

**WRITTEN TESTIMONY OF  
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MONTALVO ELEMENTARY  
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B-WET SPONSORED MERITO ACADEMY PARTICIPANT**

**BEFORE THE  
COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON INSULAR AFFAIRS, OCEANS, AND WILDLIFE  
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

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**Introduction**

Good morning Mrs. Chairwoman and members of the Subcommittee. My name is Teresa Gallegos-Ellingson. I am privileged and humbled by the opportunity to be a voice on behalf of oceans, wildlife and environmental education. For the past twelve years, I have been a teacher at Montalvo Elementary School in the Ventura Unified School District in California. Since 2007, all fourth and fifth grade students at my school have been part of the MERITO program. This school year MERITO program serves sixteen schools throughout Santa Barbara and Ventura Counties, 26 educators and 900 students.

Bay Watershed Education and Training Grants support an important program at my school, specifically the MERITO program which stands for 'Multicultural Education for Resource Issues Threatening Oceans. ' This is a community-based marine science education and awareness initiative primarily grant funded and largely dependent on NOAA B-WET grants program.

I have been enrolled in the Channel Islands NMS MERITO Academy since 2007, a partnership subprogram of the larger MERITO initiative through which I received professional development, and my students received meaningful field experiences.

**My school's audience**

Montalvo Elementary's audience is comprised of multicultural citizens of all ages, including K-5 as our school students. For our BWET/MERITO program, emphasis placed is on outreach to Hispanic populations as they represent the largest portion of a culturally diverse population--over 39% in Ventura County.

Montalvo Elementary is a Title 1 school and as such reaches other under-represented groups including African American, Asian, Middle Eastern and Native American.

According to the US Census Bureau (5 of every 10 Hispanic students do not finish High-school. Of those, only 10% graduate from College. Only 1% of graduate students pursuing science careers are Hispanic. This is of great concern to the scientific community when 1 of every 3 child less than 18 years old in California is Hispanic and by 2040 also according to US Census Bureau, 1 of every 3 youth will be of Hispanic descent across US.

**Involvement with B-WET and MERITO**

With the support of B-WET grant, the MERITO program has given me the training, tools and resources to help my students understand the connections between our watersheds, creeks, oceans and atmosphere, and to realize the effects of our habits on the health of ocean and coastal environments.

My participation in the program has given me a vehicle for being creative, passionate and engaged in what I teach, while still exposing my students to rigorous, standards-based content. It has allowed me to expand my scientific knowledge about ocean systems, and pass it on! I have developed an action plan for reducing marine debris—starting with my school. Children have studied the impacts of litter on the watershed and beg to clean up the campus during recess. They point out, "there's some debris". They are aware of how this land-based litter works its way to the ocean where it pollutes the water, and endangers wildlife.

As an educator participating in the MERITO Academy program, I commit through a signed agreement during enrollment to participate in the 3 day MERITO Academy annual Educators Workshop and to implement in my classroom a minimum of 12 lesson plans of the 45 contained the MERITO Academy curriculum. Together the preparation and implementation of 12 lessons require 18 hours, in addition to 3 full days of educator's workshop, and 3 days of field experiences. This is my 3<sup>rd</sup> year enrolled in the program and have mastered the use of much of the curriculum and invest an average

of 100 hours per year in the implementation of this program (~50 hours per in the classroom preparing and implementing MERITO Academy lesson plans, 25 hours of professional development and 25 hours during field experiences).

The core of the MERITO Academy is its standards-aligned curriculum, which teachers can implement in the classroom, while still addressing California's rigorous and numerous, academic standards. We are trained by MERITO staff on how to implement the curriculum. As a teacher I find the depth and relevance of the curriculum allows me to integrate its scientific content and exploration into biology, earth science, physical science, math, reading, writing, art, technology and English as second language.

By implementing the curriculum I am able to engage the least literate, and my most academically gifted students with this relevant content. They are thrilled real scientists are spending time with them, using scientific terms, teaching them to take scientific measurements of sand crabs, anemones, sea stars, dissolved oxygen in creeks, Ph, and even restore wetlands by planting native plants. They are thrilled to learn by doing, not being confined to "the page". The students also get to take a boat ride to Anacapa or Santa Cruz Islands, which are part of the Channel Island National Marine Sanctuary. The majority of Montalvo's fourth and fifth graders in the MERITO program had never visited any of the Channel Islands before the MERITO program, and let alone understood the biodiversity and "invisible connections" of the watershed and oceans.

### **Accomplishments:**

The B-WET grant through the MERITO program has been able to touch the lives of over 4,500 low- income students and over 200 educators in the Santa Barbara Channel and Monterey Bay area regions since 2002. The students have received first class Earth and Ocean science education through hands-on inquiry based activities supplemented by teachers like us in-class and many after school program leader with support from sanctuary's MERITO staff out in the field.

Without this program, my students would not otherwise get access to this quality of science instruction. Each year, at Montalvo Elementary School, at least 120 students are reached because each fourth and fifth grade teacher participates in the MERITO program.

As a teacher in the program, I have experienced how children's repertoire of "what I want to be when I grow up expand from the usual responses of "fireman", policeman", "doctor" and "lawyer". Now, their responses include oceanographer, hydrologist, herpetologist, ROV (remotely operated vehicle)

engineer, etc. Most of the students in my class come from poverty and the MERITO staff and curriculum has opened their minds to new possibilities.

This is important because these students come to realize that careers in Earth and ocean science are not exclusive of the Anglo and/or economically privileged population who currently dominate in these professional arenas.

**Why are B-WET and MERITO Academy programs unique and needed:**

The B-WET program has been the main fiscal sponsor of the MERITO Academy programs for both the Channel Islands and Monterey Bay Sanctuaries. Multiculturally inclusive programming is in high demand in the communities of Santa Barbara, Ventura, Monterey and Santa Cruz counties where the populations are greater than 40% Hispanic. Disruption of funding for the BWET Grants would be disastrous to thousands of teachers and students served by programs it funds.

**Testimonial from a colleague teacher:**

*'Every child has a right to an equal and quality education, but the reality is that children in inner city schools miss out not only on science, but on the enrichment opportunities that can accompany it. The MERITO Program has given my students in an inner city school in the heart of the gang injunction zone of Oxnard, the opportunity to have access to a world class science program complete with visiting scientists, science equipment, and field trips; it has given my students an awareness of the environment and how their actions affect the ocean. It has provided my students, many of who had never even visited the beach five miles away from them, the opportunity to visit the islands and revel in the beauty of the marine sanctuary that had previously been so close, yet so far away from them.'*

*- MERITO Academy teacher Nancy Karnosky, Drifill Elementary*

**Testimonial from a parent:**

- *...'participating in the Argonauts and the MERITO program has had an impact on Angeles. Earlier this school year, Angeles heard that Oxnard's Planning Commission was going to meet in regard to developing areas near Ormond Beach into housing and industrial parks. Having gone to Ormond Beach on a clean up, Angeles decided that she needed to speak to the Coastal Commission and urge them to save Ormond Beach. She prepared a brief speech all on her own, without our editing and had my wife drive her to city hall. She sat through several presentations and was called to the podium to speak.*

*She spoke about her experiences with the Argonauts and MERITO and told what she knew about Ormond Beach being a special place for Snowy Plovers and Least Terns. After she spoke people from different groups spoke as well, supporting the clean up and preservation of Ormond Beach. We believe that Angeles is more environmentally aware because of her experiences through these great programs'.*

*Francisco Castillo, parent of Angeles Castillo, MontalvoElementary School*