

Sierra Heights school lunch leftovers fed to the worms, for the environment

BY ANDREW FICKES

Sierra Heights Elementary School students are feeding their lunch leftovers to the worms, but it's not a commentary on the quality of the food. It's part of a pilot project aimed at reducing landfill waste and raising awareness of environmental issues.

The project is the brainchild of Brian Teppner, who teaches a fourth and fifth grade combination class at Sierra Heights. The idea is for the students to help their school reduce the amount of waste exported from the cafeteria to the landfill.

Teppner, a National Board Certified teacher, was once a professional landscaper and said the idea for the classroom project came to him when he first started teaching at Sierra Heights eight years ago.

"It's been something I've wanted to be involved in for some time, but just hadn't found time to do it," he says. "One of my daughters is in my class this year, though, so it just felt right to take it on. I wanted to be a role model as a dad and as a teacher."

To get the ball rolling, Teppner approached King County Solid Waste's Green Schools program last spring for assistance.

The Green Schools program, which started as a resource to schools in the greater Seattle area in 2004, helps schools with waste reduction and energy and water conservation.

"Our focus is on the reduction of biomass going into the landfill," says Teppner of his school's efforts.

To finance Sierra Heights' pilot program, Teppner qualified for an \$8,000 grant from the state Department of Ecology. He also received funding from the PTSA. The Green School's program will provide up to 80 percent of the recycling containers and also recycling labels informing students and staff what can and cannot be recycled.

In January, Sierra Heights installed a vermicomposter behind the staff parking lot. In the vermicomposter, worms will eat away the food waste and provide compost for the school's soil. The worm



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Teacher Brian Teppner and students Jeremy Thiessen, left, and Derrick Demers sift through food items for the worms.

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supply will grow to as many as 50,000 worms. Teppner says it takes a pound of worms, which is 2,000 worms, to consume a half a pound of food.

"Food waste composes about 30 to 50 percent of the school's garbage at Sierra Heights," said Green School's director Dale Alekel. "Students will be diverting the food waste from the lunchroom garbage into the vermicomposter, reducing food waste. It's a wonderful educational tool."

At each of the five lunch periods, Teppner says, four students will guide their peers in a uniform process of emptying liquids, recycling, emptying appropriate food waste for the worms, and dumping the rest in the garbage. There will be a container for each. Students will measure what is collected.

"Students will slowly learn what is good to bring to lunch, based on what is recyclable or edible for the worms," Teppner says. "We'll learn which hot lunches incur a lot of waste and cut back on those. It will be totally student-run. That's important to me."

By spring of 2009, Teppner says his grant will expire and he'll report to the

Department of Ecology on what the school learned and if the program would be applicable for other schools.

"Part of the end product is educating others and replicating the process elsewhere," he says.

An ultimate goal for Teppner is to use the compost from the worms to fertilize a school garden where vegetables and herbs would be grown. He imagines a 10-foot by 15-foot garden to start.

"I'd like our students to grow crops and give to the local food bank," he says.

Nanci Davis, Sierra Heights' principal, is a great supporter of the program, believing wholeheartedly in the value to the students.

"We need to conserve and recycle and it's for the benefit of all, not just for our school," she says. "We just hope that children become aware and pass it on to their parents. And eventually we would like to see it done throughout the district."

Editor's Note: Do to a technical error in the January issue, parts of this article were garbled. We are reprinting it in its entirety and apologize for the inconvenience.