

Study teaches students to think about recycling

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Graham Jaehnig/Daily Mining Gazette Brian Doughty (l) of the Center for Science & Environmental Outreach at Michigan Tech, and Erika Vye (R) of the Western U.P. Center for Science, Math & Environmental Education, discuss the results of the Garbology study conducted at the Hancock Middle School Tuesday.

HANCOCK — Hancock Middle School's Garbology Waste Stream Study revealed some surprising results for a school in a city where 50 percent of its residents take advantage of curbside recycling. Of a total of 182 pounds of material collected at the school and weighed, almost 72 percent of it was trash, meaning just 27.8 percent of the total was recyclable. Of that percentage, 12.6 percent of it was cardboard and paper. The purpose of the activity was to expose students to critically think about the items they handle before entering them into the waste stream.

"This activity is excellent, because one of the activities that we have in our waste kit that we check out to schools and that we present is the garbage pizza," Brian Doughty, education coordinator at the Center for Science & Environmental Outreach said. "They have a round cardboard pizza circle, and it's (divided) up into percentages by weight; how much we use as a country; and we have all these categories of waste, and then they pick it." Students almost always, overwhelmingly assume plastic as the highest percentage of waste, he said.

Using the garbage pizza as an example of the waste stream, students are startled by the statistics, Doughty said.

"They're really surprised to learn that it's really cardboard and paper products, which makes up 25 or 28 percent of the stuff that we throw away, and that blows their minds," Doughty said.

Typical of similar studies elsewhere, of the 182 pounds of total material collected, just under 8 percent of it was plastic.

Erika Vye, of the Western U.P. Center for Science, Math & Environmental Education (WUPC) said the study is an excellent activity, because it teaches students to look at waste from a different perspective.

"It's great just to do this incrementally," she said, "just to get kids thinking about how things can be sorted out ahead of time."