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Program calls on San Gabriel Valley schools to reduce lunchtime waste

By Claudia S. Palma, SGVN
Posted: 08/29/2012 09:00:00 PM PDT

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Superheroes, princesses, ladybugs and cars.

The Sanitation Districts of Los Angeles County are hoping to see more of these cute characters on local students' lunch bags, boxes and reusable bottles this school year.

For the second year, San Gabriel Valley area schools can participate in the districts' Trash Free Lunch Challenge, a program that saves schools money while reducing trash sent to landfills.

"Obviously it's a wonderful thing if we can get schools to reduce their lunch trash," said Don Avila, division engineer in charge of public information for the L.A. County Sanitation Districts.

The program was created by Manhattan Beach-based nonprofit Grades of Green.

Any school within the Sanitation Districts' service area, that is not already part of the trash-free lunch program, is eligible to participate. Schools must register by Sept. 14.

"Los Angeles County alone produces enough trash to fill Dodger Stadium from the field to the nosebleed seats about every week. So the trash problem is absolutely crucial," said Nicole Sevier, program manager for Grades of Green.

Students at participating schools will be asked to eliminate trash by bringing reusable lunch containers, reusable water bottles and cloth napkins, and sorting waste into recycling and compost containers, even if lunch is bought at the school.

Sevier said

one of the biggest things students can do is to reduce "the amount of packaging by purchasing large bags of, say, carrots or chips, instead of individual ones. By doing so, kids are given concrete examples of reusing, reducing, recycling and rotting, or composting."

Composting is the controlled breakdown of biodegradable yard and kitchen wastes that also benefits garden soil.

"Statistics show that environmental education and greening schools not only protects our environment, but also saves schools money, decreases absences and increases test scores; yet most schools lack the guidance and resources to produce tangible results," said Sevier.

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Grades of Green offers free environmental education and resources to registered schools through its website. There, schools can find easy hands-on interactive tool kits including Trash Free Tuesdays, Walk to School Wednesdays, Green Clean Thursdays and more.

Sevier said if students take part in these types of programs now, it becomes second nature, and "those kids would take those environmental values into their adult life and careers, thereby influencing generations to

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come."

At the end of the school year, participating schools with the most waste reduction have a chance at earning science grants.

A total of 12 schools took part in the inaugural challenge last year. Trinity Lutheran in Whittier nabbed third prize while Jefferson Elementary in Redondo Beach won top prize.

Jefferson implemented a full lunch time sorting system including trash, recyclables, liquids, tray stacking and compost, as well as creating a student-led "Green Team."

The school went from producing 16 bags of landfill trash daily to just two bags a day.

"Cumulatively these schools diverted over 18,000 bags of trash from going to the landfill, annually. Collectively, the schools saved over \$4,000 in trash liner costs alone," Sevier said.

This year's goal for the program is to reduce waste by 82 percent.

Sevier noted the Sanitation Districts has provided funding for the challenge and shared expertise, staff and other resources.

The first 16 schools to register at www.gradesofgreen.org/trashchallenge will receive an Eco Tool Kit and professional consultation.

Registered schools must completely implement the program by March 15, 2013.

A panel of environmental experts and other judges will evaluate the implementation and success of three finalists' programs. The winning school will receive a grand prize of a \$1,000 science grant. The second- and third-place schools will receive \$750 and \$500, respectively.

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