



Environmentally Based Curriculum Thinks Globally, Acts Locally

By Hanna Brown, Earthscope Reporter

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For the past nine years, students have found an alternative to both environmental destruction and regular coursework in Sir Francis Drake High School's Studies of the Environment Academy (SEA-DISC).

SEA-DISC is offered as a junior/senior program that students can sign up for during their sophomore year. It is an environmentally based academy that teaches traditional subjects, such as chemistry and economics, with the environment as the integrative concept.

"I enjoy being in the SEA-DISC academy because it gives me the chance to get outside of the classroom and make some real changes," said SEA-DISC senior Bobby Blain.

SEA-DISC has been praised by many for its outstanding project-based curriculum. It has won both local and state Golden Bell awards and has been featured in U.S. World and News for being an exemplary project-based program. Teachers have traveled from all over the country to take a look at how the academy blends math, science and social studies in an environmental way, and at the academy's impressive projects.

"[Students] have an opportunity to demonstrate their understanding of the things that they're learning in class in some real world experiences," said Vice Principal Don Drake.

A group of teachers started the academy because they were interested in integrating environmental issues into the regular curriculum. From the beginning, the academy was set up to revolve around projects. Four projects are conducted per year, each focusing on a different environmental issue. All projects contain an activist component and education of the community.

"My most rewarding aspect [of teaching SEA-DISC] is knowing that I'm not just teaching information that students take a test on and forget about," said SEA-DISC environmental science teacher and co-founder Sue Fox. "It's stuff that has molded and shaped the directions that they've taken."

Past projects include a creek "revegetation" project, the making of public-service announcements about atmospheric issues, designing Web sites on endangered species and an agricultural debate. Results of the projects have included the approval of a proposal to switch the pool heating system from natural gas to solar, and the return of the native steelhead trout to the San Anselmo creek.

Another unique thing about the academy is its requirement of an environmentally focused internship for all SEA-DISC seniors.

The internships students choose range from working with green architects to trail restoration.

“Until I found my internship, I couldn’t envision a career doing what I love – helping the environment,” said SEA-DISC senior Alex Webster. “My internship has shown me that I can use the knowledge and passion I have gained from SEA-DISC in the real world.”

On campus, SEA-DISC makes an annual impact by hosting the campus-wide Earth Day celebration. This brings together the students to learn about environmental issues and appreciate the earth. This year, it will be held on April 30, and will include an organic meal for sale, live music and a raffle.

This celebration is just one way that the academy makes some of the money that enables it to go on educational field trips and study in the field. Other funding sources are grant and taxpayers’ money, and student fundraising. For example, when they built their on-campus organic garden, a grant from the Marin County Stormwater Pollution Prevention Program enabled them to buy lumber and plants, and a local organic-soil company donated and delivered the soil.

Though funding sources seem rich, recent state funding cuts threaten the academy, according to Fox.

She stated that if the funding continues to decrease at this rate, it could result in the dissolving of the academy altogether.

Despite the threats to the academy, ample support lies behind it from both the students and administration. SEA-DISC has, thus far, turned nine years of “Global Warriors” out into the world, and will most likely continue this pattern for years to come.

RESOURCES:

For more information on the plethora of activities that SEA-DISC students are involved in, visit http://drake.marin.k12.ca.us/tour/seadisc_over.html