



Press Release

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La Merced Intermediate Celebrates Going Green Efforts With \$1,000 Grand Prize on Earth Day

MONTEBELLO – Large numbers of empty milk cartons, plastic sandwich bags, and orange peels and apple cores filling trash bins to the brim are a thing of the past at Montebello Unified School District’s La Merced Intermediate School thanks to educators who were successful in teaching students about the benefits of recycling and living green.

La Merced was declared the winner of the sixth annual Trash Free Lunch Challenge run by Grades of Green, an environmental educational nonprofit that shows students how to recycle, reuse and reduce lunchtime waste. The school received a \$1,000 grand prize Friday during Grades of Green’s Earth Day celebration at the school.

La Merced, which reduced trash by 75 percent, was the middle school winner out of 22 Los Angeles area elementary and middle schools during the year-long competition to reduce the most trash.

“This is exciting news for Montebello Unified,” Board of Education President Benjamin Cárdenas said. “This is proof that our students have learned better habits that will protect the environment for years to come. I commend our teachers, staff, and our community partners for teaching them about reducing trash and recycling.”

Through mentoring by Grades of Green staff, La Merced staff and students implemented a customized lunchtime waste reduction program that reduced trash to 10 bags daily, down from an average of 40 bags. The program includes recycling trays, composting of fruit and vegetable scraps, and reducing waste by bringing trash-free lunches when possible.

“La Merced is a shining example of what can be accomplished when students lead the way in creating environmental change in their school community, and we could not be prouder,” Grades of Green Programs Manager Allie Bussjaeger said.

Grades of Green provided La Merced with free educational assemblies, personalized eco-starter kits and waste reduction plans to guide students and staff through the competition. Schools then submit a final application at the end of the school year; the winning entry is based on actual trash reduction, sustainability, integration, and student leadership.

“It’s hard to believe what a small group of students accomplished,” said La Merced seventh grader and Green Trojans Club member Sophia Picon, noting that the trash-recycling group started with 15 to 20 students and grew to around 30. “I want to suggest that they use the money on the drought-tolerant garden we planted last fall.”

Picon writes for the school newspaper and plans to become a journalist someday.

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Grades of Green hosted Friday’s celebration, which included congratulatory speeches by Cárdenas and school officials, entertainment and the grand prize presentation.

“It’s always exciting to see what’s happening in our schools, especially when it comes to seeing student leadership fixing a problem like reducing lunchtime waste,” MUSD Superintendent Susanna Contreras Smith said. “It’s important for us to show our students we support them in everything they’re doing – and what they’re doing now is going to make them future leaders in the community.”

About Grades of Green

Grades of Green is an environmental education nonprofit dedicated to providing parents, students and educators with free, fun and hands-on Grades of Green Activities to inspire and empower students to care for the environment. Anyone wanting to implement sustainability programs can [register their school online](#)—at no cost—to gain access to step-by-step instructions to 40+ Grades of Green Activities, including downloadable lessons, resources, and art work, and measure their environmental progress.

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Montebello Unified School District is a dynamic learning institution employing top-quality educators. It is the combined work of many that allows the District to continue educating more than 30,000 students every year using the 40 Developmental Assets at all of our school sites. It is through everyone’s efforts – students, parents, teachers, staff and administrators – that we are achieving the District’s number one goal of raising student achievement. Learn more online at www.montebello.k12.ca.us.