

The Future Is Green

Educating the next (green) generation

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In cafeterias all over Los Angeles, students get ready for lunch by pulling cloth napkins and refillable water bottles out of their reusable lunch bags.

It's a stark contrast from the plastic sandwich bags, juice cartons and paper napkins that would've filled disposable paper bags just a few years earlier. Today, when students are done eating, they scrape their food scraps into the compost, sort their clean and empty plastic containers into recycling bins and toss the rest of their waste into a container labelled "landfill" in their school's customized sorting station. These students are at one of 25 Los Angeles schools participating in a year-long Trash Free Lunch Challenge. On average, they'll reduce their lunchtime trash by 70 percent over the course of the year.

Grades of Green

The Trash Free Lunch Challenge is one program run by [Grades of Green](#), a non-profit organization and Lush [Charity Pot partner](#) that provides resources and support to educate students on environmental issues.

"[We're] trying to make environmental education and going green at school as fun and easy as possible," says Emily Gee, Senior Program Manager. Any school anywhere in the world can register with Grades of Green to get access to their free resources and programs: they currently work with 400,000 students from roughly 530 schools across 12 countries.



Exercises like the Trash Free Lunch Challenge teach students to be conscious of their role in creating waste, and can quickly change habits around single-use disposable packaging, which makes up the overwhelming majority of the waste found in nature. “Kids...are the future leaders of our world, so when we’re caring for the environment and thinking about how...to create a positive environment, it is the next generation that can help do that,” Gee says. “Whether students go on to be a scientist, or a congresswoman or a teacher...they’ll be carrying those intrinsic environmental values and they’ll be brought into everyday culture.”

Original programming

“Grades of Green...inspires and empowers kids to protect the environment, and we’re so excited to do that through three main programs,” Gee says. The core program is a toolkit of activities relating to water, waste, energy, air pollution and toxin reduction. Students and schools choose activities that they’re passionate about, and they partner up with a Grades of Green advisor to implement them.

The other two main programs are focused on the Los Angeles area, where Grades of Green got its start. In the Youth Corps Eco-Leadership program, 60 fourth to twelfth grade students are given one-on-one guidance and coaching to make them environmental experts and leaders. “Each student takes a Grades of Green activity that they’re personally really passionate about and then our staff mentor them throughout one school year as they implement that activity. So kids can take energy conservation, waste reduction...whatever they’re really excited about and then we help by giving them the leadership skills to make that activity happen,” says Allie Bussjaeger, Senior Program Manager. Throughout the school year, Youth Corps students participate in meet-ups, receive guidance and leadership training from Grades of Green staff and make friends with other passionate students.

Grades of Green’s last program evolved out of one of their most popular waste reduction activities, Trash Free Lunches. “It helps schools set up a comprehensive waste reduction program to show kids all the things that we can do to take action to make less trash,” explains Bussjaeger. “This activity was so popular that we decided to make a competition out of it for local schools in Los Angeles.”

What emerged was the Trash Free Lunch Challenge. And since the challenge began in 2011, 227,000 bags of trash have been diverted from landfills!

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With what they learn through Grades of Green programs, students are empowered to affect change on topics they're passionate about. As a passionate eighth grader and Youth Corps member in Long Beach, California, Antonio implemented a No Idle Zone at his school to improve air quality for himself and his classmates.

What started as a green initiative at his middle school quickly caught the attention of other schools, which began to follow suit. Within three years, Antonio had worked with local policymakers to make No Idle Zones the new norm not only in Long Beach, but all over the state. Passed in August 2016, Resolution ACR 160 encourages all California schools to implement No Idle Zones. The story doesn't end there: No Idle Zone resolutions have now been passed in more than 20 states, with similar legislation popping up in municipalities in Canada, Britain and Australia. Now Antonio's in eleventh grade, and he hopes to have this resolution taken to the next level and passed as a law.

By coaching and developing students to tackle environmental issues, Grades of Green has built a network of highly engaged youth with the skills and knowledge to make changes at school, at home and in their communities.

"When kids talk, people listen. They have this incredible power to create change because their intentions are so pure," Bussjaeger says. "Kids want a clean environment for no other agenda than that's what the earth deserves."

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