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EPA chief, on campaign swing, doles out grants

Three grants, totaling \$70,000, will help children's health in Rhode Island, including one to improve air quality in schools.

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PROVIDENCE -- EPA Administrator Christine Todd Whitman took a grilling from eager third graders at the Laurel Hill Avenue school yesterday, before announcing three new environmental grants to a less demanding group of reporters and school administrators.

The youngsters, who prolonged her visit to the classroom by relentlessly poking their hands in the air with new questions, wanted to know everything from where tap water comes from to where the contents of a flushed toilet end up.

The media wanted to know what Whitman, who was next headed to a Donald Carcieri fundraiser, thought of the Republican gubernatorial candidate's environmental record.

The Environmental Protection Agency chief replied that she was merely in town as a former Republican governor helping a fellow Republican. She also said she believed that the environmental misdeeds alleged in Democrat Myrth York's attack ads occurred before Carcieri took the helm of the company associated with them.

Arriving at the school, Whitman first went to the classroom, where she joined 26 third graders. They were listening to Kate Bousquet of the Northern Rhode Island Conservation District present a slide show and talk on "Do's and Don'ts for the Woonasquatucket River" (e.g., don't swim in it because it's polluted; do pick up your trash so it doesn't get worse).

The education campaign, now in its fourth year, has reached more than 1,000 second and third graders in Providence, North Providence, Johnston and Smithfield.

Whitman announced yesterday that an additional \$30,000 will bring it to more schools -- and also will finance the creation of a "tool kit" to adapt the program to other urban watersheds. The tool kit will be tested by the Blackstone River Watershed Council.

→ [Whitman noted that the EPA has spent \$10 million to clean up dioxin from the Woonasquatucket River. "Our goal at EPA is to restore the river to fishable and swimmable quality by 2020," she said.]

U.S. Sen. Lincoln Chafee, introducing Whitman, said: "She's bringing a sack full of money." The three grants, totaling \$70,000, all relate to children's health.

"There's no doubt that contaminants in water and air affect children more than they do adults," she said. The grants promote "different ways to protect children's health," she said.

The others were:

\$25,000 to the Childhood Lead Action Project, to continue its work reducing lead poisoning, particularly the Rhode Island Lead Collaborative, a network of organizations involved in lead-poisoning prevention education and outreach.

\$15,000 to the state Department of Health to expand the "Tools for Schools" indoor air-quality program. Tools for Schools helps school officials evaluate and correct air-quality problems, such as improving ventilation, eradicating mold, eliminating curtains or carpets that trap dust, testing for radon and keeping diesel bus emissions outside.

Whitman said asthma costs 14 million missed school days per year, and that half the schools in the country have air-quality problems. "This is an issue that we can solve. There are a number of different ways, many of which do not cost a great deal of money," she said.

More than 20 Rhode Island schools have already put Tools for Schools into action.

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