

Turlock kids taking action against idling to improve air quality

By Nan Austin

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TURLOCK - Bad air can make kids sick, from itchy eyes to cancer, Alondra Zaragoza told her classmates.

"Think about it. This is the air that we breathe. Do you want to be polluting it?" fellow sixth-grader Genesis Ellis asked them.

Burning fuel from oil and coal create air pollution, Rocco Perez explained.

The three are student body officers at Walter Brown Elementary School in Turlock, where students took part in sixth-grade science projects around air pollution. They shared their reports as part of an assembly Thursday put on by the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

The assembly was a tip of the hat to Turlock Unified School District's longtime efforts to reduce the impact of smog and pollution on student health, the goal of the air district's Healthy Air Living Schools program.

The free program includes the Real-time Air Advisory Network, a 24-hour service of real-time localized air quality information throughout the valley. The information includes a color-coded Real-Time Outdoor Activity Risk guideline for outdoor exercise, colors Walter Brown fifth- and sixth-graders instantly recognized as air board staffer Anthony Presto quizzed them during the assembly.

The point of having students learn about air quality is to make a better world in the future, Presto told students, "so things will be better for you and your kids."

Turlock's been on top of this for a long time. Gil Ogden, Turlock Unified School District director of student services

Turlock schools use the RAAN updates and color codes. Kids stay indoors during hours when air quality is bad (red) and children with asthma or other health issues get a close watch when the indicator calls for caution (yellow), said Brown Principal Luisa Salinas.

Healthy air is something of a cause at Brown Elementary, where eight teachers received \$250 mini-grants to fund anti-air pollution educational projects from the Central California Asthma Collaborative.

"Turn the key, be idle-free!" the assembly crowd chanted.

The air district and collaborative have partnered in a campaign against cars sitting with their engines running, a particular problem at schools, said organization spokeswoman Destiny Rodriguez.

"Idling is something we're seeing a lot of health issues with," she said. The collaborative gave out 60 mini-grants throughout the valley, she said.

Valley air problems have long been associated with higher incidence of asthma and upper respiratory infections, especially for children.

In California, school buses must be turned off when stopped at a school until 30 seconds before they leave, and cannot idle for longer than five minutes when stopped within 100 feet of a school.

Turlock Unified started making hourly air checks in 2007. At the time, the district was using a flag to signal when a bad air day was forecast, but that kept kids indoors the full day, said Roger Smith, district safety coordinator.

"It was just a forecast that somewhere in Stanislaus County air would be bad sometime during the day. But in the early morning hours it could be perfectly fine," Smith said after the assembly. He began searching hourly updates at area air monitoring stations and sending out email alerts if ozone or other levels got high.

In the summer, the worst time for air pollution can often be midafternoon. In the winter, low-lying clouds or fog can cause problems early in the day. Either way, the time of day kids are out running at recess or exercising in PE makes a difference.

Also time-sensitive are weather alerts the district issues, for extreme heat or cold, or severe storms. Thunderstorms cause children to be pulled back inside and, at the high schools, out of the pools.

Red alerts are rare, Smith said, usually only happening when there is a forest fire in the hills. There is also a too-dangerous-for-anyone air level – purple. “I tell people it’s like the volcano going off,” he said.

Turlock Unified adopts program to improve air quality

By Alysson Aradas

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Fifth and sixth graders at Brown Elementary School received an air quality lesson on Thursday as part of the Healthy Air Living Schools Program, which has been adopted by Turlock Unified School District to prioritize student health and safety.

A number of students, however, did not need the morning lesson to understand the harmful effects of air pollution.

“Not only is air pollution affecting humans and animals but it is affecting the plants and as I recall the plants give us air. If there is a lot of pollution, then we would be losing our air as well,” said sixth grader Rocco Perez. “So please stop smoking and littering because even the smallest things have the biggest impacts.”

Turlock Unified School District was awarded a \$1,400 grant to implement the Healthy Air Living Schools Program, which is a multipronged outreach effort that offers support and tools to help Valley schools make informed decisions about outdoor activities in relation to air quality. The funding can be used to support Health Air Quality Education projects, including awareness posters, books or computer programs, and signs that alert parents to not let cars idle.

“We are so happy that the whole Turlock school district is involved in Healthy Air Living Schools,” said San Joaquin Valley Air District Outreach and Communications Representative Anthony Presto. “There is nothing more important than protecting public health, especially the health of children whose lungs are still developing.”

“TUSD as a district is doing its part to protect our students’ health and safety,” added TUSD Director of Student Services Gil Ogden.

The Healthy Air Living Schools Program is made up of two components: the Real-Time Air Advisory Network and the NO Idling campaign. With the most up-to-date hourly air quality information from the nearest air monitor, RAAN helps schools and individuals make decisions on whether it is acceptable for outdoor activities by classifying current air quality levels.

These five designations range from Level 1 (Green), which has no restrictions, to Level 5 (Purple), which is assigned to air quality that is considered hazardous. Everyone should avoid outdoor activity when air quality levels are at Level 5.

“Our job is to make sure that we monitor the air 24 hours a day, seven days a week for everyone who lives in the San Joaquin Valley,” said Gustine Mayor and Valley Air District Board Member Dennis Brazil. “Our air is very, very critical to all of us.”

The NO Idling campaign encourages students to talk to their parents about the hazards of idling vehicles. Among other adverse effects, engines left idling pump a large amount of harmful pollution into the air, which poses a threat to student health, and can affect asthma and various long-term health effects.

“The message is simple: While you wait for your child, please turn off your engine,” the Healthy Air Living Schools program website states. “Idling for more than 10 seconds uses more fuel than turning off the engine and restarting it.”

For more information on the Healthy Air Living Schools Program, visit healthyairliving.com/your-school/halschoolsprogram.htm.