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February 11, 2026

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Sandia Academy takes first place in Mojave Water Agency's 2026 Problem Solvers Competition

Apple Valley, CA — Student creativity, innovation, and leadership were on full display as Sandia Academy earned first place in the 2026 Problem Solvers Competition, announced live on stage during the Innovators High Desert Water Summit hosted on February 6 by Mojave Water Agency.

More than 300 middle and high school students from across the High Desert gathered at High Desert Church in Victorville for the annual summit, themed “Influencing the Future of Water.” The event introduces students to water science, conservation, and career pathways while highlighting how youth voices and ideas can shape sustainable solutions for the region.

The Problem Solvers Competition, produced in partnership with the award-winning PBS series Curiosity Quest and hosted by Joel Greene, challenges student teams to respond to real-world issues through creative collaboration. This year’s challenge asked teams to develop marketing and education toolkits designed to inspire water-wise habits in their communities.

Sandia Academy’s winning project distinguished itself by narrowing its focus to a single, highly specific area of water waste on school campuses. The team identified leaking school water fountains as a common and visible source of water loss and also highlighted the absence of automatic shut-off sensors on existing fountains as an opportunity for improvement. Rather than taking a broad approach to conservation, the students developed an influencer-style toolkit centered on raising awareness of these issues and proposing the installation of sensor-equipped fountains as a practical, water-wise solution. Judges noted that this focused strategy made the project especially relatable, actionable, and easy to replicate at other schools.

Thanks to the support of event sponsors Zanjero Consulting, Kennedy Jenks Engineering, Ardurra, and the County of San Bernardino, Sandia Academy earned a \$3,000 school scholarship for their first-place finish. Second place honors went to Excelsior Charter School, while University Preparatory Academy earned third place recognition.

Additional participating schools included Academy for Academic Excellence, Academy of Careers and Exploration, Apple Valley High School, Granite Hills High School, Oak Hills High School, Serrano High School, and Victor Valley High School. All teams were recognized on stage for their creativity, collaboration, and thoughtful engagement with local water conservation

challenges.

The Water Summit also featured a keynote address from Flora Delgado, a civil engineer with Mojave Water Agency, who shared her journey from local High Desert schools to a career in the water industry. Students also heard from Student Essay Contest winner Ariaella Randolph, a University Preparatory School freshman, who earned a \$3,000 scholarship for her presentation on how youth can influence water conservation.

Throughout the morning, students participated in interactive breakout sessions led by water professionals and educators, exploring water science, conservation technology, sustainability, and the many career paths connected to water.

The Innovators High Desert Water Summit is an annual educational event hosted by Mojave Water Agency to connect students with real-world problem solving, STEM learning, and career exploration in the water industry.

“The Innovators High Desert Water Summit is about showing students that influence doesn’t come from popularity...it comes from ideas, curiosity, and the willingness to take action,” said Mojave Water Agency Board President Marina West. “Today’s students are already thinking critically about the future of water, and that gives us confidence in what lies ahead.”

For more information about Mojave Water Agency’s education programs, visit www.mojavewater.org.

Mojave Water Agency, which was established in 1960, plays a vital role in securing reliable water supplies for the High Desert region. As one of 29 State Water Project contractors, the Agency manages water resources across a 4,900-square-mile service area, promoting long-term sustainability and stewardship.

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