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Young scientists from St. Vital win sustainability award



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Excitement was in the air as present and former students of St. George School gathered on the steps of the Manitoba Legislative Building.

They were not there to protest a government decision. They were there to be honoured for creating the St. George Freshwater and Ecological Institute. The Institute won Manitoba's 2016 Education for Sustainability Award.

Like many great things, the institute had a modest start under the leadership of a modest man. Brent Atkins will tell you that he's just a teacher looking for ways to bring the curriculum to life for his Grade 7/8 students. Toward that end, he seeks out meaningful activities to connect his students with the local community.

It all began with walking his class to the Seine River for Adopt-a-River activities. Under his careful supervision, every student got to enter the river in a small group to take scientific measurements, collect water samples, and collect invertebrates.

Word quickly spread throughout the



Students from St. George School relaxing on the steps of the Manitoba Legislative Building after receiving their award.

Supplied photo by Brent Atkins

school. By 2014, all of the Grade 7/8 students were involved. Harry Bell and the Louis Riel School Division (LRSD) repackaged the

activities as Waterways to make it easier for students as young as Grade 4 to participate. Brent and his students mentor other teach-

ers and younger students throughout the school, the LRSD, and across Manitoba.

Every year, Brent added new environmental actions for the students. First, it was the Great Canadian Shoreline Cleanup. Next, the students stencilled storm drains for the Yellow Fish Road program. In 2015, the students helped plant the Niakwa Trail Rain Garden to clean runoff before it enters the Seine River. Last year, they put up bat boxes.

Ultimately, Brent and his class created the Freshwater and Ecological Institute. This is not just a place for hip waders, nets, and water test kits. It is a research hub for students from across the division. One of its first projects was a citizenship symposium for 240 Grade 5 to 8 students. Of course, the theme was water.

The institute's young scientists have also met with local researchers for tours of the Namao research vessel, the St. Adolphe floodplain, and the St. Andrews locks.

Some might view the institute as the culmination of past efforts. Brent and his students will tell you it is just the beginning. They have big plans for the future.

Congratulations to Brent and his team of river stewards. Today St. Vital, tomorrow the world.

Michele Kading is a community correspondent for St. Vital and the executive director of Save Our Seine — www.saveourseine.com