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Daily Breeze

Lunada Bay Elementary wins environmental award for lunchtime trash reduction

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Environmental nonprofit Grades of Green toured three South Bay elementary schools chosen as finalists for their lunchtime trash reduction, Washington Elementary in Redondo Beach, Riviera in Torrance and Lunada Bay in Palos Verdes Estates. Lunada Elementary won first, with Washington and Riviera being named runners-up. Washington Elementary students sort their trash after lunch. (Robert Casillas / Staff Photographer)



A student at Washington Elementary in Redondo Beach shows her trash free lunchbox to judges Alisha Auringer and Rupam Soni. (Robert Casillas / Staff Photographer)

A year ago, Lunada Bay Elementary School in Palos Verdes Estates didn't recycle at lunchtime.

Now, the school's post-lunch routine requires students to carefully separate their waste at a line of receptacles according to category: unconsumed liquids, composting, recyclable bottles, recyclable everything-else, trays and, yes, good old-fashioned trash.

The school this year also jettisoned Styrofoam trays in favor of paper ones, and did away with the plastic straws that were handed out to every student every day inside a plastic wrapper.

"These are really flimsy and they can't be recycled," said fifth-grader Clarice Yang, speaking of the plastic bags. "And sometimes on windy days they fly away and people wouldn't pick them up."

A Manhattan Beach-based environmental group called Grades of Green is hoping this kind of conscientiousness will one day be as commonplace as recycling plastic bottles. But for now, it's above and beyond, and as a result of these efforts and more, Lunada Bay has won a countywide contest put on by Grades of Green recognizing the school that does the best job of reducing its daily trash output. In less than a year, the elementary school has gone from producing eight bags of trash every day to one.

Called the Trash-Free Lunch Challenge, the contest begins in August, when schools sign up to participate on Grades of Green's website. Even though participation is free, schools

that sign on for the challenge are the exception, not the rule. Of the 300 or so schools across Los Angeles County that were approached by Grades of Green to compete, just 17 took the plunge - although that's five more than last year's inaugural contest.

As for Grades of Green, some of the people in the organization are volunteers, but others are staff members, and the program costs money. Schools that sign on are visited several times by Grades of Green staff members, who conduct



A student receives a ticket for monthly raffle from Washington Elementary parent volunteer Lisa Toone for bringing a trash free lunch. (Robert Casillas / Staff Photographer)

a waste audit, put on a school assembly and provide other methods of counsel on how to reduce landfill-bound waste. That work is financed in part by the contest's main sponsor, the Sanitation Districts of Los Angeles County - which granted the group about \$29,000 this year - although other sponsors include LAcarGuy and the Johnson Ohana Charitable Foundation.

Grades of Green affiliates say the total cost of the Trash-Free Lunch Challenge is about \$4,000 per school, or \$68,000 altogether for this year's program.

Grades of Green spokeswoman Melissa Bailey says becoming environmentally friendly saves schools money. She estimates that the Trash-Free Lunch program saves each school \$2,500 to \$5,000 a year in reduced costs for trash collection and even liner bags. Families, she added, save up to \$300 packing trash-free lunches, which might include using lunchboxes instead of paper bags, for instance, or reusing water bottles instead of using a fresh one daily.

On Tuesday, a panel of judges toured the campuses of the competition's three finalists: Lunada Bay, as well as Riviera Elementary in Torrance and Washington Elementary in Redondo Beach. As the winner, Lunada Bay - whose campus enjoys sweeping views of the Pacific Ocean - received \$1,000. The two runners-up will each receive \$750. (The prize money comes from another sponsor, Chevron.)

Schools can sign up for the contest only if they new to the program, which



Judge Alisha Auringer, left, takes notes during tour of Washington Elementary in Redondo Beach. (Robert Casillas / Staff Photographer)

is called "Trash-Free Tuesdays" because it encourages schools to sort waste at least once a week, though some schools - like Lunada Bay - do it every day. So in a sense, in the ideal world, the contest will one day be unnecessary because all schools will be "Trash-Free Tuesday" participants.

Thus far, the program is most successful in Los Angeles County's South Bay region, which claimed 13 of this year's 17 entrants. Five entrants alone came from Torrance Unified.

Among the panel of judges who visited the three schools this week was Rupam Soni, a public information officer for the Sanitation Districts of Los Angeles County. She said the most difficult part of the judging task is picking a winner among such a dedicated field of candidates.

"We see trash-sorting systems, composting in place that can be sustained year after year after year, we see young students engaged in the process and making sure that it's happening," she said. "All these schools that are participating in the challenge are winners. "