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CHRIS HOLMES RECEIVES 2010 MASWCD TEACHER AWARD

St. Paul, Minn.—The Minnesota Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts (MASWCD) has awarded Chris Holmes of Roosevelt Elementary School in Viriginia, Minn. with the 2010 MASWCD Teacher Award. The North St. Louis Soil and Water Conservation District nominated Holmes for the award.

The award will be presented at the 74th annual MASWCD convention, to be held Dec.5-7 at the Crowne Plaza St. Paul Riverfront Hotel, St. Paul, Minnesota. This award honors a K-12 educator/professional teacher who has created innovative conservation education activities for reaching students.

Holmes, a fifth grade teacher, is the director of the Virginia School Forest, located on 120 acres north of the Laurentian Divide. Students in grades 2-5 use the school forest weekly during the school year to study topics in outdoor education.

Along with his duties of directing activities such as fund raising and management of the forest, Holmes includes his students in a variety of interesting projects throughout the school year. Among them are collecting samples and creating field guides of wildflowers, trees, and fungi, outdoor survival lessons, birdhouse building, wildlife lessons, water quality studies, tree planting, forest management, and soil and water studies. His students enter the yearly North St. Louis SWCD Poster and Essay Contest and National Arbor Day Poster Contest. The students in Mr. Holmes’ class make weekly observations of nature, write reports, and read them on-air weekly on the local public radio station. Since 1994, they also record and submit daily weather data for the GLOBE program, which is a worldwide hands-on science program that works in partnership with NASA and the National Science Foundation.

Holmes uses a variety of resource professionals in his outdoor education lessons. Throughout the school year, the North St. Louis SWCD, Minnesota DNR, ArcelorMittal Steel, KAXE Public Radio, and Boy Scouts of America commit professionals and resources to enhance lessons in the school forest and on Silver and Virginia Lakes, located in the City of Virginia.

Holmes also leads field trips for teachers in the Virginia Schools who want their students to experience the outdoors, but don’t have the ability to do that themselves. During the past school year, Mr. Holmes worked with over 200 students in grades 2-5, in addition to his own students.

Currently, Holmes is working with a local mining company to use grant money to improve physical features in the school forest. The project, now in development, is to replace the existing bog walkway with one that will be wheelchair accessible. The Virginia High School shop class will build the walkway and volunteers from ArcelorMittal will help install it.

Students who have Mr. Holmes as a teacher use their knowledge of the environment and natural resources to win poster and essay contests, develop and implement action plans to help clean and monitor local lakes in association with the Virginia Lakes Committee, and look at what they have learned as a stepping stone to a future career in the arts and sciences. Roosevelt Elementary School principal, Willie Spelts, noted, “Chris Holmes’ passion for the outdoor classroom is the number one reason our students score so well on Minnesota state science tests and most importantly why our students are so active in their environment.”  

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