Pursuing Zero Waste at Your Campus

An Austin ISD Green Team Publication

ZERO WASTE AT AUSTIN ISD

Austin ISD supports the City of Austin's zero waste goal of diverting at least 90 percent of all trash from the landfill by 2040. To do its part, Austin ISD seeks to minimize the creation of waste and to responsibly manage the waste that it does create through reuse, recycling, and composting (where available). This guide provides a primer for setting your campus on a path towards zero waste.

Everyone—students, teachers, custodians, cafeteria staff, administrators, and parents—has a role to play in keeping as much trash as possible out of the landfill. The first step is to **reduce** the amount of trash created through smart choices like only buying what is needed, avoiding excess packaging, and identifying creative **reuse** options like making bulletin boards out of recycled wrappers and fabric scraps or using bubble wrap and Styrofoam® as insulation in a greenhouse.

For waste that cannot be avoided or reused, the Facilities Maintenance Department manages waste collection district-wide, and custodial staff oversees collection at the individual campus level. Texas Disposal Systems (TDS) provides landfill and recycling collection at 100 percent of Austin ISD facilities and cafeteria composting at all elementary schools and a growing number of middle schools. For a full list of campuses with recycling and cafeteria composting, visit: http://www.greenschoolsolutions.com/.

TDS provides "single stream" recycling, which is the same type of recycling that is available at your home if you live in the City of Austin. Single stream recycling means you can put different types of paper, plastics, metals, and glass all in the same blue bin—no sorting required. As we'll learn later, there are some nuances to what you can and can't recycle through single stream. For this reason, some campuses have additional "special recyclables" collection for items like plastic bags and batteries that cannot be recycled through the regular single stream (blue bin) recycling. These special recyclables must be taken to drop-off locations (e.g., spiral CFL light bulbs to home improvement stores) or be mailed in (e.g., chip bags and energy bar wrappers to Terracycle). For help identifying recycling locations, visit: http://search.earth911.com/.

TDS provides large-scale, commercial-grade cafeteria composting that is processed offsite. Because this commercial process allows the compost piles to reach very high temperatures, TDS accepts meat, dairy, and other items that should not be placed in small-scale onsite composting bins or piles. Local organizations, such as Keep Austin Beautiful and Compost Pedallers, may provide support for smaller-scale onsite composting systems to nourish school or other community gardens. Do not place meat, dairy, or oils in these onsite compost systems.

BUILDING A CULTURE OF ZERO WASTE AT YOUR CAMPUS

One of the challenges of teaching environmental stewardship is the disconnect between our individual actions and their collective impact. To motivate students and staff to embrace a zero waste mentality, we must help connect the dots between our consumption and the waste created from that consumption. One way to do this is to integrate systems thinking into the classroom and make everyday activities like clearing lunch trays and drying our hands with a single paper towel a learning opportunity.

Building a culture of zero waste is all about changing behavior so that recycling and composting becomes the norm. Keeping track of what can and can't be recycled or composted can be confusing, so consistency and engagement is key. The goal is for students and staff to know their waste disposal options and for those options to be simple to understand so that sorting becomes second nature.

To support this zero waste habit, the district is moving towards the creation of Zero Waste Stations, like those shown in Figure 1 below, at all Austin ISD facilities.

Figure 1. Example Zero Waste Station Set Up

There are four key components to fostering a waste-free culture:

Bin Placement. For visibility and ease of access, bins should be placed in high-traffic areas where waste is created. The bins should be co-located with the goal of providing at least one landfill alternative and placed in the same order: **l**andfill on the **l**eft, **c**ompost in the **c**enter, and **r**ecycle on the **r**ight. Remove the compost bin if that's not an option at your campus or if food waste or soiled paper—the main types of compostables found in schools—is not created at that location. See Table 1 for recommended bin locations.

Table 1. Recommended Bin Locations

Location	Landfill	Compost	Recycle
Pick-up/Drop-off	•		•
School Entrance	•		•
Front/Main Office	•		•
Library	•		•
Classroom	•		•
Gym/Athletic Facilities	•		•
Performing Arts Center	•		•
Cafeteria	•	•	•
Kitchen	•	•	•
Staff Break Room	•	•	•
Restroom (paper towels)	•	•	•
Hallway	•	•	•

It is best practice to use bins of varying sizes based on the volume of waste created in a given area. For example, classrooms and staff break rooms might have small bins that get emptied at the end of the day into large roll carts in central areas like a hallway or wing. Cafeterias and kitchens should have larger roll carts, especially for composting given the large volume of food waste that is created. You might also try using smaller bins for landfill trash and larger bins for recycling/composting to flip the mentality towards more waste being kept out of the landfill, as shown in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2. Recycle Bin with "Side Car" Landfill Bin

Color. Landfill bins should be **black** or **gray**, compost bins **green**, and recycle bins **blue**. Don't worry, you don't need to buy new color-coded or specially labeled bins. You can use colored construction paper or poster board affixed to existing bins (of any color) with the applicable landfill (**black/gray**), compost (**green**), or recycle (**blue**) label written on the construction paper or poster board. You can also download color-coded stickers from: http://austintexas.gov/page/zerowastebusinessresources. See Figure 3 for examples.

Figure 3. Example Bin Color Coding

Signage. Knowing what to recycle vs. compost vs. landfill takes practice and plenty of visual cues. Large, eye-catching signage is a must to help improve sorting. For students, three-dimensional signs with examples of the types of waste found in Austin ISD schools can be more effective than text-filled lists. However, some may want the detail that a text-based list can provide, so use of multiple formats is encouraged. For examples of 3-D signs and to download printable 11" x 17" recycle/compost text-based posters, visit: http://www.austinisd.org/advisory-bodies/esac/sustainability-resource-fairs/zero-waste.

General sorting rules of thumb are below.

- **Paper recycling.** If it tears, *recycle* it. If it's wet or has food on it, *compost* (if available) or *landfill* it. If it's coated with plastic or foil, *landfill* it.
- **Plastic recycling.** If it falls to the ground when dropped, *recycle* it. If it floats to the ground when dropped, *landfill* it.
- **Metal recycling.** If it's clean aluminum, tin, or steel, *recycle* it.
- **Glass recycling.** If it's clean and unbroken, *recycle* it.
- **Composting.** If it was once living, it can be *composted* (but sometimes it's a better use to *recycle* it, e.g., clean paper).

Also, keep in mind that words matter. Rather than labeling bins or signs as “trash,” use “landfill” to trigger an image of where the trash goes. Statistics, humor, and animation can also be effective attention-grabbing tools. For example, to remind people to compost rather than recycle paper towels (a common sorting mistake), consider a sign that reads:

> *I’ve already been recycled many times and had a long life. Please **compost** me so I can give life to new plants as soil.*

To encourage creative reuse of Styrofoam, try a sign that says:

> *I have the gift of eternal life. Don’t send me to the **landfill** to spend the next 500+ years alone. How else can you use me instead?*

Make sure the signs are durable using lamination or equivalent, as they are generally in high-traffic areas and can take a lot of wear and tear. 3-D signs can be a lamination challenge, so consider plastic wrap or clear mailing tape as an alternative. Post the signs at a level that can be easily read and that is out of reach of student hands and flying trash. Many schools have had success with hanging signs from the ceiling, as shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Hanging Signs at Bedichek Middle School

Personal Empowerment. As Dr. Peter Senge with the Society for Organizational Learning says, “Learning is deeply personal but inherently collective.” Teaching students (and adults) about responsible waste management and empowering them to help the environment by sorting their own waste can lead to lifelong habits and help influence their families and friends outside school. Leverage social norms and build leaders by creating teams of “Landfill Leaders,” “Compost Captains,” and “Recycling Wranglers” to be the go-to experts and monitors to ensure your waste stream is effectively sorted so that as little trash as possible ends up in the landfill.

Also consider creating a reward system for encouraging desired behavior. For example, at Guerrero Thompson Elementary, students who correctly break down their lunch tray into the appropriate bins within a given time frame receive a ticket from custodial staff for a weekly prize drawing. Students are so engaged that many sort their waste as they eat to increase their chances of earning a prize. You can reverse the reward structure with students auditing classroom waste bins and awarding teachers with correctly sorted trash with a “green apple” or other small token. This type of incentive system has led to teachers proudly displaying their kudos on their classroom door or desk. The teacher with the most number of tokens can earn an extra free period or pizza party for their class.

You can also create recycling and composting contests using the weight of recycling and composting picked up at your campus: http://www.greenschoolsolutions.com/.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- AISD What to Recycle/Compost 11” x 17” Posters (English, Spanish)
- Campus Recycle/Compost Collection Weights
- City of Austin Landfill/Compost/Recycle Decals
- City of Austin *What Do I Do With…* Waste Sorting Guide
- City of Austin Zero Waste Plan
- School Waste Audit Guide and Resources
- Zero Waste Teaching Tools

If you don’t find what you’re looking for in the resources above, please contact Austin ISD Sustainability Coordinator, Jen Cregar, (512) 414-3072 or jennifer.cregar@austinisd.org.