

Elementary students become Watt Watchers

Spaceship story encourages kids to monitor energy

By June Russell
Emerald Reporter

He begins with a story. "This spaceship is called the H.T. Rae," John Bezelj tells the class of fifth graders at River Road Elementary. "It has enough food, water and air for everyone on board, but each of its systems must be used carefully because there is no extra food, water or air.

"But one group of astronauts, the Uoys, are using up the resources of everyone else, eating all the food and polluting the air," Bezelj continues. "The question is, what are you going to do about it?"

The response from the students is as prompt as it is varied. Some suggest a compost pile to recycle the food as fertilizer. Others want the space police to take the greedy Uoys away. Their classmates like the idea and take it one step further. They want the Uoys locked in a dungeon and tortured.

Bezelj listens to their suggestions and grins. He tells them the rest of the story.

"The H.T. Rae is planet Earth, and the Uoys are you," he tells the class. "This story is to point out that human beings are guilty of using more resources than they need.

"All of the air, water and soil we will ever have is on the Earth now. We are the astronauts on spaceship Earth. It's up to us to take care of our resources.

"The question is," Bezelj tells the class, "what are you going to do?"

Bezelj, energy conservation and recycling education coordinator for Eugene 4J School District, uses the "H.T. Rae" story to train fourth and fifth grade students at the elementary schools to be Watt Watchers, monitors of electricity use and waste at their schools.

The idea is not a new one, but it is one that works. Bezelj's predecessor saw the success of the Watt Watchers program in schools in Texas and California and decided to incorporate it into the conservation program in her own district schools.

Armed with badges and clipboards, Watt Watchers make periodic rounds to



John Bezelj reveals who the greedy 'Uoys' really are to fifth graders at River Road Elementary School.

Photo by Sean Poston

inspect how energy is being used. They leave notes of commendation or gentle reminders to conserve energy in each room.

The program is funded by a \$20,000, two-year grant from the Oregon Department of Energy. District Watt Watchers have already seen a decrease of 25 percent in energy costs in some schools.

M.J. Goewey, fifth-grade teacher at River Road Elementary, found the Watt Watchers program works well with her own theme of helping our planet Earth. The idea is two-fold: to integrate standard subjects, like writing or math into exercises in conservation, and to incorporate energy conservation and recycling into daily practices at home. Both the students and their teacher are all for it.

"It's more hands-on, more real life that they can apply at home," she said. "Texts are great, but whenever a kid can get involved in hands-on activities,

it sticks."

The students also prefer hands-on activities to tests. As Luke Guinn, one of the students said, "We like the fun stuff. It's very cool, man."

Classmate August Boyer agreed. "It's nice to have someone come in and teach us this stuff. I like to recycle."

Future conservation awareness activities will include the continuation of Earth Log, in which students apply conservation suggestions at home and report on their findings. Another activity will teach the children to read the kilowatt meter at home and try to conserve energy there as well.

"We're going to have the child be their own Watt Watcher at home," Bezelj said. "It makes the child feel responsible, and that's important. They also save their family money on their energy bills, and that's pretty neat.

"Can you imagine how much this community can save using the schools

as a springboard?" Bezelj said. "That's the concept of having kids take the education home and teaching their parents. That's my idea of real education, if they can apply it."

Since the inception of the district's conservation and recycling program in 1985, the district has experienced increased public support, lowered fuel costs, increased staff and student involvement in conservation efforts and increased environmentally responsible operations.

Actual savings in reduced consumption of five utilities totaled \$78,227 during the 1989-90 school year. Some \$19,556 went back to the schools, in rebates ranging from \$91 to \$1,789.

The students, Bezelj said, are what make the conservation program work.

"They're vital. They're the whole program," Bezelj said. "You start the kids out young and they grow up responsible citizens."

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