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Billings Schools Get into Green Routines with Smart Recycling Habits

Even though Earth Day has come and gone, the recycling habit is going strong in Billings schools. From the preschoolers at Billings Head Start to the leaders of the MSU-Billings Student Initiated Recycling Program (SIRP), young people are getting into green routines in school buildings throughout the community. And, their efforts are making a real difference by sending thousands of pounds of waste to recycling bins instead of area landfills.

"We pick up at least 9,000 pounds of paper per month just from the twenty-two elementary schools in Yellowstone Valley Citizen Council's (YVCC) recycling program," says Scott Berens, owner of Earth First Aid Curbside Recycling in Billings (www.earthfirstaid.com/). "That's enough paper to fill an Olympic-size swimming pool every school year. Plus we pick up thousands of pounds of other recyclables, such as plastic bottles, aluminum cans, and magazines. We've seen steadily increasing amounts over the past year. The schools have really gotten involved and made the program a huge success."

Following a pilot in spring 2008, YVCC found local businesses and individuals willing to sponsor pickups at the schools. Berens credits the sponsors, including health providers, architect and engineering offices, real estate brokers, hair salons, and banks, with the getting the program up and running. "However, it's really student energy that has made every day Earth Day in these schools. In several schools, 'green teams' of students actually run the program and even help load the sorted items into our trailers. They've learned an impressive amount about recycling and its impact on the environment."

Billings Public School educators agree that students get seriously excited about their responsibility for recycling. "Our middle school students are fundamental to every effort of the Go Green Castle Rock Recycling Club," says teacher Randy Chase. "We used a student/teacher-produced video at our assembly on Earth Day 2008, and they have recycled literally tons of materials since then." Sandy Abraham, a fourth grade teacher at Miles Avenue Elementary, agrees. "Our Green Team members participate in every part of our program, from educating students and teachers about the importance of recycling to collecting materials throughout the school." Here are Abraham's tips on making school recycling a success:

- **Tap into students' desire to help:** Children like to know that they personally can do important things to help protect the environment. They actually enjoy their job assignments, like collecting recyclables from the classrooms on pickup day.
- **Encourage them to teach others about recycling:** Students love to create posters as everyday reminders to recycle or for special events. They can also do very persuasive presentations for classes, as well as for teacher and parent meetings.
- **Make recycling fun and meaningful:** Allow students to decorate recycling bins or to create a recycling theme song for their class. Integrate recycling into classroom lessons, such as graphing the amounts of various items recycled over time.

"There's no doubt that recycling is a success at Miles Avenue Elementary," notes Ms. Abraham. "Recently, our school was able to decrease our garbage pickup from 3 times a week to just twice! We're now looking for more ways to get families involved in our green efforts. In May, we are sponsoring an event for hard-to-recycle items, like batteries and electronics."

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