Students at Zachary Elementary School react with delight Friday morning as a Mickey Mouse character arrived at an assembly to help announce that 30 students taught by Kristy Gilpin and Breigh Rainey won Disney’s Planet Challenge competition for their work in growing and planting beach grass for erosion control on Louisiana’s coast.

We’re going to Disneyland!

BY JAMES MINTON
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ZACHARY — A spirited pep rally in advance of next week’s state-mandated tests turned into near-pandemonium Friday when Mickey Mouse stopped by Zachary Elementary School to make a very important announcement.

Thirty second- and third-grade students and their teachers, Kristy Gilpin and Breigh Rainey, won the national elementary grand prize in Disney’s Planet Challenge, an environmental and science competition for classrooms in third through eighth grades.

The children and teachers will be guests of the Walt Disney Co. at a May 6 recognition ceremony and parade at Disneyland, the original Disney theme park at Anaheim, Calif.

The Disney Channel’s television programming also will feature the students’ project to grow and plant beach grass for erosion control on Louisiana’s coast.

“I’m so proud of them because...”

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they took what they’re doing for the state of Louisiana — helping the coast, all of their wetlands projects — and they turned it into something that’s going to be celebrated throughout the state,” said Tammy Wood, the district’s coordinator of gifted and talented programs.

In November, the students in the combined second- and third-grade program planted 503 stalks of salt-tolerant beach grass — bitter panicum — on Grand Isle State Park’s beach and low sand dunes. They grew the grass in long tubes in their schoolyard nursery from cuttings taken from the joints of mature grass stems.

The project is part of the LSU Coastal Roots program, which works with schools to combat land erosion and encourage habitat restoration in the state.

The students also wrote and published books about Louisiana’s wetlands and made a Coastal Roots podcast for broadcast on radio stations.

Friday’s announcement came as a total surprise to the teachers and students, but Rainey’s and Gilpin’s expressions began to change when Principal Jennifer Maragos introduced Corrine Martinez of Disney’s Planet Challenge as the third motivational speaker of the assembly.

Martinez initially announced that Rainey’s third-grade class was one of 20 finalists in the competition, but after pretending to take a cellphone call from her “boss,” she introduced Mickey Mouse and Disney representative Christiane Maertens.

While the nearly 800 students squealed with delight at seeing the Disney character, Maertens teased Rainey and her class, suggesting the earlier announcement could be an April Fool’s joke, but finally announced that Gilpin and Rainey’s students were the national prize winners.

Second- and third-grade students in a combined class taught by Kristy Gilpin and Breigh Rainey at Zachary Elementary School celebrate Friday after learning from Walt Disney Co. representatives that they had won an expense-paid trip to Disneyland for having the winning entry in Disney’s Planet Challenge competition.

“I can’t believe I’m not dreaming. This is an April Fool’s joke. I’m so proud of my students,” Rainey said a few minutes later.

“I can’t believe we won. We put so much work into it. It’s just surreal,” Gilpin said mid-celebration.

“It’s really amazing to win this trip, because I doubted we would get here because there were lots of other people who had some pretty good projects. I was very scared until now,” 9-year-old Katy Knecht said.

Jeffrey Brent, also 9, said, however, he was confident all along because of the quality of the entry the classes submitted in the contest.

“I pretty much knew that we would win. I thought nobody could top it,” he said.

“What I’m very excited about is that now the entire third grade will go plant next (school) year at Grand Isle. They just didn’t do it with their classes. They extended it to the entire school,” Wood said of Gilpin and Rainey.

The other students in the classes are third-graders Walker Shows, Dylan Jackson, William Sanford, John Varnado, Jayden Williams, John Hernandez, Ava Martin, Faith Hughes, Hannah Kelley, Elizabeth Cavell, Audrey Hanks, Kylie O’Brien and Emily Strahan.