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Environmental Education Gaining New Momentum

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Preserving natural beauty, protecting wildlife, conserving resources, reducing pollution, and other environmental goals are hard for individuals to accomplish on their own, so significant progress in these areas often requires legislation. However, implementation of the legislation, usually in the form of environmental regulation, requires the cooperation of individuals. Moreover, legislators are elected, and generally act, only as a result of the actions of individuals.

Therefore, advocates for the environment, non-profit organizations with environmental missions, and public agencies with environmental mandates focus on alerting individuals to the need for environmental protections and try to motivate individuals to take actions for the environment. Schools are one area where environmental education is most influential.

School districts in Ventura County have long included environmental education in their curriculum, and most of this education tends to focus on hands-on activity. For example, Oak Park Unified School District's annual Sustainability Fair includes opportunities for students to build solar toy cars, create craft projects with reused materials, plant and bring home seeds and garden cuttings in pots, and bring home owl box kits for construction. Older students and their parents are allowed to test drive electric bicycles and electric cars, and parents are also given water-conserving devices and landscape management consultations (by the area's water purveyor).

Few school districts have resources and volunteers comparable to Oak Park, and recycling drives are not sufficient to make up the difference, but schools are increasingly incorporating another hands-on activity to reduce waste and conserve resources. In compliance with the mandates of Assembly Bill 1826, which requires businesses, schools, and others generating more than four cubic yards of organic (biodegradable) waste per week to join composting programs, schools and public agencies are organizing programs to reduce food waste. Local students sort food scraps for separate collection, and cafeteria staff sometimes send pre-consumer vegetable scraps from the kitchens to on-site school garden composting bins.

The resulting waste reduction is significant. For example, students at Mesa Elementary School in Somis used to fill eight trash cans (32 gallons) per day during lunch hour, and they now do not even fully use two cans.

Litter clean-up events provide another opportunity for hands-on learning. In preparation of yesterday's California Coastal Clean-up event, last week 75 students from Rio del Norte Elementary School in Oxnard (El Rio), spent over two hours cleaning Ormond Beach then returned to classrooms to create charts and graphs helping them analyze the

1,626 pieces of trash; 762 cigarette butts were the largest type of litter collected. Teachers dramatized the lesson with an aquarium display containing water, cooking oil, and toy animals, as they taught about the trash gyres in the ocean.

Larry Kelman, one of the fourth grade teachers organizing the event, says a new school opening adjacent to the Santa Clara River next year plans to take environmental education to a higher level. Teachers and administrators are working with water districts, public agencies, and non-profits to incorporate environmental education into many aspects of the science, technology, engineering, arts and math curriculum of the upcoming Rio STEAM Academy.

With successful environmental education, a future generation of leaders is likely to make the environment a priority.

Notes:

A new k-8 school will be opening next Fall on Santa Clara River, new partnership with a Water Districts, Fish and Wildlife Service, Chumash elder (story telling in the classroom, used to be a Chumash Village), Surfrider, and other environmental groups. for demonstrations in classrooms. The three teachers involved in this will have more of an environmental emphasis.

Groundbraking was last week.

Rio Steam Academy, STEM plus arts.

Raised ground to prevent potential flooding. Water detention basin on site.

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