

San Francisco Chronicle

Bay Area

Wednesday, February 16, 2011

EDUCATION



Town School for Boys fourth-graders Ben Harris (left), Noah Kim and Freddie Kehoa talk to Cal Academy of Sciences visitors.

Mini docents teach big lessons

Students serve as rain forest guides as part of California Academy of Sciences program

By Katie Nelson

CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

Noah Kim straightened the sleeves of his white lab coat and took a deep breath Tuesday before walking up to a group of parents and children in the California Academy of Sciences' rain forest exhibition.

He smiled as he approached them and asked if they wanted to learn something "cool" about rain forests and environ-

mental laws.

Five weeks ago, the fourth-grader at Town School for Boys in San Francisco had never heard of environmental impact laws, let alone been able to describe how they aid international rain forest conservation efforts.

But after weeks of learning about tropical animals, Amazon Basin geology and plant life cycles, Kim and his classmates served as museum docents Tuesday, teaching visitors about what they discov-

ered through a new academy program that encourages interactive education.

"I really like teaching everybody in here rather than in my classroom," Noah said. "I mean, I can tell so many more people that if you cut down the rain forests, then it's sort of their fault when the trees take 4,000 years to grow back."

Town School is one of 25 Bay Area schools participating in the academy's Teacher Institute on Science and Sustainability, which began in 2009 to try to improve science education in elementary schools.

"Normally, we build a rain forest out of
Academy continues on C7

Mini docents teach rain forest lessons

Academy from page C7

paper in our classroom, but in learning about sustainability efforts, I thought it would be cooler if we conducted our presentations at the academy," said Noah's teacher, Jared Fortunato. "Being here makes everything more real for the kids."

Grahame Smith, who manages the academy's program, said the free, two-year intensive curriculum is meant to help teachers give students a holistic science education that emphasizes sustainability.

This summer, the

academy's first group of teachers will graduate from the program and, according to Smith, he is already hearing from teachers about how the program has positively impacted their schools.

"They have created composts in classrooms and have students going into rooms to make sure they are clean at the end of the day," he said. "One school in the program has asked that their students develop a waste-free lunch on Friday where students bring in lunches that create no waste."

The program provides

two weeks of all-day training during the summer followed by one-month professional development classes.

The academy's program also provides teachers with classroom kits that include lesson plans and items such as quartz and gravel, a bat skull or a device that mimics bat echolocation — all of which are used to educate students on topics like the rain forest.

Smith said most items in the kits could not be found just anywhere. The kits are created especially by the academy with items from the museum. Each topic-specific kit is prepared by the academy and rented to teachers for classroom use.

Fortunato, who has been in the program

since it started, said he suggested that his students come to the academy to teach others what they had learned.

The students worked for over a month on how to research and create comprehensive presentations for their visit to the academy, covering topics such as biodiversity, the water cycle and conservation efforts.

Ben Harris, 10, said he addressed one major question in his research. "I wanted to know what we are doing when we hurt the rain forest," he said. "Then I found out if we keep cutting the trees, they'll be gone in 40 years. That's not good."

E-mail Katie Nelson at knelson@sfchronicle.com.