

Lessons in recycling not going to waste

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TRAVERSE CITY -- Green is becoming a way of life at The Children's House school where even a trip to the trash can has become a learning experience.

"We are recycling more than just paper, we recycle everything -- cardboard, glass, every kind of plastic," said Nicole Blakkan-Esser, a fifth-year student at the independent Montessori school, where every effort is made to reduce the amount of trash sent to local landfills.

"It is not whether or not something can be recycled, but what bin it goes in," said head of school Michele Shane, noting that some classrooms have gone to no trash can at all.

The schoolwide effort, referred to as "extreme recycling," is already showing significant results.

"We have gone from a 4-yard Dumpster to a 2-yard Dumpster and hope to get down to a family tote per week by the end of the school year," said Shane, who credits working with Bay Area Recycling for Charities for the school's giant leap forward in recycling.

The waste reduction is also due, in large part, to the school's effort to compost all of its food and organic refuse.

"We figure we will keep four tons of food waste out of the landfill over the school year," said Shane, who includes every grade level in green initiatives.

Fifth-year students made presentations to students at all age levels, as well as parents and staff members, on the contributions they can make toward the school's successful green plan.

"We made a presentation to the parents with a lot of facts, the good stuff, the bad stuff and what they can do to help," Blakkan-Esser said.

"We just wanted to show everyone how easy it is to keep the earth beautiful," said 10-year-old Cara Ferguson, who helped write a story and performed in a play to inform younger students of their role in reducing the school's landfill footprint.

Recycling in the classroom means using items that would previously have been cast off.

"We use extra printer paper to write our rough drafts and for drawing, and we recycle anything plastic," Ferguson said.

In addition to processing its own recyclables, the school regularly holds earth-friendly collection drives for everything from disposable batteries to wire coat hangers and cell phones.

"You would be surprised how many wire hangers are out there," said Shane, who noted that earth science, conservation and stewardship have always been an integral part of The Children's House curriculum.

In keeping with that philosophy, the on-campus greenhouse is a hands-on classroom where students not only use their composted waste to grow and tend various vegetables and herbs, but then turn the food into meals in the campus kitchen.

"From collecting of the material that enriches the soil, to the final result of having a meal you grew and prepared with your own hands, our green initiatives teach children that everything in life is connected," said Shane, who hopes to use heat created by their ever-growing compost system to heat the greenhouse during winter months, keeping it off the electrical grid.

"Aside from the great benefit of being green for the planet, this is a great learning experience for our students," Shane said.

Students like Ferguson and Blakkan-Esser are taking the lessons they have learned at school and applying them at home as well.

"We realized how much more we could be doing at home and we are going to start composting," said Ferguson, noting that her family has recycled "from day one."

Shane is excited to see the way green initiatives have been embraced by her students and their families but has ideas for becoming even more eco-friendly.

"It is a matter of taking all the big ideas and biting off a chunk at a time, just the recycling and compost program is a huge start," Shane said.

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Nicole Blakkan-Esser and Cara Ferguson, students at The Children's House, add organic waste to the compost bin. Record-Eagle