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Students aim to go 'green,' reduce waste

Atholton Elementary cuts back on lunchroom trash



Bringing food in reusable containers and eating lunch together on Waste-Free Wednesday at the school are students Jeremy Barton, 7, Julia Pomerantz (center), 7, and Alie Hayley, 8. (Sun photo by Andre F. Chung / January 23, 2008)

By Lauren Shovan | Special to the Sun
January 30, 2008

Hannah Wehrmeister had to convince her mother that it was OK to pack silverware in her lunch. A second-grader at Atholton Elementary School, Hannah was participating in Waste-Free Wednesday, part of the school's Green School initiative. She knew that plastic utensils could not be recycled, and that silverware is reusable.

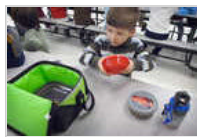
"At first, my mom told me no, but she decided yes," Hannah said.

Everything in her lunch - containers for applesauce and pasta, the silverware, even a baggie for her milk money - went home to be used again.

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Last week, Atholton Elementary observed its first Waste-Free Wednesday, cutting back on typical lunchroom trash by about 50 pounds. The weekly event is part of the school's two-year initiative to earn Green School recognition from the Maryland Association for Environmental and Outdoor Education.

Gifted and Talented Program resource teacher Lisa Young began researching the association's program last year. It is one of several Green School designations.

By August, Young had gathered a "Green Team" of staff, administrators and parents to work on Atholton's application, a process that includes documenting environmental education

and practices. "There's a lot that you have to change about the way you do things" to earn the recognition, Young said.

To be a Green School, Atholton Elementary must show that environmental issues are being taught as part of the curriculum, that changes - such as reducing waste - are made in the building's operation and that the community is involved. To that end, the Green Team meets every other Tuesday, brainstorming environmentally friendly activities for students.

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At the beginning of the school year, Young went to Sally Oswald, G/T resource teacher at Hammond Elementary. Hammond earned its Green School certification in 2005. Oswald has been mentoring Young, sharing the application process and activities.

Oswald began Waste-Free Wednesdays at Hammond.

"We can teach kids to try to reduce the stuff they throw out," she said. "You get kids involved, and they will make the change."

Encouraged by Oswald, Young brought the program to Atholton Elementary in Columbia.

To prepare for the first Waste-Free Wednesday, fifth-graders in an environmental-themed G/T group called "We Care" created PowerPoint presentations about packing a waste-free lunch. Students went to each lunch shift to explain "how to go about packing your lunch and why it's a good thing to decrease our trash consumption," Young said.

Dale Burgess is a special-education para-educator at the school. A week ago, she walked around the cafeteria, checking students' lunches. "I'm so pleased with these parents jumping on board," she said.

Many children had hard plastic bottles with permanent straws rather than juice boxes, sandwich containers instead of baggies and lunchboxes rather than paper bags.

Using a bathroom scale, Young took a baseline weight Jan. 3. That day, kindergarten through fifth grade had 136 pounds of lunch trash. A week ago, the school had reduced that number to 86.5 pounds. The program will continue, with students tracking how much the school reduces trash and which grade cuts back most.

Adults took the competition as seriously as students did. When Assistant Principal Debra Ahoff accidentally threw notepaper into the second grade's lunch trash, she gasped and dug it out.

Young and her fifth-grade G/T math students needed a fair way to gauge which grade produced the least amount of trash. They decided to use unit rates, a topic that the class had studied.

The children researched the number of students in each grade, then averaged how many pounds of trash per child each lunch shift produced. Third grade won the competition last week. The prize - a golden trophy that art students made out of recycled cans and boxes.

To cut back further, Atholton invited Rosalie Edwards, area field representative from the school system's food services department, to teach staff members and parent volunteers how to wash reusable hard plastic lunch trays, plates and silverware that the school has on hand. The training is necessary because of safety guidelines for working in the kitchen.

Another "green" project was making oyster reef balls. Young's "We Care" class made six concrete "balls" over the past several weeks. In May, several Atholton fifth-graders will join other Maryland students as they drop their reef balls into the Chesapeake Bay.

Conor Habiger, 11, helped pour cement into a mold, then added plastic balls. When the cement hardened into concrete, the balls were removed, leaving "holes for the oysters to attach themselves to," he said.

Conor explained that oysters "filter the water, and they can clean 60 gallons a day. ... It makes me feel good that I know that I'm doing something for the environment."

Young said that spending for Green School projects has been minimal. She is looking into funding, and the school PTA has set aside money to support "green" projects.

"The big hope is that these environmental enrichment opportunities will inspire these kids to become leaders," Young said.

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