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Rheem Going Green

By T.R. Audley



Rheem students pack-up plastic bags Photo provided

Rheem Elementary School is being recognized for their efforts to "go green." Over the past year, students, teachers, parents and administrators have more than met the challenge to do better for the environment. "Every little bit helps," says Principal Elaine Frank. So she and her staff look for opportunities to recycle...and cash in on their efforts, too.

During 2008, in their second year of participating in Wal-Mart's "Kids Recycling Challenge" for plastic bag reclamation, Rheem School was awarded 1st place in the San Francisco Bay Region for most bags collected. Being the overall winner meant that they took home the first prize pot of \$3,000. Rheem's effort, however, added up even before the winner was decided. Through the Wal-Mart program, \$5 is available to schools for each 60-gallon bag filled with the used plastic bags. With 295 bags filled, Rheem earned \$1,475 dollars even before the grand prize was awarded.

Before plastic, however, a bigger waste concern on campus is paper. So by communicating with parents through e-newsletters and a school phone messenger system, Rheem cuts paper waste each week. "We estimate that we are saving cases of paper each year, thereby helping ease the strain on both our budget AND our planet," says Frank. And parents don't worry that important announcements from their child's teacher will be lost in their child's backpack either. Email addresses were collected in each classroom at back to school night so that teachers can send class announcements electronically.

In addition to work on campus, Rheem is leaning on parents for recycling education at home. The school asks parents to elevate commonplace blue recycling bin by talking about its importance with their kids. Parents are also asked to reduce children's lunch waste and visit the Contra Costa County Solid Waste Authority website for more ideas on ways to reduce waste.

For Rheem's efforts, the CCC Waste Authority has recognized the school as well. Since 2002, Rheem students and staff have been dubbed exemplary "Waste busters" by the Authority for their understanding and practice of recycling. In 2008, they were brought into the "Waste busters Leadership Circle," a distinction that will award the school \$1,200 annually for continued efforts to reduce school waste. In addition, Rheem 5th graders were invited to be among the first in the Bay Area to visit the newly opened CCCWA Materials Recovery Facility in Benicia.

Bess Inzeo, a teacher at Rheem, was instrumental in designing the field trip.

"We are very proud of Ms. Inzeo's work on this project," says Frank. As a result of her involvement, Rheem students were asked to provide field trip feedback to help make the experience more successful for future visitors.

Rheem's "greening" work continues this year as a new school garden takes shape. Planting and harvesting are planned for spring 2009.

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