

Parents picking up kids urged to cut engines

By LEE G. HEALY
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Samantha Clary's white minivan was the first in a growing line of vehicles in front of Boiling Springs Elementary School Friday afternoon. She claimed her spot at 12:30, then sat to wait on her 9-year-old grandson — windows down and engine off.

At Boiling Springs Elementary, the no-idling policy in the loading zone is not negotiable, for both environmental and student safety reasons. Similarly, drivers in the line at Pine Street Elementary might notice a no-idling sign posted during busy morning and afternoon hours.

The two Spartanburg schools are among the first in the area to implement active no-idling campaigns, and local clean air activists hope more schools, businesses and individuals will join suit.

"Sometimes it gets so hot you have to turn the car on for a minute, but it's good to turn them off when the kids come out," Clary said. "I think it's best for the environment to have them turned off."

Boiling Springs Elementary Principal Kim Ashby said the no-idling push began last year. By 2:30 p.m., as many as 500 cars pass through the school's loading zone, picking up more than 800 of the 1,100 students at the District 2 school. Seeing the safety and environmental red flags, Ashby made a rule that car engines were to be turned off in the school's loading zone until otherwise directed.

"We could feel the heat and everything coming off from the cars," she said. "We certainly considered the environment."

The Air We Breathe campaign, a collaborative effort by the Spartanburg County Air Quality Advisory Committee, the Spartanburg Development Association, Spartanburg County government, the Spartanburg Area Chamber of Commerce and Upstate Forever, will host educational meetings and forums throughout the year on harmful ground-level ozone. Schools are being targeted now — during the hottest time of year, and the worst for ozone pollution.

"Quite literally the young and the old are the two demographics that are most sensitive to and most susceptible to the health effects of ground level ozone," said Chris Story, assistant county administrator. "It's hard for a child to learn when they're having respiratory problems."

Pine Street Elementary participates in the Department of Health and Environmental Control's Breathe Better program, a statewide clean air initiative focused on school campuses.

"We get a lot of parents who try to line up early," Assistant Principal Dennis Regnier said. "Traffic can get very congested during the afternoons. It was part of our overall goal of healthier living and healthier lifestyles."

Regnier said the program has been successful and has received positive feedback from parents. Pine Street leaders also encourage students to walk to and from school, if possible, to further reduce pollution and traffic congestion.

According to DHEC's Web site, www.scdhec.gov, children breathe in 50 percent more air pollution than adults because their lungs are sensitive and still developing. Idling increases the amount of vehicle exhaust and pollutants in the air that have been linked to asthma, other lung diseases, allergies, heart disease and other health problems.

DHEC advises drivers to turn off their engines if they idle for more than 30 seconds, except when in traffic. Contrary to the myth, idling for just 30 seconds wastes more fuel than restarting the engine.

For more information on local efforts to reduce ozone emissions, visit www.cleanairspartanburg.org.