

Pupils aren't conserving water, study finds

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Elementary and high school pupils in Beit Shemesh no longer conserve water and electricity as a matter of course, according to the results of a citywide survey, part of a new educational initiative.

Sviva Israel ran a program this past semester in 27 recognized Beit Shemesh schools, teaching them about the three Rs - Reduce, Reuse, Recycle - and figuring out their ecological footprint.

The survey was carried out among pupils in 25 of the schools and returned some surprising results, according to Sviva Israel executive director Carmi Wisemon.

"We noticed that there is a lack of education regarding conservation. Recycling and composting has been stressed, but we brought in reducing and reusing, which wasn't in the lexicon," he told *The Jerusalem Post* on Tuesday.

There are 31 schools connected to the municipality in Beit Shemesh, constituting about 60 percent of the schools there. Another 40% are haredi schools and are part of a separate network. Sviva Israel worked with 27 of the 31 municipally-affiliated schools.

The survey revealed that certain basic conservation techniques have slipped out of use. For instance, 22% of the students said they left the tap water running while brushing their teeth, 44% said they took seven- to 10-minute showers, and nearly 24% said they took baths in half-full or full bathtubs.

Regarding electricity conservation, nearly 46% said they only sometimes turned off lights when they left the room. Another 7.7% said they never did so.

Despite the fact that almost all of the pupils lived within walking distance of their schools, only 28% said they walked or biked to school.

On the positive side, 77% said they either reused or recycled new plastic water or juice bottles. However, 12% admitted that they littered and left the bottle wherever they finished drinking.

The survey was conducted as part of the organization's educational initiative and not by a professional polling company.

"As a result of what we discovered, our next citywide campaigns will be to encourage walking and to encourage conservation," Wisemon said. "I want to do citywide projects because I think we can build on the momentum from this project, capitalize on the ripple effect, and people will respond better if they see others, for example, walking to school."

Sviva Israel's project introduced the concept of an ecological footprint - a measurement of how much of the earth's resources one uses - into the schools and then proceeded to calculate that footprint for each school. The calculation takes into account such elements as land and air travel, how much meat one eats, water and electricity conservation, recycling, the use of hand-me-downs, and many other practical indicators of lifestyle. The results are measured in basketball court-lengths and in the number of earths one would need to sustain oneself.

Wisemon said the project had actually overturned one of his preconceptions.

"I thought going into the project that haredi schools would generally have smaller ecological footprints than either the national religious or the secular because they are smaller consumers. That turns out not to be the case," he said.

In addition, higher socioeconomic status does not necessarily mean a larger footprint.

"Some of the kids flew abroad once or twice a year, which adds significantly to the footprint, but they were careful in other areas and so managed to bring down their footprint. It goes to show that one can be well-off and conserve by not being a spendthrift," Wisemon noted.

In Beit Shemesh, there is also a rough correlation between religiosity and lower socioeconomic status, and it is here that Wisemon was surprised.

"There is no culture of cutting back, even if they don't have much money to spend; they spend what they don't have. There is almost an attitude of 'We don't have money, we live in a mess anyway, why bother [to conserve]?' " Wisemon speculated, noting that many of the lower socioeconomic religious schools actually had the largest footprints.

"Anglo schools seem to have smaller ecological footprints," Wisemon said, "because it seems they've been brought up to care more."

Next Wednesday, Sviva Israel, along with the Department for Torah Culture of the Jerusalem Municipality, the Environmental Protection Ministry and the Ramat Shlomo Community Council, will host "The Jerusalem Conference - The Environment in Jewish Thought and Law" at city hall. The conference marks the publication of the fourth volume in the series *The Environment in Jewish Thought and Law*. Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi Yona Metzger, Environmental Protection Minister Gideon Ezra and Jerusalem Mayor Uri Lupolianski will address the participants.

According to Sviva Israel's Web site, "*The Environment in Jewish Thought and Law*, with a forward by Rabbi Chayim Soloveichik, contains more than 30 rabbinic and scholarly papers in Hebrew and English from contributors in Israel, the US and the UK. Topics include global warming, zoning laws, prevention of cruelty to animals, composting the Torah way, vandalism and damages of public property, [and] cleanliness of public spaces."

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