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# Fourth-grader greens lunchtime at Hermosa Beach schools

Max Riley, 8, had an idea: Instead of his school serving lunch on Styrofoam trays, Hermosa Valley ought to use recycled paper trays. Such a switch would promote reuse and cut down on waste.



Max Riley holds a recycled and recycleable paper tray now used at lunchtime on Fridays at the Hermosa Beach schools.

Photo by Ed Pilo la.

Riley got his wish, with the first Foam Free Friday at the Hermosa schools last week. About 600 Styrofoam lunch trays were replaced with paper trays that can be recycled as well as composted.

While few students stood in line for pizza served on paper trays, Riley gripped a paper tray in one hand and an apple in the other.

“The only Styrofoam I want to see in the ocean is our boogie boards,” Riley said.

Environmental groups say polystyrene is a main culprit polluting the beach and ocean. The product breaks down into the tiny and toxic flakes that look like food to fish and birds.

In September, the Hermosa Beach City Council outlawed [polystyrene takeout containers](#) in the city, but the ban excluded the lunch program at Hermosa Valley and Hermosa View schools.

Polystyrene, which includes Styrofoam, is cheaper to produce and purchase than recycled paper, said Kim Martin of Grades of Green, a non-profit dedicated to improving the environment for kids. The recyclable paper trays each cost 3 cents more than the Styrofoam trays, Martin said.

So when Riley and his younger sister Reece, who attends Hermosa View, came up with the idea to make the switch of trays at their schools, their mother Elizabeth sent out an email to district parents looking for \$20 a week to make the change on Fridays.

About 20 families responded with pledges to donate — so there’s no extra cost to the school district.

Foam Free Fridays is an inexpensive once-a-week trial to see how the green lunch program works, Martin said. At the end of the school year, representatives of Grades of Green plan to approach the board of education to see if paper trays could replace Styrofoam trays every day at lunch, which would cost about \$3,600 a year, Martin said.

Students like Riley are emphatic when it comes to environmental issues.

Riley, who along with other students spoke at a public hearing in August in support of the Polystyrene ban, said chemicals from Styrofoam soak into hot food.

“Styrofoam is really bad for the environment,” Riley said.

Asked about the difference in quality between the Styrofoam and paper trays, Riley shook his head and said, “There’s no difference.”

Riley and his sister are part of the Youth Board of Advisors for Grades of Green, which includes about 29 children. “We want to inspire the students’ creativity,” Martin said. “We want to know what speaks to them.”

Grades of Green organizers implemented the paper trays on Friday when pizza is served at the Hermosa schools, which results in less food contamination of the tray and more trays being recycled.

Martin, a former environmental attorney who worked for clean water, said the most effective way to make environmentally-friendly changes is to work with children.

“They totally understand the issue. They totally get it,” Martin said. “The most important thing is instilling these values with the kids.”

At least 50 of the 600 paper trays used on Friday are composted at View and Valley schools, with the remaining 500 or so recycled, said Geri Shapiro of Grades of Green.

The Manhattan Beach Unified School District also uses recyclable paper trays at lunch, Shapiro said.

“It’s so rewarding to see the benefit for the kids and to see the knowledge they gain and ability to influence their parents and other people,” Shapiro said.

Grades of Green also has provided a food recycling program at the schools for the past four years that has lowered the amount of trash discarded from 18 bags a day to four, Shapiro said.

Jake Carter, 9, thinks the recycled paper trays are a great idea at his school. Carter uses a reusable lunch box he proudly displayed.

“I haven’t thrown anything away in months,” Carter said.