‘Shark Tank’ but for scholarships: Six Miami students make pitches and win $10,000 each

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To conserve oceans, a pair of high school juniors had the solution: Convert storm runoff and sewage into fuel.

Jonathan Wong and Luis Garcia-Sarabia spent months doing research to compile a 20-page proposal that singled them out as finalists for the inaugural Superintendent’s Innovation Challenge. Now came the hard part: Convincing a panel of judges in three minutes that their idea merited $20,000 in scholarships.

Their assigned pitch coach, Amy Padolf, director of education at Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden, was there to help.

“It’s your story,” Padolf told them. “Tell your story.”

With Padolf cheering them on, Wong and Garcia-Sarabia were one of three teams whose problem-solving solutions survived grilling questions by judges, similar to the popular reality show “Shark Tank,” where entrepreneurs pitch their business plans before celebrity investors. With pledges for matching donations from community members, each winning student took home $10,000.

“It’s amazing,” said Garcia-Sarabia, 17, a student at Coral Reef Senior High. “I keep smiling.”

“If we have to apply out of state, this is a big help,” added Wong, a 17-year-old student at School for Advanced Studies in Kendall.

Miami Superintendent Alberto Carvalho created the challenge after he received $10,000 in scholarship money for a student as part of his urban superintendent of the year award from the Council of Great City Schools.
But instead of passing along the money to one student, he created the “Shark Tank”-like challenge. In teams of two, more than 40 high school juniors and seniors submitted 20-page proposals to qualify for the competition. Twelve teams split into three categories, environmental, health and social, were selected as finalists to compete in the judging competition held at the Cambridge Innovation Center in Overtown on Monday night.

“I think through the solutions that these remarkable young people will be presenting to the judges,” Carvalho said, “we will be enlightened.”

The teams spent the afternoon with assigned pitch coaches to refine their presentations.

Moments before the winners were revealed, Carvalho had an announcement: He, along with matching gifts from Toyota of North Miami and the Miami Dolphins, would commit funding to give every participant in the challenge $500.

“This is working out so well, we’re going to run out of money here,” Carvalho joked.

In the health category, Hialeah-Miami Lakes Senior High’s Brian Rodriguez and Luis Salazar won for their plan for employers to improve mental health of their workers and increase productivity. Wong and Garcia-Sarabia won for their conserving the oceans pitch in the environmental category. Maria Estrada and Cristian Ochoa of Coral Gables Senior High won for their Closing the Opportunity Gap project in the social category.

Judges scored the teams using a rubric that factored in the project’s feasibility, sustainability and impact.

Ebony Smith, a corporate coach who served as one of the judges, said there were ties in all three categories. Tiebreakers were given to teams who had solutions to the most pressing issues.

“If more people had thought leadership, there’d be a lot different Miami,” she said.

Carvalho said he may commit more award money to the project proposed by the Gables students, who called for a student-led college mentorship program for minority students. They said they have one college application adviser at Gables serving a campus of 3,000.
“I like their project. It has merit,” he said. “I picked up some good ideas from the students.”

The competition may be a new tradition for Miami-Dade County Public Schools. One team of juniors said they would try to compete again next year.

“Next year will be bigger and better,” Carvalho added. “I think we started something strong, something positive, and the spotlight’s on them.”