

Organizing Cafeteria Recycling Programs in Elementary Schools

--A How-to Guide--



Los Angeles County Department of Public Works
Elementary School Environmental Education Program

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The following reference listings were used in researching this information and can serve as additional resources:

- 🌍 *50 Simple Things Kids Can Do to Save the Earth*, John Javna, The EarthWorks Group, ©1999.
- 🌍 *More Teaching Kids to Love the Earth*, Marina Lachecki Herman, Pfeiffer-Hamilton Publishers, ©1996.
- 🌍 *How to Set Up A School Recycling Program*, American Plastics Council, A Joint Initiative with the Society of the Plastics Industry, Inc., ©1993.
- 🌍 *A District-Wide Approach to Recycling: A Guide for School Districts*, California Integrated Waste Management Board, ©1994.
- 🌍 *Oregon Green School Tools: Creating Healthy School Environments through Resource Efficiency*, Oregon Department of Environmental Quality, ©1996.
- 🌍 California Integrated Waste Management Board Web Site (www.ciwmb.gov)

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How to Start a Cafeteria Recycling Program

Why Recycle?

Every day at your school, a large amount of recyclable material is thrown out and taken to a landfill. The cafeteria is a major source of this waste. Half of all garbage in schools is generated during two hours – lunchtime. Consider the amount of waste created by just one item, milk. A typical school cafeteria can easily distribute more than 1,000 cartons of milk in a week. If not recycled, all that paper ends up in a landfill. By setting up a recycling center in the cafeteria, schools can make major reductions in their waste creation with minimal effort.

Benefits of a Successful Recycling Program

Everyone knows recycling is good for the environment. But starting a recycling program can also have a direct benefit for your school. A successful cafeteria recycling program can:

- 🌍 Cut your school's garbage hauling costs.
- 🌍 Generate additional revenues for your school.
- 🌍 Provide an opportunity for school recognition and awards.
- 🌍 Provide students with hands-on lessons in conserving resources.
- 🌍 Open up opportunities for community partnerships and parent involvement.
- 🌍 Conserve limited natural resources and landfill space.
- 🌍 Reduce campus litter and the amount of space taken up by garbage cans.

Program Design

A 10-Step Plan For Creating Your Cafeteria Recycling Program

1. **Name a Recycling Point Person:** Appoint a staff member or teacher to serve as the school's point person – both internally and externally – on recycling issues.
2. **Assemble a Recycling Team:** Your Recycling Team should include your recycling point person, students, and other teachers and staff members. They will help plan and implement the recycling program. Make sure to include

maintenance workers and kitchen staff in your planning. They will do most of the work involved in recycling. Ask the Recycling Team to assist in encouraging teacher and staff involvement. (Also use meetings and memos to communicate with teachers and staff why you are starting this program and how it will operate.) For outside assistance and information, contact your local city recycling coordinator or your local county representative for unincorporated areas. To locate the recycling coordinator in your city, visit www.888cleanla.com.

3. ***Determine How Material Will be Transported:*** Contact your local waste hauler or city sanitation services department to determine if curbside recycling is a service they provide. If so, ask for collection bins for your recyclable materials. If not, call 1-888-CLEAN LA or visit www.888cleanla.com to determine the closest recycling center to your school. Many recycling centers/processing facilities will offer to come to your school to collect your materials in exchange for the right to sell the materials.

If you wish to use cafeteria recycling as a fund-raising program for your school, look for a processing facility/recycling center that provides payment by the pound for recyclable materials. Consider asking local businesses or environmental organizations if they would be willing to support your program by donating equipment or services. Recyclables may be collected in special bins, buckets, cans or boxes (plastic liners are recommended). For smaller quantities, consider asking parents or community volunteers to help transport materials.

4. ***Decide What You Will Recycle:*** When you have decided what recycler or waste hauler your school will be working with on your cafeteria recycling program, you will need to find out what materials the company will accept and whether the materials need to be sorted. The materials recycled will also depend on the recyclable items used by the teachers and students in your school. Some items to consider recycling in your cafeteria are:

- | | |
|-----------------------------|---|
| 🌐 steel/tin cans | 🌐 paper lunch bags |
| 🌐 glass jars and containers | 🌐 plastic containers for bulk food supplies |
| 🌐 aluminum foil and cans | 🌐 corrugated cardboard boxes |
| 🌐 plastic service ware | 🌐 milk cartons |

5. ***Measure Cafeteria Waste:*** It is useful to know how much cafeteria waste is being created before the recycling program begins, so that you can measure the results of your recycling program. This number is also useful in determining how much material you will be processing through your recycling efforts. A good indicator as to how much of a given material is thrown away is the amount of that item bought in the first place. By determining the quantity and frequency of purchase, you can determine how

much is being discarded. These estimates will form the basis of several decisions in the planning process.

6. ***Set Up a Recycling Center:*** Make the collection process as easy as possible. The simpler it is to sort and recycle, the higher the participation rate will be. Place your recycling containers in a convenient location for students and faculty. Make sure that large size recycling containers are also placed in the kitchen area of the cafeteria, so that the staff can recycle bulk size containers. Create signs to clearly identify recycling containers and their intended contents. Anticipate what students are likely to do wrong (i.e., clearly explain that food scraps are not to be mixed with recyclable paper, etc.). Regular garbage cans should also be placed near the recycling containers for non-recyclable items.

7. ***Kick-Off Campaign:*** When your program is ready to be put into action, a kick-off campaign can be created to generate enthusiasm and explain the program to students and teachers. Some ideas:
 - ④ Staff Meetings/School Bulletins: Meet with teachers, administrators and other staff to explain the procedures of the cafeteria recycling program. This meeting will allow time for those with questions to get clarification on program specifics. Ask the teachers to speak with their students about the importance of recycling and how the new program will work. The school/morning bulletin can also be used to distribute information about the program to the students, including recycling facts, how much waste the school is recycling, etc.

 - ④ School Assembly: Hold a schoolwide assembly to introduce the process of the lunchtime recycling program. Explain to the students and faculty how to sort recyclable materials into the correct bins. Use volunteers to show how much of your current garbage is recyclable. Consider inviting a guest speaker, such as your city recycling specialist, an environmental leader or a representative from the DPW.

 - ④ Poster Contest: To help students participate properly in the recycling program, have each class create a poster explaining what material goes in each bin and reasons why it is important to recycle and conserve resources. Hang these posters near the bins.

 - ④ Recycle Contest: Hold a contest for the first week or month of your program to challenge the different lunch periods to recycle the highest amount of waste.

8. ***Monitor the Recycling Center:*** For the first few weeks of the program, post monitors by recycling containers to give instruction and assistance to students. Monitors can be teachers, adult volunteers or older students. After a month or so, students will need little or no instruction.

9. ***Motivate and Recognize Students:*** Following the kick-off, maintain momentum through use of some of these ideas:
- ④ Publicize weekly recycling totals through the student newspaper, morning announcements or hallway bulletin board. Statistics tracked could include the amount of recyclables collected weekly and the amount of waste thrown away. Whenever possible, give tangible results – such as an estimate of how many trees have been saved by the program. (For every ton of paper recycled, you have saved 17 trees.)
 - ④ Encourage teachers to discuss recycling with their students. Remind them that the Environmental Defenders teacher packet includes a lesson on recycling, and that other environmental lessons are available at www.888cleanla.com.
 - ④ Have students create artwork using recycled materials. Display their artwork prominently.
 - ④ Challenge another elementary school to a recycling contest. Exchange statistics weekly and report results to students.
 - ④ If applicable, announce the amount of funds raised by your recycling effort and what the school will buy with the funds raised.
 - ④ Honor individuals or classes internally for their recycling efforts. Include an article on your recycling program and results in your parent newsletter.
 - ④ Use your waste analysis and recycling totals to apply for grants and awards. Grant funding is offered by many federal, state, local, non-profit and private organizations. For information about receiving grant money for your school, contact the following organizations: United States Environmental Protection Agency – www.epa.gov/enviroed/solnotice.html; California Office of Environmental Education – www.cde.ca.gov/cilbranch/oe; California Department of Conservation's Division of Recycling – www.consrv.ca.gov/dor/nonprof/nonprofi.htm; Captain Planet Foundation – www.turner.com/cpf.
 - ④ Alert local radio, TV and newspapers of the results of your program.
10. ***Evaluate and Adjust:*** Keep looking for ways to make your recycling program more effective. Do you need more recycling containers? Are there enough custodial/volunteer personnel? Are your students sorting the recyclable materials correctly? Is your recycler satisfied with the quality of material collected? Monitor your recycling records. If participation dips, consider some of the motivational ideas in step 9.

Other Ways to Save the Environment During Lunchtime

Other Cafeteria Hints About Reducing and Reusing

Emphasize to students and staff that even more important than recycling is *reducing* and *reusing* our resources. The less we consume in the first place, the less waste we create. Following are some tips to help your school reduce your waste:

- 🌍 Reduce waste in the cafeteria by switching from *servicing* food to *offering* food. Letting students choose what they receive, instead of giving all students the same amount of food, can result in a 50 to 90 percent reduction in food waste. When unwanted food is served, not only is the food wasted, but so is the money and time needed to purchase, prepare and dispose of it.
- 🌍 Have cafeteria staff use reusable trays, cups and silverware in the cafeteria instead of disposable items, which end up in a landfill.
- 🌍 Encourage students to bring their lunch to school in reusable containers such as lunch boxes and cloth lunch sacks, which can be used many more times than paper bags.
- 🌍 Encourage students to bring metal silverware and cloth napkins to use with their lunch. These items can be taken home and washed to be used again.
- 🌍 Encourage teachers to use reusable coffee mugs by providing dishwashing materials in the teacher lounge.
- 🌍 Buy food products in bulk instead of individually packaged. For example, use large condiment containers, rather than individual packets.
- 🌍 Use bulk milk and juice dispensers rather than individual cartons or cans.
- 🌍 Use a plastic bottle to carry beverages instead of buying individually packaged drinks.

Recycling in Action

Case Study of 9th Street Elementary Recycling Program

School Information

Ninth Street Elementary, Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD)

Enrollment

Approximately 500 children are currently enrolled in this K-5 elementary school. The school has the largest number of children living in missions, hotels and motels in LAUSD and also includes a large number of homeless children.

Years Program in Effect

The cafeteria recycling program was started in 1994.

Waste Reduction Program

In 1991, the Los Angeles Unified School District adopted a policy to support community efforts to meet the 50 percent waste diversion goal of the California Integrated Waste Management Act of 1989 (AB 939) by the year 2000. Schools in LAUSD were encouraged to help meet these requirements through waste reduction, recycling or composting.

When the administration of 9th Street Elementary, located within the LAUSD, received district information encouraging schools to reduce their waste through recycling, the school took action and started a cafeteria recycling program. At the time, the large trash bins for holding the campus garbage took up a great deal of space and the school was frequently littered with trash. The administration thought that a recycling program might help alleviate both of these problems. The school worked with its local waste hauler to devise guidelines for the program, such as how recycled materials would be collected, sorted and transported.

How the Program Was Organized

Through discussions with the waste hauler, the school decided to recycle paper, aluminum and plastic. The school purchased different colored trash cans through its waste hauler (at the same cost as regular trash cans) and then assigned each colored trash can certain recyclables. (For example, all aluminum materials would be placed in the blue trash can.) All bins were placed in the cafeteria with signs designating what recyclables were acceptable in each. The sorted recyclables were then placed in color-corresponding trash bags (also purchased at the same cost as regular trash bags from their waste hauler) and transported to a handling facility by the school's waste hauler. In addition, to help students during lunches, lunchroom aides were stationed next to the bins to monitor the recycling containers and help children with any questions about the program.

Since the program started, additional improvements have been made. For example, all non-food items and bulk food item containers purchased by the kitchen staff are now made of recyclable materials and processed through the cafeteria recycling program. School lunches are served on aluminum trays and eaten with plastic forks, which are also recycled.

Teaching Students the Program

At the beginning of each school year the school holds a back-to-school assembly, where all campus policies are reviewed. One of the main items discussed is the campus cafeteria recycling program. Children are told which materials to place in each recycling bin, as well as where to place non-recyclables. Teachers are also asked throughout the year to discuss the program with their students and to cover various environmental topics appropriate to each grade level.

To help keep students motivated throughout the year, students who participate in the program and “go the extra mile” (cleaning up trash after other students, helping other students recycle, etc.) are awarded a Golden Ticket. At a monthly schoolwide assembly five students who have received a Golden Ticket are awarded a prize. Four of these students receive a reading book; the other wins the “classroom prize” and is allowed to choose one item that every student in his or her class will receive, such as a box of crayons, notebook, etc. This reward system helps recognize those students who are active in the recycling program and encourages others to become more involved.

Program Costs/Savings

The materials needed to start and maintain the cafeteria recycling program at 9th Street Elementary did not result in any additional costs to the school. For example, the colored trash cans and trash bags needed for the program, when purchased from the school’s waste hauler, cost the same as those normally purchased by the school. In fact, the school was able to reduce its waste hauler costs significantly by implementing the recycling program. Its overall monthly garbage collected decreased to one trash bin for every three that were produced prior to starting up the program, with the school now recycling an average of 90 percent of its waste annually.

Other Benefits to the Campus

The 9th Street Elementary School Recycling Program has not only reduced the amount of the school’s monthly waste production, but has resulted in a cleaner and virtually litter-free campus, with students taking more responsibility for their own environment. In fact, teachers and administrators alike have been amazed at the cleanliness of the campus since the program began. The students of 9th Street Elementary have also developed a sense of pride as a result of the program and are a model to others working to protect the environment in Los Angeles County.