Reporting by Lydia Chung, Nadine Kohnke, Noelle Paek, Dorothy Piech, and Dean Simons

WE DIDN'T

THE

STUDENTS AND
COMMUNITY
MEMBERS
RESPOND
TO CLIMATE
CHANGE, AN
ISSUE DECADES
IN THE MAKING

UP IN SMOKE On June 7, a bird flies past Little Joe tower in downtown Corning as smoke from Canadian wildfires blankets the valley, obscuring the Southside hills from the Centerway Bridge. By the end of the summer, more than 71,000 square miles, or 5% of Canada's forests, had burned in a record-setting season.

Photo provided by
Caitlin Burdick

here there's smoke, there's...a fire in Canada. Smoke choked the skies in Corning on June 7, filling the hallways and halting outside and

after-school activities.

"I definitely think climate change can be seen in the Canadian wildfires. Smoke in this area might become a normal occurrence now, but before,

it never happened. We never saw this in elementary school," junior Josephine Sauer, vice president of the Environmental Action Club, said.

On a global scale, temperatures in 2022 reached 1.55°F above average, making it the sixth-warmest year since 1880. Together, the last nine years have been the warmest on record according to the National Centers for Environmental Information.

With debate and concerns about climate and a warming planet making headlines, some students reported making choices to lessen their own impact on the environment. In a poll conducted by the Tesserae staff, just over 51% of students reported being worried or very worried about the future of the environment. Forty-one percent of students either owned or would like to own an electric car, while 22.3% of students either used or would like to use geothermal heating or cooling in their homes.

PERSONAL CHOICES

On a smaller scale, students considered the environment even when shopping. Thirty-eight percent of students shopped at thrift stores to help the environment, and more than 74% reported shopping with reusable bags. Sauer's club offered additional, simpler solutions to their classmates.

"We're discussing how to get people to appreciate nature. For example, we're planning on having ways for people to meet animals, get to know the animals, understand why they're important, how they have an impact on the environment, and the fact that they need help," Sauer said. "We also spread awareness on a whole bunch of different issues, ranging from ocean to forest ecosystems. A lot of people only know about climate change with ocean levels rising and the environment heating up, but there are so many more aspects of environmental damage that we discuss."

For others, like senior Caton Riesbeck, a desire to take positive action informed future education and potential career choices.

"Manufacturing and modern agricultural practices are not sustainable, such as monoculture and irresponsible pesticide use. I'd like to make a difference in regulating those because it's not really a problem that anyone seems to be making big changes to right now, and it is making

large-scale problems," Riesbeck said.

"I'm going to college for either agricultural business or plant science in general. Using that degree, I'll work up the ranks, probably through Cornell University because they have a lot of programs in environmental and agricultural businesses. I'm pretty sure if I get some sort of job in the Department of Agriculture I could petition for certain types of change."



TAKING ROOT in the greenhouse on Sept. 25, senior Jacob Hufnagel examines sunflowers for Botany class. 'A big cause of climate change is people, and it needs to stop. It's definitely a problem, and it definitely could get worse quickly if nothing's done about it," senior Dylan Rose, a student in IB Environmental Systems and Societies, said. Photo by Dean Simons

While some students considered the environment in their day-to-day choices and college plans, others didn't feel the same urgency in responses to climate change.

"I think we should worry about climate change. We shouldn't be like 'Oh, let's carelessly spit out a bunch of emissions,' because that's not necessarily good," senior Ezra Despain said. "However, I think that trying to do things to reverse what's happening to the climate right now is unnecessary. I think that where the climate is at right now is fine. I think the problem is that people are trying to completely reverse climate change and stop emissions 100%, and that is nowhere near plausible."

BUILDING A FUTURE

As awareness of climate change's reach increased, the school district worked on making changes to decrease the environmental impact of its buildings. Through a study and four-phase contract with Day Automation, the district completed an energy audit for all of its buildings as part of an ongoing capital project.

"We're weather wrapping all the buildings, installing new insulation and

adding caulk around windows and doors," Assistant Superintendent of Facilities Bill Pierce said. The district also replaced old lighting fixtures with efficient LEDs, implemented controls on walk-in coolers, and replaced windows to help with energy conservation, according to minutes from an Oct. 18 Board of Education meeting.

With these renovations came savings. In 2022, the school district spent \$234,000 on natural gas and \$269,000 on electricity bills. But with the first two years of the capital project complete, the district was on track to save more than 2.5 million kilowatt hours of energy annually — a savings equivalent to taking 815 gasoline-powered cars off of the road each year. Throughout the district, automation helped keep costs down.

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MELISSA KARBAN, EARTH SCIENCE TEACHER

"We're getting more control of spaces on an annual basis," Pierce said. "There was a time where in this building you could have 25 classroom lights on overnight because you had to turn it off with the switch. Now, when you leave for the evening, they're off because of the sensors. The heat gets turned down from midnight to 5 a.m.; we can go right down to 60 degrees. Then as soon as 6 a.m. hits, we're back to pumping hot air."

SEEKING ACCOUNTABILITY

Even as the district made

improvements, staff in the building were concerned about the environment, including Earth Science teacher Melissa Karban.

"I learned a lot about the issue when I was getting my geology degree. For me, it was kind of nice because I trusted my professors who had a better understanding of it than I did and were able to explain it to me in a way that I understood. Once I had that baseline, I feel like I was able to take in more recent studies and more information and understand it a lot better." Karban said.

Karban's familiarity with the topic didn't leave her optimistic for the future.

"I am concerned about climate change, but I feel like it's a 'What can you do?' Things are changing so much, but so much of it is out of the everyday person's control," Karban said. "I think it would help if people knew more about climate change. It would help keep people accountable who need to be accountable for it. The everyday person can try to limit their plastic waste, you can try to recycle, but ultimately it's the larger corporations that hold so much of the sway and so much of the power. They're the ones doing the most damage."

Sauer agreed with Karban's perspective. "One of the biggest things about climate change is that it is mostly caused by big companies," Sauer said. However, Sauer also emphasized the impact that individuals can have.

"We can all have an impact. We have to focus on how companies are making their products and what they're doing and how that's affecting the environment. I think that people have this idea of 'Well, I'm only one person, I can't make a change,' but for example, in a vote, if a bunch of people vote then that's how things can get changed," Sauer said. "The same is true for climate change. If everyone reduces their gas usage or how they're using energy in their home, that will have an effect, which is how I think we can all have an impact."