FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

American Student Assistance Announces Student Winners of National 'Solve Together' Contest

Middle school students, educator recognized for innovative solutions in career exploration and skill-building competition focused on addressing real-world challenges

BOSTON – May 14, 2021 – American Student Assistance® (ASA), a national nonprofit focused on fostering students' understanding of post-secondary education and career pathways, announced during a virtual ceremony Tuesday that the "Galactic Girls," a team of middle school students from Plouffe Academy in Brockton, MA, had won the inaugural national *ASA Solve Together: Tomorrow's Leaders Tackling Today's Challenges* contest. The school was awarded $10,000, and the team of students won $1,500. In addition, middle school teacher Hannah Choi from Larchmont Charter School in Los Angeles, CA, was recognized with the *ASA Solve Together* Educator Award of $1,000 for her work in teaching students about the far-reaching economic impact of COVID-19 to develop real-world solutions.

ASA Solve Together is a national competition designed to encourage career exploration and skill-building for middle school students through project-based learning and teamwork. Each proposed challenge is aligned to grade-level standards so educators can incorporate them into daily learning and help students build critical foundational skills like communication, critical thinking and collaboration. Student teams select a career role -- such as the role of a government official, restaurateur, nonprofit leader, engineer, scientist, architect -- identify a challenge, develop a solution, and build and present their project.

The virtual classroom contest ran from February 15 to March 12 via Solvably, a digital learning platform operated by MassiveU. Working in teams facilitated by their teachers, students presented solutions to real-world problems facing communities, including the health and economic impacts of COVID-19, climate change and colonization of Mars.

“Students from all backgrounds crave learning that feels relevant to their daily lives. Providing equitable access to project-based learning and career exploration opportunities is critical in enabling educators and schools to prepare students for longterm success,” said ASA President and CEO Jean Eddy. “All of the student-led projects submitted to *Solve Together* were thoughtfully designed, and we commend the many educators across the country who provided strong guidance and instruction to these students throughout the entire process. While we are only presenting three teams with awards this year, all student participants are winners as they acquired important career skills that will serve them well into the future.”

The top three winning teams, as well as the educator award, were selected from 189 total submissions from 23 schools across 12 states nationwide. The submissions were reviewed by a panel of judges that included representatives from the Association for Middle Level Educators (AMLE) and ASA. In addition to the first place prize, second and third place winners will be awarded monetary prizes of $5,000 and $2,500, respectively, for their schools. An additional $1,500 (first place), $1,000 (second place), and $500 (third place) cash prize will be awarded to be split among the winning teams.

First Place, **Plouffe Academy (Brockton, MA):** A team of five seventh graders known as the “Galactic Girls,” with the help of guidance counselor John MacDonald, Ph.D., took on roles as scientists, developing comprehensive blueprints and models for hydroponic farms to sustain a colony on Mars. Through extensive research, a visit to the Boston Science Museum, and an interview with former director of NASA's Marshall Space Flight Center, the “Galactic Girls” designed innovative solutions that could prepare humans for life on Mars.

“We are fascinated with the idea that we could someday live on another planet like Mars, which is why we wanted to further investigate how we could sustain life there using solutions that are available today,” said John MacDonald, guidance counselor, Plouffe Academy. “We knew taking on the role as scientists and botanists would be challenging with Mars’ limited water supply, so we had to develop a creative solution through a lot of brainstorming, collaboration, teamwork, as well as insights gained from the interview that we conducted with the NASA scientist.”

Second Place, **New Hyde Park Road School (New Hyde Park, NY):** Also focused on addressing the challenge to build a colony to sustain life on Mars, a team of five sixth graders called the "Futuristic Illusionists," with the guidance of teacher Jennifer Coaker, proposed and submitted a website, game and video to demonstrate solutions to challenges including radiation exposure, toxic soil and cold temperatures.

"There are many challenges that come with the potential of living on Mars," said Aaron George, sixth grade student, New Hyde Park Road School. "The contest allowed us to think creatively about how to overcome these challenges by taking on the role as future colonists. Throughout the process, we had the opportunity to explore many careers, including spacecraft engineer, an urban planner and architect, climate scientist, and lawmaker."

***Third Place*, Larchmont Charter School (Los Angeles, CA):** A team of four seventh grade students, with the help of teacher Rachel Jung, came together as the "Environmental Defense Team" to tackle climate change by presenting a plan for scaling using four different energy sources – including wind turbines, hydrokinetic energy, solar panels – to address climate change.

"Our generation cares deeply about a sustainable future and the issues of climate change are important to address," said Rachel Jung, seventh grade English teacher, Larchmont Charter School. "Through the Solve Together challenge, we were able to examine new ways to use green energy resources to protect our planet."

Hannah Choi, recipient of the Educator Award, worked with 32 teams of math students to delve deeper into the economic challenges created and exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. With her guidance, students gained problem-solving skills through a variety of exercises. One team created a podcast that highlights how to support small businesses during the pandemic. While another team, acting as government officials, developed safety measures for airlines.

"As soon as I announced this opportunity, my students displayed a level of excitement and interest I haven't seen before," said Hannah Choi, seventh grade Math teacher, Larchmont Charter School. "Students worked countless hours to work together as a team to problem solve, and I'm so proud of all the effort that went in. Hopefully, this introduced them to a new career field they would've never considered, and I'm confident these creative thinkers will change the world for the better!"

"Middle-level educators have a unique opportunity to support young students in career exploration and skill-building, as they are in the early stages of identifying their interests

and goals," said Stephanie Simpson, CEO of AMLE. "We are impressed by the innovative solutions of all participating educators and their middle school students. Students and educators alike demonstrated creativity and 21st century-style thinking in their solutions to today's challenges."

AMLE is a premier partner of *ASA Solve Together,* as the challenge is aligned with the organization's mission of helping middle level educators reach every student, grow professionally, and create great schools.

In addition to the top winners of the *Solve Together* competition, ASA also recognized four teams as honorable mentions:

- ***Most Well Researched:*** Team COVID Community from Bellevue Big Picture School in Bellevue, WA, with the help of teacher Brooke Weber, developed a school reopening plan based on research.
- ***Most Likely to Win a Special Effects Oscar:*** Team Eco-lution from Glenvar Middle School in Salem, VA, with the guidance of teacher Allyson Umstead, produced a video skit in which students acted as reporters interviewing scientists about research-focused plans to address climate change.
- ***Most Likely to Top the Podcast Charts***: The Math 7 Team A3 2 from Gateway Preparatory Academy in Enoch, UT, with the help of teacher Amy Thorpe, recorded a podcast about the pandemic's impact on small business and homelessness.
- ***Most Innovative:*** Team 1 from University Middle School in Memphis, TN, with the guidance of teacher Jennifer Simmons, developed a set of research-based laws for a Colony on Mars.

All participants will receive a certificate of participation for their ingenuity and creative problem-solving skills. To learn more, go to asasolvetogether.org.

###

About American Student Assistance® (ASA)

American Student Assistance® (ASA) is a national nonprofit committed to helping kids know themselves, know their options, and make informed choices to achieve their education and career goals. ASA® has a 60-year legacy of working directly with students to increase their access to higher education through loans and financial education. ASA has turned its experience into impactful solutions for students in grades 6-12 to help them pursue their dreams. To learn more about ASA, visit www.asa.org/about-us.

Media Contact:
Sandy Dawkins
Director of Strategic Communications American
Student Assistance
sdawkins@asa.org