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NY SCHOOLS

A Prize Teacher Tends to the Bronx

Stephen Ritz Is a Finalist for the \$1 million Global Teacher Prize



Teacher Stephen Ritz and fourth-grader Hannah Acenscio in the library garden at P.S. 55: 'We're harvesting hope and cultivating minds,' he said. *PHOTO: JOHN TAGGART FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

By **LESLIE BRODY**

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A science teacher in the south Bronx makes kids think it's cool to eat Brussels sprouts. And for that, he could win \$1 million.

On Friday, Stephen Ritz is to be named one of 10 finalists for the Global Teacher Prize, a new award designed to recognize the role teachers play in society and attract top candidates to the field. The winner will be announced March 15.

Mr. Ritz, 52 years old, has helped Bronx students build more than 100 gardens inside schools and outdoors in high-poverty neighborhoods where fresh produce can be hard to buy.

"We're harvesting hope and cultivating minds," he said, wearing a bow tie made of old

Legos to promote recycling. “I love arugula, but I really love happy, successful, engaged kids.”

More than 5,000 teachers were nominated for the prize from the Varkey Foundation, the charitable arm of GEMS Education. The Dubai-based company runs public and private schools internationally and provides education consultants and training.

Besides Mr. Ritz, U.S. finalists include teachers from Southport, Maine, and Springfield, Mass.



Mr Ritz's fourth-grade students pollinate zucchini in the garden at P.S. 55 in the Bronx. PHOTO: JOHN TAGGART FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Mr. Ritz's project, called the “Green Bronx Machine,” grew out of an accident. In 2007, while teaching at-risk teenagers, he received a box of daffodil bulbs. He thought they were onions and might be hurled as projectiles, so he stashed them behind a radiator. One day, he found they had burst into beautiful blooms.

“It was an epiphany,” he said. “Nature happens.”

Mr. Ritz started building “academic gardens” inside schools, nurturing seedlings into small plants that are placed in specially constructed walls or towers until they are ready to eat. As children tend strawberries, squash and lettuce, he said, they learn about temperature, measurement, responsibility and nutrition.

The project started community farms outside as well, often with volunteer help from the New York Police Department.

“My kids are meeting the police in the garden for something good, and it's been critical

for building relationships,” he said.

With support from donors, corporate partners and local elected officials, Mr. Ritz said the project has grown more than 15 tons of produce, and his students have landed jobs in restaurants and catering businesses. Some of his fourth- and fifth-graders visited the pastry chef at the White House this summer.

Last week, as one of the front-runners for the teaching prize, Mr. Ritz went to Rome to meet Pope Francis.

“We chatted about vegetables,” he said.

Now the teacher is starting a wellness center on the fourth floor of P.S. 55, a century-old building for children in preschool through fifth grade that is surrounded by public housing projects. His goal: sending children home with 100 bags of fresh produce every week and helping some eventually get into the elite Bronx High School of Science.

Luis Torres, principal of P.S. 55, said Mr. Ritz’s charisma helps him in his work with students.

“He’s like a cartoon character,” Mr. Torres said. “Because he’s so dynamic and entertaining, they become engaged.”

If Mr. Ritz wins, he said he would use the money to expand his projects.

“My favorite crop,” he said, “is organically grown citizens.”

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