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Contact:
Michelle Weber
773-334-9828

Common Ground High School Wins National Environmental Education Award

National Merit Prize for Greening Initiatives Awarded to New Haven Charter School

New Haven, Conn. – Common Ground High School, the nation’s first environmental charter school, has won the 2011 Green Prize Merit Award in Public Education http://neefusa.org/grants/green_prize.htm, which includes a \$5,000 award, for creating the next generation of environmental leaders through the work of its school-wide Environmental Leadership Team.

The National Environmental Education Foundation (NEEF, <http://www.neefusa.org>) awards 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.

Despite being a green school situated on a 20-acre demonstration farm, the teachers at Common Ground were concerned that only a handful of students were taking on environmental leadership roles. They also realized their facilities and practices could be greener and their students could be better prepared for college.

Teachers worked across subject areas to create their own set of core environmental learning standards, and Common Ground began using these standards the same way it uses state academic standards, putting them at the heart of the school’s curriculum. They also launched a year-long environmental jobs program – a Green Jobs Corps – that connects students with paid environmental jobs on and off the school site.

"Our teachers have been real stars in our greening effort. In a half dozen different courses, our teachers charged their students with developing proposals for improving campus sustainability," said Lizanne Cox, school director. "They made these projects a core part of our curriculum, using them to teach essential concepts and skills related to writing, research, science, math, and social sciences. The result was a lot of learning, as well as real and significant improvements in our sustainability practices."

“The commitment of the whole Common Ground community – the teachers, students, administrators, parents and community partners – is truly inspiring,” said NEEF President Diane Wood. “The work they are doing serves as an example of a strong public-private partnership that not only engages students more successfully in the classroom but also creates a pathway for studies and careers in the environment.”

Common Ground’s Environmental Leadership Team program has used courses to support over three-dozen student-led projects – from grey-water systems to a new sustainable city bus shelter, from eliminating all disposables from the school’s cafeteria to installing geothermal electricity – to encourage a cross-disciplinary approach to environmental education in the classroom.

"I am thrilled. It's genuinely gratifying to have the work we do at Common Ground affirmed in this way," stated Cox in response to the news of the Green Prize Merit Award. "This student-led work is transforming our school—and it is transforming our students. We have seen the results that are possible when you combine high academic standards, a focus on the local environment, and active authentic learning opportunities. This approach has helped our students make our state's largest test score gains, get more than 90% of our graduates into college, and convince more than a third of our seniors to pursue environmental fields in college."

The first-place 2011 Green Prize was awarded to New Vista High School in Boulder, Colo. The other 2011 merit award went to Waters Elementary School in Chicago, Ill.

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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