded by a \$25,000 grant from the Fairfield County Community Foundation, area students in fourth through sixth grades will take part in the second annual six-week after-school program. Targeted student demographics are primarily urban, due to cities being major sources of pollution.



Angel Vega III carefully examines an imitation ice core as part of his participation in nonprofit Clean Air-Cool Planet’s after-school program, hosted by SoundWaters at the Lathon Wider Community Center in Stamford.

Several area science centers, including The Maritime Aquarium at Norwalk and the Discovery Museum in Bridgeport host the program, which culminates on Earth Day (April 22).

The New Canaan Nature Center is also part of the collaborative, but has not been involved with Clean Air-Cool Planet.

Coordinator Karin Jakubowski and Development Officer Amanda Muise work in the Cherry Street office. Ms. Jakubowski helped design a hands-on educational curriculum for the area science centers to implement.

By focusing their activities on Fairfield County rather than global problems, the hope is to make students “feel like they can do something about the issue,” Ms. Jakubowski said.

At the start and end of the program, a test is administered to participants to gauge their level of knowledge about climate change. Last year, results averaged 44 percent at the beginning.



“It showed that they were not completely ignorant about climate change from the beginning,” Ms. Muise said.

Post-program test scores averaged 75 percent, which Ms. Jakubowski and Ms. Muise agreed was a marked improvement, indicating that the after-school sessions were a success.

“I think if it’s fun, you’re getting your message across and the students are more likely to retain it,” Ms. Muise speculated.

The cornerstone of the activities is the “Climate Change Backpack,” a book bag filled with an assortment of tools. These include a binder full of information, clothespins, an “eco-bulb,” a plastic bottle, an imitation ice core and more.

Using the variety of common items in conjunction with what they have learned, students are charged with the task of answering the question “How is climate change affecting Fairfield County?”

“We were impressed that the subject captivated them,” Ms. Jakubowski said.

“We’re hoping the kids internalize it and take it home (to tell their parents),” Ms. Muise added.

Additional information about Clean Air-Cool Planet and climate change can be found at the organization’s Web site, www.cleanair-coolplanet.org.