

The Journal News

Students Advocate for Sustainable Development

By Diana Bellettieri

The Journal News--Westchester, Dutchess, Rockland counties, New York

(Original Publication: December 14, 2006)

BREWSTER - Winfield Greene and Thomas Heath moved about Bob's Diner earlier this week with a critical mission: to find ways the 50-year-old village eatery was wasting energy.

They checked seals on refrigerator doors. They scrutinized light bulbs. They examined window insulation, or the lack thereof. Going through a prepared checklist, they left little unattended to.

The team is now putting together recommendations to help the owner boost efficiency, save money and possibly even attract new customers.

"So, do I owe you anything?" owner Tom Sprague asked as the audit was wrapping up.

"No," the inspectors answered with a chuckle.

Although they conducted themselves like seasoned professionals, the auditors were 12-year-olds on a class assignment from Henry H. Wells Middle School.

"I'm impressed, without a doubt. I had no idea how old they were going to be when they first called me," Sprague said. "I'm curious to see what they have to say and what they found out."

In a model conceived by educational consultant and Brewster teacher Scott Beall, students in the class operate as if they are employees of a nonprofit corporation.

DoRight Enterprises Inc., as the fictitious nonprofit is called, was first piloted last year as an enrichment program for seventh- and eighth-graders.

Since then, approximately 300 students have conducted on-site sustainability assessments and offered suggestions to nearly 30 local businesses.

Students in the class also act as lobbyists, researching environmental topics, writing letters to politicians and news organizations, and organizing fundraisers. Students raised about \$350 last year for the World Wildlife Fund and Defenders of Wildlife.

All the while, students use digital cameras to document the progress of the various efforts.

"This is a really risky thing for a teacher to do," Beall said. "But the thing that I've really been inspired by is that if kids feel that what their education is about has a distinct meaning and purpose to it -and they feel that in their gut -then the discipline problems seem to vanish and motivation goes through the roof."

Without any prodding or instruction, a class of eighth-graders yesterday got right down to business on their group projects.

Jenna Leser, for instance, prepared small signs to put next to light switches around the school to remind everyone to turn off the lights when they're not needed.

"We only have 25 right now, but eventually we're going to try to get them into all the rooms," said Leser, 13. "We feel like we're using so much energy with the lights on all the time."

Meanwhile, James Smith talked about his group's plans to organize an Environment Day for younger students. He would also like to get informational brochures about wind energy out to homeowners and businesses.

"Personally, I think a lot of people just don't know about this," said Smith, 14.

Sitting at a computer as he edited a letter about the effects of oil drilling on the environment, 13-year-old Brian McPartland said he and his group expected to send the letter to the secretary of the Department of the Interior by the end of the week.

Last year, state Sen. Vincent L. Leibell, R-Patterson, responded to a letter from McPartland about air and water pollution.

"People care about this stuff," McPartland said. "And it's not just a school project -it's real life."