

Kids soak up big ideas at Project WET



Children make the connection between the rain that falls on their heads and the water that comes out of their taps.



GETTING A
little bit wet
IS TEACHING KIDS
to save water

Every year, City of Richmond Water Services crews, who usually install, operate and maintain pipes or install and repair fire hydrants, take part in the appropriately named Project WET, an interactive science program aimed at educating Grade 4 to 7 students about the importance of water.

WET stands for Water Education Team and the program is delivered by Water Services staff working in partnership with local teachers. **The main objective is to promote higher-level thinking skills while learning about the fundamentals of water quality, water consumption and waste in an interactive and fun environment.**

It's hard to say who has more fun – the students on the half-day field trip to the Richmond Works Yard or the staff who collectively spend weeks preparing for the annual event.

Ken LaBoucane, a pipelayer in Water Services for about 12 years, has participated in Project WET for the last five. LaBoucane says he and his colleagues set up an above-ground watermain to mimic what they do underground to get around other buried utilities.





**It's an
inspirational,
motivational
and
educational
event.**

The display also illustrates how water mains connect to residences, businesses, fire hydrants and other distribution points. Students also pass through other interactive learning displays as well as some actual Water Services work areas during their fun and informative visit. In addition to showing the young field-trippers how the equipment is put together, he says staff share facts on the water cycle – evaporation, condensation, precipitation – as well as information on water conservation.

But the highlight for both students and staff, LaBoucane says, is when everyone gets a little wet. Water is fired into the air to spray everyone in the area, and City employees even volunteer to get soaked in a dunk tank.

“They love it. We’re all smiling and laughing, and I’m soaked from head to toe,” LaBoucane says. “They keep wanting to come back and do it again. It’s a lot of fun. I look forward to doing it every year.”

He adds, “It’s a little more laid back than being out in the field, digging around underground utilities and staging trucks and material.”

Colleague John Crocker, a hydrant mechanic, agrees saying, “It’s a lot of hard work setting it up, but at the end of the day, we’re all smiling as much as the kids are.

“It’s a joy to be able to talk to the public, seeing the kids smile, watching them have fun, getting excited about being around something I’m around every day. I like sharing my joy. I have a passion towards it,” says Crocker.

Teacher Dawn Lessoway appreciates the enthusiasm and hard work of Richmond staff members who put on Project WET, and emphasizes that enjoying the whole experience and getting soaked is not only fun, but a great way to learn.

“I love it because it helps my students to understand systems,” says Lessoway, who teaches Grades 3 to 5

Montessori classes at Steves Elementary School and has taught in Richmond for 25 years. Her lesson plans include the City’s water, sewer and storm drainage systems as well as natural systems like the hydrological cycle.

“When we learn about the different parts, such as the water cycle and then the watersheds, by going to Project WET, we get a much better sense of how they’re all connected and inter-connected, and then we start thinking three-dimensionally,” she says, noting the event helps children make the connection between the rain that falls on their heads and the water that comes out of their taps. “That’s taking a lot of really big ideas and making the abstract become very visible and concrete.”

The experience also cements the connection to the City and the important work of its employees. Project WET field trips take place in early May and are part of the City’s celebration of National Public Works Week. 2023 saw the return of the popular program, which had been suspended since 2019 due to the global pandemic.

“It’s an inspirational, motivational and educational event.” says Carly Smith, a 17-year Richmond employee who has worked in various areas in Water Services. “We inspire and teach the younger generations about potential career paths and give them a better understanding of how civil infrastructure works.”

While Water Services takes the lead for Project WET, the program also incorporates displays and demonstrations from a number of City departments and community partners. Project WET is truly a community experience as staff from numerous City departments volunteer to be Tour Guides, making it an enriching experience for all those involved.