

President's Perspective

Thoughts, ideas and perspectives from Larry L. Bingaman, President and CEO

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25 Years of Youth Education

A lot has happened in the past 25 years. But one thing that hasn't changed is the Regional Water Authority's commitment to youth education. This past school year, the Authority's Whitney Water Center celebrated 25 years of providing water science education programs to schools, camps, and other organized groups in their water district.

"Water is one of our most precious, yet endangered, natural resources, which is why we offer environmental education programs that teach people how their actions affect ecological quality," Larry L. Bingaman, President and CEO of the Regional Water Authority, said. "The 25th anniversary of our Whitney Water Center is an exciting opportunity to celebrate environmental education with the communities we serve."



The mission of the Whitney Water Center is to create an educated constituency for clean water by increasing public understanding of how the Authority defines water quality, how they are preserving it, and how they are working to improve it. By presenting programs that stress enjoyable hands-on learning, the water center hopes to create "informed consumers" who see the relationship between human activities and ecological impacts, enabling them to make intelligent decisions regarding the future of our environment.

The original idea for education was to outfit a service van as a mobile environmental education laboratory and classroom on wheels. The van would travel to various schools and watersheds and provide experiments, lectures, investigations, etc. There would even be a roll out canvas canopy to protect students and equipment during inclement weather. But this would only work in warmer weather months, so it was back to the drawing board.

In the late 1980s, planning began on a water science education center that would be open to schools in the water district. Its purpose was to provide a hands-on learning facility for water and the natural environment for elementary school students and for science teachers. At the time, elementary school children, especially those in the New Haven Schools, had few hands-on science learning opportunities. A water center would provide science teachers and students a laboratory and programs where learning by hands-on experiments with water would raise awareness and understanding of this precious, taken-for-granted resource.

The building chosen to house the classrooms was a former office building, built in the 1880s, of the Whitney Arms Company complex. It is located below the Lake Whitney dam near Whitney Avenue. After significant renovation work, the water center opened for business in the fall of 1980; 3,428 elementary school students and teachers took part in programs offered by the center that first year. The three most popular programs were Water Wizards (physical properties of water), the Magic of Microscopy (a microscopic look at life in the Mill River), and Discovery Hikes through nearby East Rock Park. All programs were and still are free to schools and groups in the Authority's district.

Three years later, with a grant from a local foundation, the water center started providing classes at area schools. Interns from the education program at the University of New Haven took the programs on the road. This proved to be very popular, especially as school busses for field trips became less available.

Today, the Regional Water Authority offers a wide variety of water science programs for school classes, scouts and other groups. The Authority's educator, Lisa DiFrancesco, teaches some programs at the water center, but she takes most programs to area classrooms. Programs include hands-on presentations, water science loan boxes, and Project WATER, a water quality testing program for students in sixth through eighth grades.

Water science programs offered through the Whitney Water Center have evolved over time to keep pace with the state education standards. Current offerings include something for every grade level: building a distribution system out of PVC pipe and seeing how communities use water for younger children, exploring the water cycle, properties of water, and conservation for older children, and pollution prevention and microscopy for upper elementary and middle school students. Loan boxes cover many of the same programs that the Authority's educator presents to students, but also allow students to spend more time exploring the concepts of density, properties of liquids, weather, and watersheds.

To celebrate this anniversary, the Authority adopted Common Ground High School in New Haven, providing this charter school with monetary assistance and working with teachers to show students the real world applications of what they are learning in the classroom. In honor of the teachers, without whom 25 years of education would not have been possible, the RWA awarded five mini-grants to educators in the region. The grants will enable teachers to try out creative teaching techniques and buy enriching teaching materials not provided for in their schools' budgets to further their students' learning in water science.