

Message of clean air hits home at Hidahl Elementary

By Nan Austin

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CERES - A light harvest haze of dust and a slightly acrid scent of wildland fires wafting on a crisp breeze lent atmosphere to the art project at Hidahl Elementary's after-school program, where a group of kids leaned over a large poster, illustrating ways to improve the Ceres air.

The indoor activity Wednesday served two purposes. First, creating an artistic backdrop for an upcoming school assembly on Healthy Air Living Schools. Second, providing an alternative for students with respiratory issues, because Wednesday was a bad day for sensitive groups to go outside to play.

There are 71 kids at Hidahl with asthma, 15 percent of the school, Principal Vaughn Williams told students at the Thursday assembly.

That compares to a nationwide average of 10 percent of children, by federal figures. Asthma in children is higher across the San Joaquin Valley, where its geographic bowl tends to trap pollutants.

"We had some of our students come in during the recesses (Wednesday)," Williams said. "On really bad days our P.E. teachers are instructed to keep the students inside."

Like other Ceres Unified schools, Hidahl checks air quality throughout the day and puts up a color-coded flag for healthy and unhealthy days. As quality falls, the campuses shift to indoor recess and to move physical education into the cafeteria, where kids play games or work on sports skills.

"They're ready to go at the drop of a dime," said Brian Murphy, Ceres Unified coordinator of student support services. The schools use the Real-time Air Advisory Network, a free program of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

Signs in the parking lot urge parents to turn off their motors while waiting for kids after school and the well-attended after-school programs train Clean Air Champions.

While grown-ups debate the politics of reducing pollution, kids at Hidahl are trying to do something about it.

"We should tell our parents (to not idle). It's important, because we're not the ones driving. We don't have the driver's license," said fifth-grader Natalia Armas-Perez, 10, after the assembly. "They should turn off the car while they're waiting."

Riding bikes to school would help the air, said classmate Emaly Fernandez, adding that it would also be good exercise.

"I think we could help clean the air by not using our fireplace as much. We could use the heater instead of a fireplace. They work the same," fifth-grader Lily Smith said.

Anthony Presto, the school outreach lead for the air district, said he hopes all those great ideas will find their way into art submissions for the annual calendar, due by Oct. 3. Presto urged students to think about all the ways people could make the air cleaner, and start drawing.