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## **The Florida Aquarium Receives an Award from Hillsborough County Schools for Outstanding STEM Participation**

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**Tampa, Fla.** – Each year the Hillsborough Regional Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) Fair recognizes an individual or organization in the community that demonstrates longstanding support of STEM education and the STEM Fair through activities that are above and beyond their own mission/vision. The Florida Aquarium is the 2016 recipient of the *HR-STEM Friend of the Fair Award* and will be highlighted at each of two Fair Awards Ceremonies on February 9th.

Hillsborough County Schools STEM Director Larry Plank shared with CEO Thom Stork and Vice President of Education Debbi Stone, “I thank each of you and the staff at [the Aquarium] for supporting our STEM Fair and providing amazing experiences for kids in our community. Our partnership is a model for the nation!”

Since opening in 1995, the Aquarium has had a longstanding fruitful relationship with Hillsborough County Public Schools (HCPS), the 8th largest school district in the nation with around 200,000 students in over 254 instructional sites (<http://www.sdhc.k12.fl.us/>). As the non-profit Aquarium’s mission is to entertain, educate and inspire stewardship about our natural environment, the leadership team is honored by this recognition.

“When we opened our new Carol J and Barney Barnett Learning Center in 2014, we knew it would have a tremendous impact on our community” said Thom Stork, president and CEO of The Florida Aquarium. “Immersive and filled with cutting-edge technology, we are inspiring the next generation of explorers and decision-makers. To be able to do that with underserved audiences, through the support of our donors and our own operating budget, is a privilege. We work hand in hand with the school system to ensure we are exceeding their needs in every way we can and we are extremely honored by this award.”

The Aquarium has provided long-term support and resources to numerous Title 1 schools, exposing to the wonders of the STEM program in a unique and hands-on way to children who might not otherwise have an opportunity to do so. Beyond traditional school settings, the Aquarium has been a long-term partner of AMIkids Tampa, a nonprofit facility serving youth who have committed non-violent offenses and who are addressing issues both in the home and in the their neighborhood to gain needed skills to return to their families and communities (<http://amikids.org> ). Additionally, the Aquarium has partnered with organizations such as United Way, Metropolitan Ministries, YMCA, and Boys and Girls Clubs to offer free summer camp experiences for up to 60 HCPS students annually for over 15 years.

Says Aquarium VP of Education Debbi Stone, “Through our *What’s in Your Watershed* summer camp, we offer a completely free program to underserved youth in our community who have Tampa Bay right in their own backyards; though may never have experienced all that nature has to offer. It is one of the most rewarding things that we do, because we see firsthand our impact as we watch cautious kids who have never been in a kayak

transform into curious scientists by the end of the week. It's affecting for all involved, as the camp is as much about building confidence, curiosity, and leadership skills as it is about STEM education."

Stated HCPS Director of STEM Larry Plank, "Through the Tampa Bay STEM Network, we will continue to *prepare our students for life* and in the process augment Tampa Bay's STEM portfolio, improving opportunities for business and ultimately improving the lives of those who live, work and play in Tampa Bay."

The Aquarium impacts approximately 100,000 students annually through outreach, onsite programs, teacher workshops, camps, Scout programs, homeschool, and more, while also inspiring the 800,000+ visitors that visit the Aquarium every year.

### ***About The Florida Aquarium***

The Florida Aquarium is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit institution whose mission is to entertain, educate and inspire stewardship about our natural environment..

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