

A kindergartner's winning poster.



Drawing the future of conservation

STATEWIDE POSTER CONTEST GIVES STUDENTS THE OPPORTUNITY TO LEARN ABOUT CONSERVATION.

Scott Hennelly

A poster can promote the next president, advertise a product and excite moviegoers. But can it teach kids about conservation? Many teachers, county conservationists and parents think so. Which is why they are telling their kids about the National Conservation poster contest. Organized by the National Association of Conservation Districts, states across the country submit their best posters to the annual contest, with kids competing from kindergarten through high school.

Wisconsin has participated in the contest for 59 years, with the Wisconsin Land and Water Conservation Association's (WI Land+Water) Youth Education Committee taking the lead on organizing the competition on the state level for the past three. The poster theme changes annually, with the 2015 theme having been, "We All Need Trees." And while the posters are judged primarily on their conservation message, the contest has been entering art rooms, science labs and agricultural classes across the state.

Sprouting artists

Around the start of the school year in August is typically when teachers receive the email that reveals the year's poster theme. That is when Kelly Antoniewicz, art teacher at Richfield Elementary School in Washington County, starts planning her lessons to incorporate the contest into her curriculum. Her classes have been submitting posters for six years.

Following a presentation about the importance of trees, Antoniewicz helped

her students design their posters using an artistic eye.

"We are focused on making sure that it is colorful, balanced and uses the elements of art and principles of design," says Antoniewicz. "We talk more art related on how to get this message out."

As an art teacher, Antoniewicz loves how the contest promotes art within Richfield Elementary and gives her student artists statewide recognition.

"Although arts around the state are being cut, we are choosing to engage students through art. So art and the environment coming together is great," Antoniewicz says.

But Antoniewicz is not the only one enthusiastic about the contest; her students are as well. She can recall one student who told her that he still remembers how he

drew Spider Man hanging from a tree in his winning poster more than four years ago.

While these posters do require an artistic eye, they need to combine lessons in art and science to really go far. But combining art and science is not too daunting. Just ask Antoniewicz, who is the assistant advisor for the Rocket Club, and opens up her art room to students who want to build rockets.

New branch of science

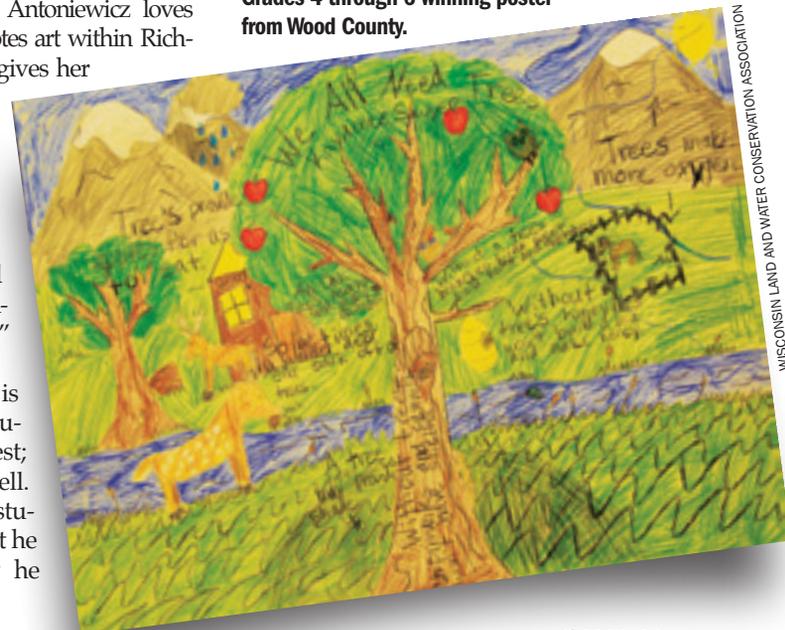
Across the county from Richfield Elementary is West Bend High School. With the poster contest being open to high schoolers, Paul DeLain, advanced placement environmental science teacher at West Bend, gives his students a chance to make a poster for extra credit. While Antoniewicz focuses on color, balance and other art principles, DeLain likes to discuss the science behind each year's theme.

"There's an opportunity every year to have discussions. In 2014 [the theme being pollinators], I went off that first day and talked about how one-in-three bites comes from a pollinator and most of them being from the honey bee and then we talked about what's currently wrong with the honey bee population," says DeLain.

DeLain knows the importance of good visuals in science. His classroom is covered with science posters, globes, models and gadgets that make science come to life and caters to those students he sees as less science oriented.

"There are kids in here who are more artsy — who think with the other side of the brain. So I look for opportunities when I'm teaching to allow them to pres-

Grades 4 through 6 winning poster from Wood County.



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ent in more ways than just a lab report,” says DeLain.

The idea of offering an alternative assignment is important to DeLain; it is how he became a science teacher. During his senior year in high school, DeLain built a model of the Borax Team (a team of 20 mules that transported borax out of Death Valley) instead of taking a normal test. He then entered it into a competition at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville and received firsthand lessons about science and geology from his science teacher as they drove to drop it off.

“I became a teacher because of that guy. That idea of doing something different than the norm put me on a different path,” says DeLain. “That’s what I think of and tell my students when they do this poster competition. It’s a simple thing, but it could be one of those things that changes somebody.”

Roots in rural areas

Over 100 miles away, at the geographic center of Wisconsin, is Pittsville High School in Wood County. Surrounded by paper mills and cranberry bogs, and with a population under 1,000, students in Pittsville come from a more rural background. Bill Urban, the agriculture teacher at Pittsville High School, brings the poster contest to his eighth grade classes to supplement other conservation lessons.

“I teach a fish, forestry and feathers class one year and the next I teach wildlife and conservation. The poster contest plays into the conservation part — just getting kids interested in it,” says Urban.

A native of Pittsville himself, Urban likes to tell his students the advantages of growing up in a rural place, such as knowing firsthand where your food comes from.

“What I really like about the contest is that it makes these eighth graders focus a bit. They think about the concepts and have a realization that ‘Hey, trees are important.’ or ‘I didn’t realize how important honey bees are,’” Urban says.

Approximately 50 posters are submitted in Wood County every year, with over half coming from Urban’s class. While this is a small number compared to other counties, Tracy Arnold, the conservation program coordinator for Wood County, thinks the contest is making a lasting impact on those who participate.

“There are not many schools that participate in Wood County, but the ones that do see a real benefit with the teachers and students,” says Arnold. “The

students can relate to it because they’re outdoor kids. They’re ag kids. They can relate to the natural resources.”

Youth education plants the seed

In addition to being Wood County’s conservation program coordinator, Arnold is also chair of WI Land+Water’s Youth Education Committee. Arnold devotes one-third of her time to youth education, including the poster contest.

“I really see the contest growing and the reason is because of the passion of the people who want to keep it going. Like me, if they have an extra minute, it’s something they are volunteering to put on their plates,” says Arnold.

Being WI Land+Water’s largest committee, Arnold and her committee are never short on passion. After just three years, the committee has ramped up youth education around the state, promoting additional projects such as Envirothon, conservation camps and a speaking contest.

Success of these programs comes from passionate county workers like Stephanie Egner, project technician in Washington County. Egner devotes a portion of her work schedule to focus on youth education, occasionally dressing up like a farmer or beekeeper to teach lessons about conservation in schools around her county. Most of her invitations from schools come as a result of participating in the poster contest, Egner says.

Paul Gunderson, a county conservationist from Green Lake County, has also built a relationship with students and teachers in his county because of the poster contest. Last year, the county had two first place winners and one second place winner at the state level, who were recognized at a special ceremony put on by Gunderson in the county office.

“The winners of our local contest are recognized in front of the county board,” Gunderson says. “They have an opportunity to explain what the poster means and anything they liked about the contest. We also present the kids with certificates and cash prizes. Everyone really seems to enjoy the presentation.”

Parents in Green Lake County appreciate Gunderson’s efforts too. Lisa Reas-Knapp and her son, James, attended the ceremony once.

“In our house, we always talk about what the theme is going to be, and then I give my son about a week to think about what things he’d like to see on his poster,” says Reas-Knapp.

With her youngest son starting kindergarten, Reas-Knapp has been help-

ing both her sons think of what they can draw. At the end of the competition, in addition to getting a treasured poster she can give her kids when they are older, Reas-Knapp appreciates the lessons the contest teaches her sons.

“It gets kids at a younger age interested in environmental issues. So much seems to be for the older kids, but this is something the younger kids can be a part of. It’s very meaningful to them,” she says.

The meaning this poster contest holds for kids is much larger than one would expect to come from a simple 8-by-11-inch poster board. Yet, looking at what students take in to draw these posters — art lessons from Kelly Antoniewicz, science discussions with Paul DeLain, and an appreciation of natural resources from Bill Urban — the significance becomes apparent.

What kids draw on their posters are not just trees. They are pictures of the next generation’s attitude towards the environment and the future of conservation in Wisconsin. ❧

Scott Hennelly is a communications specialist with WI Land+Water, a nonprofit that supports locally led conservation through advocacy and capacity building.

>>> AWARD LEVELS

County level: Winners are announced between November and January. Awards vary by county. For example, Washington County features its winners in a calendar while Wood County gives out a trophy and \$20 gift card.

Regional level: Winner is announced between January and February. Awards depend on the region.

State level: Winner is announced at the WI Land+Water Annual Conference in March. All posters receive a plaque. First place winners also receive art supplies.

National level: Winner is announced at the NACD Annual Conference in January 2017. Award for first place is \$200; second place \$150; and third place \$100.

Past poster winners can be viewed at:

National level: nacdn.net.org/education/contests/poster

State level: wisconsinlandwater.org/events/youth-poster-amp-speaking-contest