Little red worm with a big role

Hooks kids on recycling

BY MARY McGRATH

How to get fourth-graders’ attention: Ask whether they’d like to
pluck a slimy, squirming worm out of a box of smelly compost.

“Ooh, yes, take me!” “Me, I’ll do it!” “Can I touch it?” Leaping and
shouting, 40 students at Clifton’s School No. 3 surged forward and
watched as nature’s tiny eating machine — the red worm —
tunneled through a garbage pile the size of a fax machine and turned it
into deep brown soil.

The demonstration was staged Wednesday by Alfred DuBois,
Clifton’s recycling chief, who is
pushing to expand composting
already done in some back yards
— to every apartment and condominum in Clifton, New Jersey’s
ninth-largest city.

Clifton has operated a leaf
composting site for 10 years and gives
about 4,000 tons of fertilizer a year
to residents. But other vegetative wastes are given to a professional
composter, who charges $25,000 a
year for processing and $45 a ton
for collecting 4,000 tons a year
— an additional $168,000.

DuBois says only household
composting can effectively reduce the
amount of vegetative garbage,
with each family producing an
estimated 500 pounds of garbage a
year.

“The emphasis has to be on families — Reduce, Reuse, Recycle,
and now compost, even in the winter months,” said DuBois, re-
calling the mantra of the recycling
movement.

And to get his message out, Du-
Bois is going first to children.

For Wednesday’s event, he don-
ated two days’ table scraps from
his own household: four pounds of
bananas, coffee grounds, celery
talks, lettuce, melon rinds, and
eggshells.

Using a blue recycling bin to
hold the soil, the fourth- and fifth-
graders helped mix the rotting
waste teeming with red worms Du-
Bois obtained at a horse farm on
Garrett Mountain.

“It looks like spaghetti,” said
one boy. “That dirt looks like
chocolate cake,” said another.

As DuBois crumbled the soil in
his palm, one boy held a worm
over his mouth like a sword-swallow,
and another pretended to
lob one at some recyling girls.

Of the estimated 600 Clifton
families who already compost,
most live in homes with yards. But
compost heaps can be kept in plas-
tic recycling bins in apartments
and condominiums as well as in
homes and in school science
classes.

“I’d like to see every Clifton
home with a compost heap under
the kitchen sink,” DuBois said.

“In apartments, condos, and
homes, they can compost most of
these wastes. The worms are the
key ingredient: They eat it up.”

Indoor composting requires a
15-inch square box, a lid, topsoil,
worms, and kitchen scraps such as
coffee grounds, tea bags, vegeta-
bles, fruit scraps, and eggshells.
No meat, fat, or milk should be
added because they produce odor.

Within three months, the
worms will convert wastes into a
rich humus that can be used as top
dressing for houseplants, mixed
with potting soil, or used for trans-
planting seedlings.

If each of Clifton’s 20,000
households composted garbage, it
would save on about 4,000 tons of
the 30,000 tons collected a year,
for a savings of about $500,000 a
year, DuBois said.

After the demonstration, one
girl said she’d like to start com-
posting at home.

“IT was pretty good,” said Alana
Cantillo, 9. “But I don’t know
what person would want to grab
those [worms]. But I guess I would
if it helps the environment.”

Lizzie Abreu, 9, and her family
already compost.

“I go out after dinner, and my
mother gives me a plate of food
that we don’t want to throw out,
and I give it to the worms,” Lizzie
said.

Principal Anthony Barbary said
he will look into creating an out-
door compost heap for students in
conjunction with the science pro-
gram.

“It brings us full circle with oth-
er recycling programs we’ve done,”
his said.