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Carbon-Curbing Kids

Thanks to one eco-friendly mom, these students are cutting back on enough carbon to offset hundreds of cars—which gives a whole new meaning to the term “off-roading.”

BY JENNY JEDEIKIN

In a classroom at Bacich Elementary School in northern California, a group of second graders gathers to make holiday wrap from recycled paper, forgoing the usual recess games of dodgeball and jump rope. A woman in front of the classroom holds up a sheet of paper decorated with sponge-painted snowflakes. “Most paper you buy from a store comes from trees. I call that tree-to-trash,” she says. “Not very green. So, who can tell me why this paper is better?”

A seven-year-old boy raises his hand. “Reused paper is better for the earth because it doesn’t make as much garbage,” he says. “Too much garbage makes everyone too hot, which isn’t good for the world.”

As members of Bacich Elementary’s Green Team, these seven-year-olds are taking part in Cancel-a-Car, a grassroots environmental program launched last spring. The educational project helps children understand the issues of global warming and motivate their families to make changes. It teaches kids that when you take simple actions to save energy at home, it’s just like taking a car off the road for one year. Since it began in February of 2007, Cancel-a-Car has grown to include 25 schools in northern

California. And with nonprofit funding in place, it is poised to spread even further.

The program began when Carleen Cullen, the mother of two elementary-school-aged children, sprang into action after seeing *An Inconvenient Truth*.

“I walked out of that movie and said to myself, ‘If this global warming is real, why isn’t everybody doing something about it?’” says Cullen.

Cancel-a-Car focuses on different eco-initiatives each month, such as eliminating bottled water or reducing junk mail. After completing actions, children fill out coupons indicating how much carbon dioxide they’ve prevented from being released, then add them to their school’s tally. All told, they’ve eliminated over four million pounds of carbon, which means these young eco-warriors have countered the emissions of 344 cars.

“Children love this program,” says Cullen. “That’s what is so inspiring. When I hear the students talking about light bulbs and why compact fluorescents are so much more energy efficient, I realize their scientific knowledge is now way better than my own.”

Geared toward kids in kindergarten through eighth grade, the program kicks off at each new school with a short play featuring characters like Mr. Carbon. Middle school material skews slightly older—a recently introduced game show called *You Want to Save a Polar Bear?*, for instance, takes its cue from *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*. According to Cullen, the kids were so enthusiastic that she spent the show pacing in the back of the auditorium, unsure of how the principal would react to an out-of-control student body. Afterward, Cullen was amazed when the principal told her every teacher had agreed it was hands-down the best assembly in the history of the school.

All the positive feedback has convinced Cullen that if you make your material creative enough, it’s easy to inspire kids of all ages to sign on to save the planet—even the elusive tween audience.

Cancel-a-Car will soon be available nationwide, and anyone interested in bringing it into their school can visit www.cancelacar.org for more information.

