

County supervisor mobilizes future environmental stewards

Stops at elementary school to offer tips on ways students can be more eco-conscious

BY SHANNON BARRY

Santa Clara County Supervisor Dave Cortese knows that teaching students isn't always child's play. So in his ongoing effort to mobilize the next generation of leaders in environmental stewardship, he spoke with Rachel Decker's class of first- and second-grade students at Curtner Elementary School in Milpitas last month — one of several elementary schools he is visiting in his North Valley district.

Decker sat quietly off to the side of the room while Cortese took center stage, playing the role of teacher for 45 minutes. He opened the lesson by translating the complicated politics of elected officials such as himself, elections and city versus county governances at a simplified level the students could more easily understand.

"When you go outside to the neighborhood around your house, what are some of the things you see you think the city or the county might be in charge of? ... Does anybody have a park near your house? So who takes care of that park?"

The class stood silent as he tried to help further his lesson.

"I'll give you a hint. It starts with a t," he said.

"Taxes," many students in the class replied.

Cortese then went on to explain exactly what taxes are, where customers pay taxes and that the funds — paid for by the people — are eventually filtered back to them through services, programs or facilities they utilize.

This is an important concept, Cortese emphasized, because it shows that the government is there for all people.

"So the next time ... if you see some kid break the picnic table at the park or write on it with a marker ... what could you say to that person?" he asked.

Some children took the lesson

a bit literally.

One student replied: "Excuse me, that's mine."

Laughter from the class, Decker and Cortese himself ensued briefly before he tried to continue reaching out to them.

"That is very good," Cortese said. "You could say, 'Excuse me, that's mine and all of ours. That belongs to the people and we pay for it.'"

His stop was one of half a dozen classes he's been to throughout the county so far in the hopes of signing children up for Cortese's Kids Climate Club. Joining is something he calls a simple act that requires no money, but merely pledging to make environmentally friendly changes in their lives.

After explaining politics, he transitioned into the effect global warming can have on all people. Cortese began by breaking apart the definitions of global and warming, and then piecing them together.

"So guess what's happening to the world right now?" Cortese asked.

"Global warming," many students said in unison.

"So let's talk about what happens if the temperature in the world keeps getting warmer and warmer," Cortese said. "There are parts of the world that are supposed to be real cold, right? ... Now what's gonna happen if the world gets warmer and warmer, what's gonna happen to all that ice? ... So if all the snow starts melting and it goes in the oceans and the oceans get more water ... what does that mean? What happens to the land?"

"It overflows," many students said.

"Now I'm not trying to scare all of you ... and so far we have to worry about it raising the water just a little bit at a time," Cortese said. "One inch is a lot to raise the ocean. Even a quarter of an



Santa Clara County Supervisor Dave Cortese speaks with Rachel Decker's class of first- and second-grade students at Curtner Elementary School in Milpitas about climate change.

Photo by Steven Blomquist

inch ... because the water has to go somewhere and it will go on land."

As the water level rises and puts many places underwater, he explained to the students, facilities paid by taxes will be destroyed.

"It might be easy to stop your friend from writing on a picnic table because you can talk him out of it but how are we going to stop global warming?" he asked. "First of all you have to know what's causing it."

He explained the process to them through an analogy.

"If somebody were to leave you in a car, and that's never going to happen to any of you, with all the windows rolled up what's gonna happen?"

The children replied: "It's gonna get hotter."

Being left in a car is similar, Cortese said, to pollution like gas getting into the atmosphere and becoming trapped.

He further explained that each student in the room has the ability to make decisions every day that will help reverse the affects and save the planet over time.

Cortese used a personal experience to explain a simple example. Recently, his 10-year-old son asked if they could go to Walgreens — about half a mile away from their house — to pick up something for school. Cortese said he instinctively grabbed his keys but his son said: "You don't need the car, let's walk."

Cortese argued that it would take longer to get there, but his son said it didn't matter so they walked to Walgreens instead.

Cortese explained why acts like this are important.

"We gotta reverse the pollution and start cleaning things up and it's gonna take a long time," he said. "You can't do that in one day, one year or even by the time you're in fifth grade or sixth grade but we can start doing it right now so that by the time you're elected or you're at your job kids won't have to hear about this problem any more."

Cortese listed the following tips to give the Curtner students an idea of ways they can help:

- Conserving resources such as electricity, water and fuel. Such acts, Cortese said, include turning off the water while brushing your teeth; making sure the heater in your house is turned down to 68 degrees in winter time; not setting the air conditioner below 70 degrees; and turning off the lights when leaving a room.

- Reducing waste by being a smarter consumer. Some instances of this, Cortese said, include using cloth or paper bags when grocery shopping.

- Reusing resources. Recycling products to eliminate the waste going into landfills.

- Encouraging parents and family to follow these environmentally-friendly practices.

- Educating friends and peers on the importance of being environmentally friendly.

"I want to thank you right now because I'm getting too old to do this myself," Cortese said. "Me and your parents we have to go to work every day and we don't have time to talk to enough people to change the way people do things. You do, you do. You have your whole lives ahead of you. I want to thank you right now for saving the planet."

For more information, to join the Climate Kids Club or to schedule a time for Cortese to talk with a class or youth group call Steven Blomquist at 299-5030 or e-mail steven.blomquist@bos.scc.gov.