

# Composting taught by WSU students

*Future educators teach Lincoln Middle School children to compost*



Dean Hare/Daily News

A view of the fresh compostables added to the bin at Lincoln Middle School on Friday in Pullman.



**By Estelle Gwin, Moscow-Pullman Daily News**

Six Washington State University students brought composting to Lincoln Middle School this month as part of a statewide initiative.

For two weeks, students in Professor Paul Mencke's College of Education class traveled to Lincoln Middle School daily, first to teach about composting and then to show students how it's done.

In February, Lincoln began working on the Washington Green Schools project, which challenges the state's schools to practice sustainable habits. The middle school quickly caught on to recycling but reached out to WSU for help to make composting cool.

"They were struggling to get it off the ground so we came in to get the ball rolling," said Katie Vetter, an agricultural education major at WSU.

Using classroom games and videos the college students taught sixth, seventh and eighth graders how to compost their lunch leftovers. Slowly, they started to catch on.

"The first day was hard because they're so used to throwing stuff away," said Andrew Larsen, a history education student at WSU. "We're a wasteful society so understanding they could use garbage for something else was hard for them to get past, but more and more they got used to it."

The college course that inspired the composting project emphasizes the importance of getting young students involved in their community.

"We want students to actually care for what they're learning about and that comes with bringing the community into classrooms," Mencke said.

Lincoln's collaboration with WSU is an example of Mencke's "participatory action research projects," where students identify a problem and try to solve it as future educators.

"The beautiful part is it's the students that drive these projects," Mencke said. "It's their interest and they've taken it way beyond what I thought was possible."

Vetter said community involvement is becoming increasingly important to the education profession and was glad to learn from her experience.

"It's really important for kids to see they can make a difference, even though they're young," Vetter said. "With composting they're making a difference in the amount of waste their school produces and they're making a difference in the environment."

Linda Jovanovich, the middle school's library media center coordinator, collected data on how much the students had cut down on waste since they joined the Washington Green Schools project.

Before they began recycling and composting, 100 percent of the waste produced by Lincoln's 550 students was thrown into the garbage, resulting in more than 700 pounds of garbage.

After they began sorting their trash into recycling, garbage and compost, 215 pounds went to recycling and 71 pounds went into the compost pile, leaving 424 pounds of garbage.

"We're hoping that since we were here for two weeks it will keep going," Vetter said.

She said they came to the middle school's lunch hours and rewarded students who consistently composted by having them bring in an old T-shirt, which they would stamp with a "go Lincoln, go green" logo.

"We want to push the idea of using everything and reusing everything and buying less stuff," said Bonnie Ayre-Svingen, a seventh- and eighth-grade teacher at Lincoln.

Ayre-Svingen is working with her fellow teachers to continue the compost project after the college students are gone.

"We're trying to develop a habit of mind so it just becomes part of their routine and that's a hard thing to do for any of us but we, as educators, need to make it happen." Ayre-Svingen said.

After collecting the compostable materials in the lunchroom, the college students took it behind the school, where Ed Davis, a technology teacher, built a compost device out of wood pallets and fencing wire. In the future, Ayre-Svingen hopes to get a commercial composter. She also hopes some of the students take their experience home with them.

"The kids are now looking at food as compostable, not just as garbage," Ayre-Svingen said.  
"Hopefully we can start at the school level and parents will see how cool it is."

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