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Students honored for environmental efforts

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Free Press Staff Report

Officials from the federal Environmental Protection Agency visited Browns River Middle School in Jericho to recognize the students' efforts to make their school sustainable, and to announce funding for the installation of advanced pollution control equipment on school buses.

Through the \$194,494 grant the EPA awarded to the Vermont Agency of Natural Resources, more than two dozen school bus operators from around the state can use the money to install advanced pollution control equipment.

Wednesday's event was the culmination of a yearlong effort by the students to curb solid waste, increase recycling and reduce excessive bus idling. What began as an effort by a small group of seventh-graders to address the school's recycling habits became a schoolwide crusade that helped the school reduce its solid waste by half.

The group calling itself SOM -- Sustainability is Our Mission -- gave other students an incentive to recycle by having Principal Nancy Guyette agree to let the students use the money saved by reducing waste to pave the school's basketball court.

The students also organized a creative recycling bin contest in which the bins were decorated with reused materials, created a "school stomp" for students to compact their classes' trash, and significantly reduced the amount of paper waste and solid waste collected at the school.

Emboldened by their success, the students decided to take on another challenge: idling.

Representing the school, five seventh-graders went to Montpelier in February to ask the Legislature to ban idling by buses on school grounds. Testifying before the House Natural Resources Committee, the students said idling wastes fuel and money, pollutes the air and affects public health. Vermont's 1,800 school buses burn 13,500 gallons of diesel while idling an average of about five minutes as they wait to load students each afternoon, the students said.

The class followed up its testimony by writing letters to all 150 legislators and are tracking the bill as it moves through the legislative process.

"It's been a wonderful process for them to understand how it all works," seventh-grade teacher Patty Brushett said.

Brushett said the SOM students were innovative in implementing changes in the school. They not only educated their classmates through mini-tutorials during morning meetings, but also became mentors to their teachers by explaining what could be recycled in the classrooms and periodically checking on their progress.

"I think it's really empowering to them," Brushett said. Darren Allen, spokesman for the Vermont ANR, said efforts like those of the Browns River Middle School students is important because it establishes lifelong habits of sustainability.

"They basically undertook this effort on their own, educated their teachers and community, and then brought their message to the Statehouse," Allen said. "It not only helps the cause, but we think it's crucial."