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Project E3 earns statewide teaching award
Austin-based program focused on conservation honored by MASWCD

AUSTIN, Minn. – Friday, Dec. 14, 2018 – An Austin-led educational program that focuses on conservation and involves multiple school districts has been recognized with a statewide teaching award.

On Monday, the inter-district program known as Project E3 received the 2018 Teacher of the Year Award at the annual meeting of the Minnesota Association of Soil & Water Conservation Districts (MASWCD) in Bloomington.

Project E3, which stands for “Engineering & Environmental Science for Everyone,” annually serves about 80 students in grades 4-6 from the Austin, Albert Lea, Hayfield, Lyle and Southland school districts. Three districts are in Mower County; the other two are from Freeborn and Dodge counties.

Arik Andersen, an Austin Public Schools teacher who helps lead Project E3, accepted the award Monday on behalf of the Project E3 team consisting of staff from the Austin school district, which hosts students monthly at I.J. Holton Intermediate School.

“We have students who come to the program voluntarily after writing about why they want to be accepted into the program,” Andersen said. “They’re just so excited about what they get to do. These kids are looking toward their future. They want to be involved. They understand that they’re citizens and they are a part of our state and cities.”

Mower Soil & Water Conservation District’s Justin Hanson, district manager, and Tim Ruzek, water plan and outreach coordinator, nominated Project E3 for the award and attended Monday’s ceremony with Andersen.

MASWCD’s teaching award is presented to an educator/professional teacher or teaching team in kindergarten through 12th grade who has created innovative conservation education activities for reaching students and has worked with an SWCD office.

“Project E3 is an exceptional program and great choice for this well-deserved, statewide recognition,” Ruzek said. “Mower SWCD has enjoyed working with and supporting Project E3, and we’re excited to continue our partnership with the program.”

Mower SWCD staff have supported Project E3 by giving classroom presentations, including their interactive, watershed demonstration table; coordinating a farm field visit for students to view a newly built saturated buffer in northern Mower County; and providing ideas and resources to Project E3 staff.

Started in the 2014-2015 school year, Project E3, coordinated by Austin Public Schools’ integration coordinator Kristi Beckman, involves project-based learning. Students meet monthly on a Saturday at Holton School in Austin as well as for 14 days in June and July. They discuss and learn about conservation topics on a three-year rotating schedule of water, animal habitats and energy.

With an emphasis on natural resources and the environment – along with being good stewards of the earth – Project E3 is an enrichment program that is an extension of the school year. It uses STEM to learn more about conservation and provides students with learning opportunities through engaging educational experiences; develops community scientists who will put their new knowledge of the natural world to action in their communities; and motivates students to work at their highest potential.

The program strongly encourages applications from students who want to increase their understanding of science and become better students. They are culturally, linguistically or socio-economically diverse or possibly lack access to or advocacy for resources. Project E3 offers free transportation and lunch to students.

Project E3 staff try to use the outdoors as their classroom and provide hands-on learning as much as possible with a focus on inquiry, creativity and critical thinking. Staff also apply the program’s lessons and ideas to their regular classrooms.

Students have had lessons that included studying the Cedar River and Shell Rock River watersheds; mapping the watersheds from southern Minnesota to the Gulf of Mexico; researching reasons why the Cedar River has water-quality impairments; designing systems to clean and filter polluted water; and developing an action plan for communities to improve water quality.

In 2016, Project E3 was honored as a “Promising Integration Program” by the Minnesota Department of Education for catering to students who demonstrate the potential of high performance with further enrichment through in-depth and complex curriculum.

For more on Project E3, visit its website at: projecte3.weebly.com/ or Twitter page: twitter.com/e3science?lang=en

Mower Soil & Water Conservation District

Since 1953, Mower SWCD has provided land and conservation services to Mower County landowners to help manage lands in a way that promotes a sound economy as well as sustains and enhances natural resources that are key to the state’s environmental health. Mower SWCD is one of Minnesota’s 91 SWCDs that each are governed by a board of elected supervisors.