

Schools tackle Trash Free Lunch Challenge

Kelsey Fowler

CITYWIDE — Sticky chocolate milk cartons show up in plenty of school trashcans, but educators are hoping to teach some Santa Monica students more about living green.

The fourth-annual Trash Free Lunch Challenge from environmental education nonprofit Grades of Green aims to get students to recycle, reuse and reduce when it comes to lunch waste.

Three Santa Monica-Malibu Unified School District schools are participating in this year's challenge – Roosevelt Elementary and John Adams and Lincoln Middle Schools. There are 24 total schools competing.

John Adams Middle School assistant principal Yusuf Allahjah said it was a very personal undertaking for him, growing up in the projects of Brooklyn, New York and seeing trash everywhere as a kid. The amount of trash left behind after his students ate was concerning, he said.

“There are 30-something trash cans in the middle school quad area, and I had less trash cans in my entire neighborhood growing up,” he said. “But the kids will be sitting five feet away [from a trash can] and still leave behind trash on the tables or throw it on the floor.”

Emily Gee, Grades of Green marketing coordinator, said the program empowers kids and the whole school community to care for the environment.

“[It] teaches students about the important of waste reduction, and how and why we bring reusable items, sort our waste, compost and recycle,” she said.

The participating schools challenge students to eliminate trash by packing reusable items such as lunch containers, water bottles, utensils and even napkins. Students, including those who buy lunch at school, are also taught how to sort waste by recycling and composting.

The Trash Free Lunch Challenge team will present to the JAMS students this week, Allahjah said, and hopefully formulate a workable plan to move forward and get the community on board.

“There’s no such place as ‘away,’” he said. “Your trash goes someplace. It’s about making them mindful, to think about your actions and how it affects other people.”



Through a combination of sorting and packing trash-free lunches, the schools last year achieved a 70 percent average lunchtime waste diversion rate.

“Every small act can make a big difference,” Gee said. “We hope the students learn environmental habits they will carry for a lifetime.”

In the last three years, the challenge resulted in 71,000 bags of trash diverted from landfills and thousands of dollars saved in waste-hauler pick ups.

Winning schools in the past have diverted up to 90 percent of their waste, Gee said. She said the entire school community tends to get involved to help the school reach waste reduction and protect the environment.

“It’s great to see principals, parents, custodians, students coming together around a common goal,” Gee said. “We see great progress in not only waste reduction, but more importantly a change in the entire school community’s outlook on the importance of ... caring for our environment.”

The competition lasts through the year as the schools work on perfecting their trash-free programs. Grades of Green selects three finalists, and then a panel of environmental experts evaluate the implementation and success of those trash reduction programs. The winning school receives a \$1,000 education grant grand prize, while second and third receive \$750 and \$500 respectively.

Allahjah said his school, for instance, has bins, but the students don’t use the recycling or sorting options.

“There’s a lot of unrealized potential,” he said.

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