

# The Millbrook Independent

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## The Cary Institute's Ecosystem Literacy Program in Action

By Carola Lott

As part of the Cary Institute's Ecosystem Literacy Initiative, Cary educators are helping classroom teachers and students in the Rhinebeck School District create a yearly Environmental Scorecard. The idea is to show how much water, food, and energy the school district uses, and how much waste it creates.

Since the beginning of the school year the aim has been to inspire students, from kindergartners to high school seniors, to think of their school as an ecosystem. They are encouraged to find out where the resources they use come from and where they end up and then think about what would have the biggest impact if they wanted to make changes.

Each grade is participating in the eco initiative. The elementary school has focused on how much trash they create and how much water and energy they use. Ms. Berland's third grade has been part of the Cafeteria Waste Project - analyzing the waste the cafeteria produces every day.

What they have discovered is surprising. The cafeteria generates 22,500 pounds of waste every year: 88 lbs of food and 36 lbs of non-recyclables including food trays, zip loc bags, milk cartons and plastic silver ware. Only a paltry 1 lb. of the trash is recyclable.

With the idea of reducing waste by the end of the year, Ms. Berland asked her students for their ideas for ways to have a garbage-free day when the class would produce zero trash. The children had many suggestions, especially for things that can be re-used rather than recycled: handkerchiefs for example, instead of tissues. After all, turning a recyclable into something else takes a lot of energy.

Deedre Kaake has been working with the eighth grade on research papers, videos and other presentations relating to the eco literacy initiative. She and two of her students visited the class with three games they had devised to make the science fun as well as instructive. One illustrated the life cycle of paper, another the consumption of beef and the last the impact of water bottles. On hearing that 1 billion water bottles are transported in the US every week, one student said, "Oh my God."

Ms. Berland believes that if children "can start this in the elementary school, by the time they reach middle school it will have become automatic."



Deedre Kaake explains one of the games devised by her eighth grade class to some of Ms. Berland's third graders. Photo by Carola Lott.