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A+ for Energy

BP has launched a $2 million education programme that gives California teachers tools to teach kids about energy and energy conservation. Stella Danker joins children from West Orange Elementary School at a summer science camp organised by one of the grant-winning teachers. Photography by David Beeler

Bright-eyed with a shock of black hair, Leo Cruz, 8, who came to America from the Philippines when he was one, is on a mission to get his mother to insulate the attic “so that it will stay warm when it’s cool and stay cool when it’s hot”. Maria Chavez, 8, is going to get her whole family to recycle cans. “When you throw them away, they just fill up the dump when they could be turned into something else, something new,” she said. Leo wants to be an actor. Maria wants to be a doctor or a scientist when she grows up. Both kids are now wired to save energy, recycle and are discovering the joy of science.
Leo and Maria were among some 45 eight-to-ten year-olds from the West Orange Elementary School in California, who chose to bounce out of bed to attend a morning Science Camp starting at 7.45 am for four weeks in the summer instead of sleeping in late during the vacation.
Rosella Donoho, 9, said, “I wanted to learn about science and do a lot of fun experiments and not sit at home and do nothing.” This was the first time that Rosella, and practically all of the other campers, was attending a summer camp, unlike many of their more fortunate fellow Americans for whom $1000 camps are a summer ritual.
The camp was all paid for with a $19,000 grant from BP to one of the school’s teacher Vicki Anderson. She was also among the 120 teachers who attended a $100,000 BP-funded training session in Long Beach, California in July conducted by the National Energy Education Development (NEED).
NEED is a non profit education association to promote understanding of the science of renewable and non-renewable energy, and the impact of energy, so that students and teachers can make better decisions.
Similar training will be given next summer to 244 teachers from the winning applications to an A+ for Energy programme launched in California by BP in May. Some 5,163 kindergarten to grade 12 teachers proposed 819 projects they would love to do but for which they did not have resources. And 1,075 teachers won $5,000 and $10,000 to support 183 classroom or school projects. President of BP America, Ross Pillari, said at the programme launch: “We want to recognise those California teachers who inspire learning in their students by creating exciting and memorable experience around the subject of energy.” California’s Superintendent of Public Instruction Jack O’Connell added: “We need classroom programmes that teach about energy in creative ways. Unfortunately, in tight budget times our schools can’t always afford to add innovative new programmes to their curriculum.” BP has slated $2 million for these projects, material and teacher training.

Pillari believes that a programme that worked with teachers and students would give long-term benefits to society. “We can begin to create an impact in the community that will continue long after the programme is over. There will be a better understanding of the issues around energy; and we are also developing our teachers. We want to get students and teachers excited thinking about energy and its impact.” BP employees are also part of the community and, Pillar adds, “programmes like this one build pride in our company”.
He states that it’s important for corporations to be involved in the community. “It’s not good enough to just sell products. It’s important to give back to the community and to do it in a way that is related to your business. For one thing, people do not make buying decisions based only on value for money. It helps if they have trust and faith in the company.”

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A+ for Energy is the largest education programme undertaken in North America by BP, which had in the last two summers funded three energy training conferences for teachers in the US. BP wanted to develop a community relations programme which focused on education in California where it has a huge presence employing over 6,000 people. The A+ for Energy programme was conceived from running “brainstorming” sessions with Anderson and 19 other teachers, along with NEED programme directors. NEED ensured that standards in education were met, not only in California but also in the rest of the US, for science and mathematics; while the teachers were invaluable in telling what would and would not work in the classroom.

Anderson, 55, was a social worker, nutritionist, and Peace Corp volunteer for 20 years before being a teacher for the last 13. She thinks that science is fun. “I would like to get other teachers excited about teaching science, to put a little spark into ordinary teaching,” she said, “And for kids to learn about the uses and misuses of energy, and about the environmental impact of energy sources, so that they can make better choices. If each one does a little bit, it will add a lot to changing the quality of our world.”

She had the full support of the school’s principal, Bobbie Lansman, who was posted to the school two years ago to turn it around academically. Lansman explained that the kids come from a low socio-economic group. When she arrived at the school, it was a state-declared under-achieving school, ranking second from the bottom of the 30 in the district. Not anymore. Its 2003 test results over 2002 showed a growth that was the highest in all of Orange County and top 10 in the state.

These were the sorts of deserving over-achievers at the camp, where children wore T-shirts printed with the ten major sources of energy, and where the Pledge of Allegiance was replaced by an energy pledge “to study energy the best that we can…it has the power to keep our world working or to stop it short, you see for its one summer, one life, one earth for you and me.”

The children were divided into three groups going through the different stations – experiment, information and performing. There were plays titled Solar White and the Seven Dwarfuels; Goldilocks was Energilocks; and Charlie Brown was no loser, but a winner in energy tips.

Ryan Farley, 8, who looks like and played Peppermint Patty in the Charlie Brown play, said: “I really like science. I’m going to be a biologist when I grow up,” adding, “I didn’t realise how much energy we use everyday. Just in the kitchen alone, all the things that need energy to work.” Ryan’s favourite part of camp, as with all the other kids, were the field trips to Legoland in San Diego, the Discovery Science Center in Santa Ana, and the California Science Center in Los Angeles. Their school in Orange is less than an hour’s drive from LA, yet many like Ryan had never been there before the camp outing.

Tyler Tu, 10, said, “I was so motivated. Almost everything is about science. Today we’re going to make batteries out of apples.” And Anderson, who ran the experiment station, made it fun. The kids stuck two nails into the tops of the apples that made a circuit with the acid in the fruit. “Looks like an alien, doesn’t it?” said Anderson. Holding his own alien, Jason Aldana, 10, whose parents are from Guatemala, said, “I wanted to learn more about science so that when I’m in fifth grade, I will be good at it. I didn’t really get it. I didn’t understand circuits.” He gets it now.

Xavier Quinn, 9, who came to California last May from Antigua, said, “There are a lot of games. This is a lot of fun. I want to be a scientist.” Not any kind of games. Energy Squares, based on a game called Hollywood Squares, was played with such characters as Chris Coal, Rebecca Renewable and Ursula Uranium.

Thanks to Elise Williams, 26, a third grade teacher at the school in charge of the information station, the campers learnt about the energy sources, dug for coal in a chocolate chip cookie and made a small explosion from methane gas they had captured in a container where they fermented juice. Nothing was over their heads. “I marvel at their reaction to science and the excitement the kids are getting from it. I am impressed that they remember the information,” said Anderson. They will take it with them, too. Said Julia Willingham, 8: “My mom always tells me to turn off the lights when I leave the room. Now, I’m going to listen to her because it saves energy.” Matt Cruz, 9, declared, “I’m not going to take long hot showers and I’m getting my mother to check her tyre pressure every two weeks”. Oliver Salinas, 10, whose family hails from

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Honduras, said, “I’ve started saving cans, 20 in the last week. I’ll still recycle when I grow up I’ll tell you that and I’m going to join the Science Club.”

●Stella Danker is a writer based in New York. She has been a journalist since 1983 covering social issues, health, business, travel and the environment.

Power launch

BP kicked off the A+ for Energy programme in May this year. Adam Silber was there to witness the excitement

They stood proudly next to their projects. This was their day and they couldn’t wait to show off their hard work. One by one those guests started to arrive at the grand hall of Sacramento California’s main library and quickly it became alive with activity.
“How does this work?” queried one gentleman. “Can you show me how you did this?” asked another guest.
These were just two of the many questions being asked of children encircling the hall excitedly demonstrating their innovative energy experiments as part of BP’s kick-off ceremonies for the A+ for Energy educational grant programme.
This first-of-its-kind programme awards $2 million in grants and scholarships to California educators who want to teach their students about energy and energy conservation.
BP partners with the National Energy Education Development Project to support energy education in California schools by helping supply course content and curriculum.
BP recently announced the nearly 1,100 grant winners, each receiving $5,000-$10,000 and the company will hold a special awards banquet in October
in Los Angeles.
Hosting the festivities will be actors and environmental advocates, Ed Begley and Wendy Mallick.
From the smiles on the children’s faces, to the applause from the hundreds who watched the experiments performed flawlessly, to the upcoming awards banquet and ultimately the renewed vigour to teach California’s kids about energy and energy conservation, it is hoped this programme will serve as a spring board for a life-long educational journey that will inspire today’s youth to become responsible energy conscious adults.

Captions
Bright future: The West Orange Elementary School science camp gave the children the opportunity to learn more about energy sources through fun experiments and was the first time many of the 45 eight-to-ten year olds had ever attended a summer camp.

Energetic activities: A+ for Energy is the largest education programme undertaken in North America by BP and is run in partnership with the National Energy Education Development project to help children learn about the environmental impact of energy sources.