

Special Considerations for High Schools

eco-cycle

Snapshot

Starting a schoolwide recycling and/or composting program at a high school is an important and effective step toward Zero Waste that requires special considerations.



<https://bit.ly/eco-cycle-zero-waste-schools-guide>

Objective: Students and staff will have the tools to properly sort their waste at school. They will understand the multiple ways that recycling and/or composting helps the environment and the importance of reuse as an additional Zero Waste tool.

Age Groups: 9th-12th grade

Setting: School building

Project Duration: Ongoing

Materials:

- Examples of recyclable, compostable, and trash items found at school
- Collection bins for recycling and/or composting (5-8-gallon for classrooms, larger for other areas)
- Signage/labels for bins
- Poster-making materials

Why This Project Matters:

As students progress from elementary school to middle school to high school, it is important to have continuous access to waste-reduction options. High school systems are much more complex than those at the elementary and middle school levels. Larger buildings, open campuses, diverse schedules, and larger student populations must all be considered when designing a successful waste diversion system at the high school level.

Project Summary:

To design a successful program at the high school level, a school must choose a reliable waste hauler, acquire and label recycling and/or compost bins, determine the appropriate locations of the bins, and facilitate an efficient maintenance system. Regular training of students and staff is essential. Regular reporting of waste diversion rates will motivate and encourage greater participation. The concept and practice of reuse is another vital tool in working toward Zero Waste at the high school level.

Implementation:

Getting started:

See Schoolwide Recycling Collection, Chapter 18, and Schoolwide Compost Collection, Chapter 25, for detailed instructions on launching a recycling and/or compost collection system.

Specific things to consider at the high school level:

- Great care must be taken when determining the location for recycling and/or compost bins in a high school building. While recycling bins may be universal, compost bins may need to be limited to locations where food waste and non-recyclable paper are generated the most. Custodial needs and buy-in must be part of any plan. First, consider the type of waste generated in each space.
 - Academic classrooms – Place recycling and/or compost bins in classrooms only if students are permitted to have food and drinks while in class.



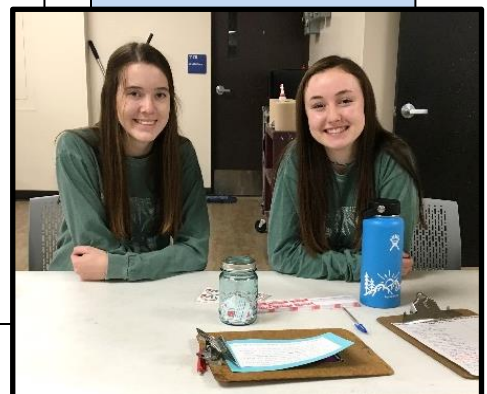
- Art rooms – These classrooms tend to generate compostable papers (paper towels, construction and other art paper) and recyclable papers, making them good locations for both compost and recycling bins.
 - Food prep classrooms – If food is being unwrapped, cooked, and prepared, the generated compostable and recyclable items can be diverted from trash.
 - Science classrooms – These often feature lab areas that would benefit from having a compost bin since they tend to produce large quantities of paper towels.
 - Lunch areas – If students are permitted to eat lunch in spaces other than the cafeteria, consider placing recycling and/or compost bins in these locations, in addition to placing them in the cafeteria. Outside eating areas should also be considered.
 - Restrooms – If paper towel dispensers are installed, a compost bin will be useful in diverting waste. Make sure trash bins are also available to avoid contaminating the compost.
- After determining where recycle and/or compost bins will be effective, collaborate with the head custodian to determine the best collection process. Compost bins with food waste must be emptied daily to avoid pest issues.
 - While ‘dump’ buckets are utilized in elementary and middle school cafeterias to empty liquid from drink containers before recycling, high school cafeterias often have multiple waste stations and ‘dump’ buckets may not be practical. In educational messaging, stress the importance of emptying all liquids before recycling.
 - While it is often effective and practical for elementary and middle school teachers and students to empty classroom recycling, this is not true at the high school level where teachers often share classrooms and are not responsible for any one space. Since students move between classrooms frequently throughout the day, imposing on instruction time for students to transfer waste is often discouraged. Eco-Clubs, special-needs classes, or other student groups work well in this role, utilizing non-instruction time and decreasing any burden placed on custodial staff.
 - Clear signage at all grade levels is crucial. Take care in placing posters on the wall above or near the waste stations. When waste bins are rearranged, which is common in high schools, the signs may no longer correspond to the containers they are near. Misalignment of signs and bins may cause an increase in contamination. Large signage on the bins themselves solves this issue.

Extensions:

Expand educational reach by working with various departments, clubs, and subgroups that represent different segments of the school community.

- Sponsor school-wide campaigns or contests that promote reuse of reusable water bottles, lunch containers, unwanted school supplies, etc. (“Choose to Reuse!” campaigns).

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Training and implementation:

See Schoolwide Recycling Collection, Chapter 18, and Schoolwide Compost Collection, Chapter 25, for ideas on educating the entire school community, including working with student groups.

Specific things to consider at the high school level:

- Posters with three-dimensional examples are helpful when educating elementary and middle school students, but they are often less effective and have less longevity in high schools. Instead, consider using signage with photos and realistic images of waste items.
- Utilize peer-messaging opportunities to foster buy-in from the student population including student-produced social media posts, videos, signage, and logos.
- Assemblies are not an effective educational tool for most larger high schools. Consider other avenues such as short presentations in homeroom classes or advisory periods to both launch and retrain in the program.
- Work with school administration to determine the most effective way to deliver information to all students. If presenting in classrooms, choose a subject that all students are required to take every year, such as language arts, social studies, or science.
- Recruit student volunteers to support their peers in sorting waste properly in the cafeteria. Since high school students have variable schedules that sometimes include off periods, some might be available to volunteer during lunch. Various high school clubs require service hours to maintain membership, so this role could provide opportunities for earning those hours.
- High schools with open campus policies, where students may leave campus and return throughout the day based on their schedules, often have increased waste from outside sources (fast food wrappers, cups, etc.). Work with a student group to conduct a waste audit. Determine which of these outside items are the most common and incorporate them into educational messaging.
- While elementary and middle schools may use durable food service ware when striving for Zero Waste, this is not always practical at the high school level. When durables are being used at high schools, coordinate with food service staff, custodial staff, and school administration to determine successful mechanisms for students to return durables to the kitchen.

Extensions:

(continued)

- Work with business classes to promote and design business models which support reuse and/or a circular economy.
- Collaborate with engineering classes to design or redesign products that increase recyclability or reuse.
- Sponsor special art projects utilizing reused or recycled materials for art classes.
- Work with the athletic, art, music, theater, science, or social studies departments on ways to promote Zero Waste messaging to the entire school.

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- Utilize screens and monitors in common areas throughout the school to display signage, short videos, and messaging. Librarians will often support this method of education.

Maintaining the program:

See Schoolwide Recycling Collection, Chapter 18, and Schoolwide Compost Collection, Chapter 25, for detailed information on maintaining interest and engagement in the program while also increasing volumes and lowering contamination of the materials collected over time.

Specific things to consider at the high school level:

- Collaborate with administration to determine the most effective mechanism for annual education, especially for incoming freshman. Some schools utilize their Freshman Seminar program. In-person, live-virtual, or pre-recorded presentations given annually can educate each incoming class. Follow-up activities and prize drawings may be used to encourage participation and assess knowledge.
- Continue to support teachers that want to involve their students in the program by providing presentations, field trips, and special projects such as creating announcements, videos, contests, and volunteer opportunities.
- Collaborate with clubs to support Zero Waste during their after-school activities. For example: serve a Zero Waste meal to theater students during rehearsals using reusable or compostable food service ware. Ensure students have access to recycling and/or compost bins during the event.
- Set up a table with literature and recycling/compost/reuse examples in the cafeteria. During lunchtime, engage and educate students as they pass by.
- Continue to check in with custodial staff to develop ongoing best practices specific to their campus.

Assessment:

Work with custodians, haulers, and a student group to track volumes of recycled, composted, and landfilled material. Ask students and staff about how they interface with the program.

Related Activities:

- Locker Leftovers/Classroom Cleanout – Chapter 9
- Schoolwide Recycling Collection – Chapter 18
- Schoolwide Compost Collection – Chapter 25
- Conducting a Waste Audit – Chapter 30

Extensions:
(continued)

- Coordinate with booster clubs to purchase items that are recyclable or compostable for school sporting events.
- Support Zero Waste events such as homecoming and prom where the decorations and refreshments create no waste.
- Recruit student clubs like National Honor Society to act as “waste goalies” to help with proper waste sorting in the cafeteria or for sports and other school events. Volunteer hours can be applied to their service hours.

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