



Waste Reduction and Recycling Best Practices Guide for Schools

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How to use this guide

Review this guide to:

- Assess current practices and learn about best practices for reducing waste and recycling.
- Find resources and tools to help start or improve waste reduction and recycling actions.
- Learn how to receive Level One Green School recognition.

How to request assistance or sign up for the program

See [Green Schools Program](#) for information.

- **Participating schools:** Email GreenSchools@cplusc.com to request assistance, if your school signed up for the program in the past.

- **To start participating in the program:** Fill out the School Application form on [this page](#).

Recognition

Your school can receive Level One Green recognition for waste reduction, recycling and organics collection actions. Those actions can happen in one school year or over multiple school years. Actions your school has taken before participating in the program count toward Level One recognition.

To be recognized, complete and submit the **Level One recognition form** linked on [this page](#).

Level One Green Schools receive: a “**We are King County Green School**” banner; an electronic icon for websites and newsletters; and a summary of the school's successes on the program website.

Level One recognition must be achieved before recognition for other program levels. But to receive program assistance, your school does not need to work toward recognition, and your school may focus on any resource conservation area offered by the program.

Level One recognition requires your school to:

- Have at least one staff member lead waste reduction and recycling practices, and serve as a Green Schools Program contact. (A team with students is encouraged, but not required.)
- Tell your school community your school is participating in the Green Schools Program.
- Educate students and staff about waste reduction and recycling – in at least four ways.
- Carry out at least 1 action to reduce food waste.
- Carry out at least 1 action to reuse durable (reusable) products.
- Carry out at least 1 action to reduce paper use.
- Reach a recycling rate of 40% or more, OR increase your rate by at least 15%.
- Follow 7 best practices for recycling.
- Collect organics for composting if your school is required to do so by state law.
- Share successes with your school community.

Waste reduction (also known as waste prevention)

Food waste, single-use products, and paper are major sources of waste in schools. Use the practices and resources below to reduce waste. Reducing waste often results in cost savings, since less garbage or recyclable materials can reduce collection frequency or size of outdoor garbage or recycling containers.

Reduce food waste

Food waste is a big contributor to climate change and is a social justice issue. About one-third of all food produced in the world is wasted. In King County, about 15% of children experience food insecurity, meaning there are times they don't have access to the food they need for a healthy, active life.

Key tools and resources	
Reducing food waste in schools infographic	Infographic on why and how to reduce school food waste
Reducing Food Waste in Schools web page	Educational tools, strategies, and resources to reduce school food waste
Food waste reduction articles for families	Tips on reducing food waste at home and school

Myths and facts about school food share programs	Facts about food share tables. Food share tables and food donation can give back to the community.
Fact sheet on how to set up food share tables from Public Health-Seattle-King County	Review this fact sheet if your school wants to set up a food share table.
Food share table request form – Before a food share table is set up, the school district fills out this form for each public school and sends it to Public Health-Seattle-King County. Private and parochial schools also must complete this form.	<u>All</u> schools: Get permission from your school administrator. <u>Public schools</u> : Also get permission from your district Food or Nutrition Services. Ask the Green Schools Program which districts allow schools to set up food share tables, and for a district contact.

Reducing food waste: *Best practices*

Use the “**Key tools and resources**” above and best practices and resources below. For recognition, carry out at least one action to reduce wasted food.

- **Encourage actions to reduce food waste.** Messages may include: “Take or bring only what you will eat” / “Eat what you take or bring” / “If you brought lunch from home, take leftovers home.” Have students sign a food waste reduction pledge, and share tips with families. **Resources:** [Pledge to reduce food waste at school](#) and [Food waste reduction articles for families](#)
- **Educate students about food waste.** Use classroom lessons, student clubs, nutrition and cooking lessons, and school gardens that involve students. **Resources:** [secondary school classroom workshops](#) - *Food for Thought* workshop; [Gardening resources for schools](#); [Project Drawdown](#) (which lists food waste reduction as a top strategy to reduce carbon emissions)
- **Track food waste and revise menus when possible.** Use tracking sheet linked below and share results with school or district food services staff, who may be able to revise menus (within federal nutrition guidelines) to reduce wasted food. **Resources:** [Food waste inventory project - daily tracking sheet](#) and [Food waste inventory project - summary sheet](#)
- **Recess before lunch / Extended seated lunch time.** Studies show elementary school food waste decreases in when recess is scheduled before lunch. In K-12 schools, longer seated lunch time results in less food waste. **Resources:** [Longer seated lunch period](#) and [Recess before lunch](#)
- **Milk dispensers.** When students choose how much milk to take in cups, less milk is wasted. Students report milk tastes better from dispensers compared to milk cartons, and this leads them to drink what they take. **Resource:** [Reducing food waste in schools – Milk dispensers](#).
- **Food Share Table.** On the share table, students may place or take unopened foods from the school meal program, including unopened milk, yogurt, cheese sticks, crackers, apple sauce, fruit cups, and unpeeled oranges and bananas. Invite students who want more food to help themselves to share table items. Public schools must obtain approval from district Food Services. **Resource:** See “Key tools and resources” above; and [School Food Donation Guidelines](#).
- **Donate food.** Some schools and districts donate weekly, others before long school breaks and at the end of each school year. **Resources:** See “Key tools and resources” above; [How it Works](#); [Food donation tracking form](#); and [School districts donate edible foods](#)

Reuse: Use durable instead of disposable products

Single-use products such as milk cartons and plastic water bottles are used only once and then either recycled, composted, or disposed of in garbage. Replace single-use products with reusable options!

Key tools and resources	
How to pack a waste free lunch	How to avoid single-use materials in packed lunches. Share this with students and their families.
Guide to plastic bottle reduction and recycling campaign	Facts about plastic bottle waste. Step-by-step guide to run a campaign to reduce plastic bottles.
Zero waste cleanout and School swap day	How to set up a swap day at the end of the school year before large amounts of materials are disposed
Ditching Disposables: A toolkit for healthier food ware in K-12 schools and Food ware	Resources from the Center for Environmental Health
Reusable Food Serveware Guide	Rethink Disposable resources and case studies

Reuse: *Best practices*

Use “Key tools and resources” above and best practices and resources below. For recognition, carry out at least one action to reuse durable products.

- **Waste free lunches.** Encourage students and families to pack lunches from home in reusable containers. *Resource:* [Cafeteria Culture](#)
- **Reusable bottles.** Promote durable, reusable bottles to replace single-use plastic bottles. Ask your school or district to install water stations to make it easy to refill durable water bottles.
- **Reuse durable supplies.** Maintain a storage closet, shelf, or bin for reusable file folders, envelopes, party/holiday decorations, classroom displays, hall passes, visitor badges, etc.
- **Zero Waste locker or cubby clean out and School Supplies Swap.** At the end of the school year, share unwanted supplies and materials with others who can use them.
- **Reusable food serving-ware.** At meal times and in staff break-rooms, replace disposable or compostable trays, plates, bowls, cups, utensils, etc. with reusable, washable products.
 - **Eliminate or reduce use of meal trays.** *Resource:* [Trayless Tuesdays - Cafeteria Culture](#)
 - **Replace single-use disposable or compostable items with reusable, washable items.** *Resources:* [Expanded Polystyrene Ban](#) starting June 2024; [Polystyrene Facts](#); [Zero Waste & Better Health: Two Schools on a Journey to More Sustainable, Reusable Food-service Ware](#) webinar; and success stories - Compostables vs. Reusables at [Franklin Elementary School](#); [Palo Alto Unified School District](#); [Bishop O’Dowd High School](#). See grant and funding resources on page 10 to request funding for reusables from Plastic Free Restaurants.
 - **Milk dispensers and reusable cups** to replace single-use milk cartons. Less milk is wasted because students choose how much milk to take in their cups and they report milk tastes better from dispensers. *Resources:* [Analysis of milk dispensers and milk cartons for Auburn School District](#) and [Milk dispensers in Canby School District, Oregon](#)

- **Unwrapped utensils, straws, napkins – offer only if requested.** Replace plastic-wrapped bundles of utensils, straws, and napkins with unwrapped items. As of 2022, food services such as schools may provide single-use (non-reusable) items such as plastic utensils, straws, and condiment packages only when a student or other customer requests them. So that a student may take only the utensil or item desired, utensils may not be wrapped with other items.
Resource: [Single-use service-ware only on request](#)

Reduce paper waste

Reducing paper use conserves natural resources. Paper can make up 25% or more of school garbage.

Key tools and resources	
Good On One Side (GOOS) image	Copy and attach this image to a paper reuse box in each classroom and office
Options for reducing office paper consumption	Tips on paper reduction strategies
Paper Calculator Tool	Calculate the impact of your school’s paper use

Reducing paper waste: *Best practices*

Use “**Key tools and resources**” above and best practices and resources below. For recognition, carry out at least one action to reduce paper use.

- **Limit paper hand-outs.** Use blackboards, whiteboards, document cameras, or smart boards. Post assignments on teacher web pages. Use email for newsletters, bulletins, and memos.
- **Write on both sides.** Use the backsides of paper printed on one side for drafts or scratch paper. Place labeled paper reuse trays in classrooms and offices, then regularly promote this practice.
- **Make double-sided copies.** Adopt a double-sided photocopying and printing policy. Provide double-sided copying instructions. Use signs and reminders to encourage this practice.
- **Ask to be removed from unwanted subscription and mailing lists.** *Resource:* [Reduce junk mail](#)
- **Print only what you need.** Right-size paper (e.g., half sheets). Change margin defaults to reduce paper needed. Promote “paper free,” “no print,” or “print only what you need” days.
- **Set a copy budget for each staff position,** recognizing different positions need different levels of paper use. Assign each staff member a copy machine code, and share monthly paper use.
- **Set up and promote a reuse station.** Use a shelf or other space for paper supplies such as used file folders and envelopes that can be reused. Office staff can monitor the reuse space.

Recycling and composting

Use the resources in this guide to help educate students and staff about: (1) the benefits of recycling and composting; and (2) what materials can be collected for recycling and composting.

Indoor bins and stickers/signs

To request materials listed below, email GreenSchools@cplusc.com

- [Recycling containers](#). The program provides indoor recycling bins, as needed, up to \$250 for schools serving 40% or more free and reduced meals and up to \$150 for other schools. Indoor bins also are available for collection of food scraps and other compostable materials.
- [Recycling stickers and signs](#). The program provides stickers to place on indoor recycling bins, and signs to post above recycling bins. Stickers also are available for indoor composting bins, garbage bins, and leftover liquids containers.

Recycling: *Best practices*

Use best practices and resources below *to*: (1) increase recycling; (2) reduce contamination; and (3) help your school or district save money, since garbage collection service costs more than recycling collection.

Key tools and resources	
Frequently asked questions about school recycling	Answers to frequently-asked questions
Recycling toolkit	Green Schools Program web page with resources and tools for schools
Milk carton recycling	Use this guide to plan and set up milk carton recycling and leftover liquids collection
Options for securing a container liner	See different ways to secure bin liner in bin
Sign holder options for cafeteria recycling and waste stations	Use this how-to guide to create cafeteria waste station sign holders
Shredded paper recycling options	Shredded paper is not accepted in recycling bins. Find out how to recycle shredded paper.

- **Educate students and staff** about why recycling matters and what materials are accepted for recycling in your school.
- **Place indoor recycling bins:** (a) next to garbage bins; (b) where they are easy to see; (c) in each classroom, office, photocopy area, staff break-room, kitchen. **Resource:** [Recycling containers](#)
- **Stickers and signs.** Place a sign on or above each recycling bin to show what can be recycled. **Resource:** [Recycling stickers and signs](#) – See signs for classrooms, cafeterias, kitchens, offices
- **Recycle Right: Keep contamination low.** Contaminants in recycling bins include food, liquids, plastic utensils, straws, bottle caps, chip bags, and candy wrappers. If there are too many contaminants, your recycling hauler may need to dispose of entire loads.

- **Empty bins regularly.** Empty indoor recycling bins regularly so they do not overflow. When recycling bins are full, recyclable materials are more likely to end up in the garbage.
- **At a minimum, collect the following materials for recycling.**
 - Paper, cardboard, aluminum cans, glass bottles and jars, plastic bottles, steel/tin cans
 - Electronics and fluorescent light bulbs/tubes. Schools are required by law to collect these materials to be recycled. Separate collection is required: Do not place these materials in your school’s regular recycling bin. **Resources:** [Take it Back Network - King County](#) and [E-Cycle Washington](#) (or call 866-779-6632). E-Cycle Washington provides Washington K-12 schools with free recycling for monitors, laptops, and more.
- **Depending on your school’s recycling collection services, your school may be able to collect additional materials for recycling.**
 - Milk cartons, juice cartons, scrap metal
 - Batteries, cell phones, keyboards, mice, and printer cartridges. Separate collection is required: Do not place these materials in your school’s regular or commingled recycling bin. **Resources:** [Take it Back Network - King County](#) and [Printer Cartridges – Recycling Options](#)
Tip: Cell phone and printer cartridge recycling can raise money for your school.
- **As needed: Adjust collection service.** As garbage and recycling volumes change, adjust pickups (i.e., less or more frequent collection, larger or smaller outdoor containers) to save your school or district money. **Resource:** District staff or custodians ask haulers for collection adjustments.
- **If possible: Buy recycled-content products.** We support recycling when we buy products made from recyclable materials. **Resource:** [Paper Calculator 4.0 | Environmental Paper Network](#)

Composting (organics collection): *Best practices*

Use best practices and resources below to plan, set up and maintain collection of organics.

Before starting to collect organics (food scraps and other compostable materials):

- Encourage [food waste reduction](#). Reducing wasted food is more important than composting. First make sure edible foods are eaten, and then your school will have fewer food scraps to be composted. See information in this guide about how to reduce food waste.
- Make sure recyclable materials are being sorted correctly.

Key tools and resources	
Food Scrap Collection Steps to Success	Learn the steps to setting up food scrap collection
Food scrap assessment	Use this form to measure its food scrap volume and/or weight before setting up food scrap collection
Sample announcements about composting	Use or modify these announcements to inform and remind your school about organics collection
Cedar Grove Packaging (cedar-grove.com) and CMA-I (Covered In-Vessel) – Compost Manufacturing Alliance	Important: Check these websites to make sure all your “compostable” products (trays, paper boats, utensils, food scrap bin bag liners, etc.) are approved for composting at Cedar Grove Composting, our regional composting facility. Cedar Grove belongs to the Compost Manufacturing Alliance, so products on that website are approved by Cedar Grove.

	Select product you want to buy, such as bag liners for indoor compost bins, compostable trays or other serving-ware, etc.
Tips to prevent or reduce fruit flies	Find strategies to prevent and reduce fruit flies.
Call for adult volunteers to help with collection of compostable materials	Template asking for parent/family/guardian volunteers to help train students.
On-site food composting	Consider composting food scraps in worm bins, Earth Tubs, etc., especially if a collection service is not possible.
Cedar Grove Composting services for schools using Cedar Grove to collect its organics	Signs, school visits, trainings: Contact Maggie Brown- 206-715-8071 / maggiieb@cgcompost.com . School Soils: Up to 10 yards of free compost annually and a gift certificate for a raffle. Wholesale prices for approved compostable bin liners and serving-ware.
Washington State Organics Management law passed in 2022. Applies to businesses and schools.	As of Jan. 1, 2024 - Schools generating at least 8 cubic yards of organic material waste per week must arrange for organic materials management service. As of Jan. 1, 2025 - Schools generating at least 4 cubic yards of organic material waste per week must arrange for organic materials management service. As of Jan. 1, 2026 - Schools generating at least 4 cubic yards of solid waste per week must arrange for organic materials management service.

- **Educate students and staff** about why composting matters and what materials are accepted for composting. (Garbage and recyclable materials such as plastic, metal, and glass do not belong in compost bins.) **Resources:** [Sample announcements about composting](#) and [The Compost Story](#)
- **Restroom paper towel composting.** *If* Cedar Grove Composting picks up compostable materials from your school, you *may* be able to include restroom paper towels in the collection program. Cedar Grove requires: (a) separate restroom bins with signs for paper towels only; (b) daily monitoring of paper towel bins; and (c) an agreement signed by the custodian who will monitor paper towel bins. **Resource:** Ask the Green Schools Program for more information.
- **Reduce lawn and garden waste** by leaving grass clippings on lawns and fields, and composting leaves and other organic material on school grounds if allowed by your school or district.

Recycling rate

To be recognized as a Level One Green School: Reach a recycling rate of 40% or more, or increase the school recycling rate by 15% or more.

Key tools and resources	
Recycling rate calculation worksheet (Link to the Recycling Toolkit web page)	Find worksheet in “Monitoring recycling and garbage” section of Recycling Toolkit web page. Questions? Ask the Green Schools Program.
Garbage and recycling tracking form	This form will help you assess fullness of outdoor garbage, recycling, and composting containers. Use that information to fill out the recycling rate worksheet.

Education, outreach, and advocacy

Education and outreach are keys to improving waste reduction and recycling practices. All staff and students can learn about conservation and take action in their schools, districts, and communities.

Key tools and resources	
Climate change and solid waste	Help students and staff make connections between solid waste and climate change
Educational programs offered by King County	Free classroom workshops for elementary, middle, and high schools, and an assembly for elementary schools
Education and assistance from recycling haulers. Includes online curriculum, school visits, presentations, audits, and trainings.	Recology: Email educationoutreach@recology.com / See Education & Outreach Republic: See Online curriculum / Email Carla.Johnson2@republicservices.com Waste Management: Email Recyclenw@wm.com / See Elementary-Curriculum-Overview -Waste Management resources.pdf (sharepoint.com) ; Curriculum-Grades-K-2.pdf ; Curriculum-Grades-3-5.pdf ; Curriculum-Grades-4-5.pdf
Fact vs. Fiction about reducing waste and recycling	Use this PowerPoint to educate students and staff about why waste reduction and recycling matter and what can be recycled
Sample announcements	Use or revise these announcements as you start and maintain recycling practices
Staff meeting presentations	Use this guide to prepare a presentation to school staff about waste reduction and recycling
Waste Reduction and Recycling fast facts	Share in classrooms, assemblies, cafeteria, emails, newsletters, website, and social media
Green Team Guide: Strategies for Success	Tips on starting and maintaining student teams.
Elementary school Green Teams	Elementary schools: Guidance, resources, project ideas and guides, and recognition offered by the program.
Secondary school Green Teams	Middle and high schools: Guidance, resources, project ideas and guides, and recognition offered by the program.

Activities for students and staff

Use “**Key tools and resources**” above and resources below in classrooms, student clubs, school-wide, and district-wide. For recognition, select and carry out at least **four** educational or outreach activities.

- **Announcements** to introduce students and staff to waste reduction and recycling practices at the start of the school year and to remind them regularly throughout the year. Use in staff meetings, classrooms, PA announcements, assemblies, newsletters, emails, and social media.
- **Cafeteria monitors.** Students or other volunteers remind students what items can and can’t be recycled. Train monitors and create a monitoring schedule.
- **Make 3-dimensional signs** to show materials which can be placed in recycling, composting, and garbage bins. **Resource:** Ask the Green Schools Program for examples and guidance.

- **Guest educators, speakers, and tours.** Schedule guest educators or speakers, or plan a tour or field trip related to waste reduction and recycling. **Resources:** See resources in “Key tools and resources” above; [Tours at regional recycling, composting, reuse, and garbage facilities](#)
- **Staff training.** Present a short training about reducing waste and recycling at a staff meeting. Students can lead the presentation or help. **Resource:** [Staff meeting presentations](#)
- **Climate change connections.** Educate students and staff about waste reduction and climate change. When we reduce waste and recycle, fewer greenhouse gas emissions are produced. **Resources:** [Climate Change: Green Team and Classroom learning and activities](#); and [Project Drawdown](#) which lists reducing food waste as one of the most effective strategies to reduce global greenhouse gas emissions
- **Contests or quiz shows.** See which classroom, grade level, or lunch period generates the least garbage per day or week, or which has the least contamination in its recycling bins. At lunch, in classrooms, or at an assembly, run a quiz show about reducing waste and recycling. **Resources:** [Recycling quiz show questions](#); [Quiz Show Guide](#); and [Incentives to encourage correct sorting](#)
- **Waste audit.** Assess what materials your school throws out instead of reuses, recycles, or composts. Share results with your school. **Resource:** [Waste and recycling assessment form](#)
- **Create a skit or video** on reducing waste and recycling to share in classrooms, assemblies, cafeteria, staff meeting, or social media. **Resources:** Tips on making videos about [reducing food waste](#), [refillable bottles](#), [recycling and waste reduction](#)
- **Student advocacy.** Secondary school students can advocate at the school, district, city, county, state, or national level for waste reduction, reuse, recycling, and composting practices and policies. Research school/district practices and policies, and offer recommendations to school board and administrators. **Resources:** [Berkeley Public School Sustainability Plan](#) (model plan for education, waste reduction, recycling, composting, energy, water, transportation, health); [Environmental Justice: learning and activities](#); and [Earth Day, Earth Month, or any day or month](#)

Grant and funding resources

- [Fundraising ideas related to recycling](#)
- [Gardening resources for schools](#) - See grants section
- [Grant and award opportunities](#)
- [Resources for Schools – from Plastic Free Restaurants](#). Email the nonprofit organization Plastic Free Restaurants at contact@plasticfreerestaurants.org to request cash subsidies for schools to switch from plastic to reusable products.
- [Waste Not Washington School awards](#)

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