

Schools and Waste



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Some areas of your school may be off-limits without permission from your teacher or principal, and some projects should be done with at least one partner. Check with your teacher before beginning any activities or projects related to this fact sheet.

Why It Matters

The cafeteria produces a lot of waste, in the form of metal, plastic, paper and even food. If it's not reused or recycled, this waste fills up our landfills and leads to pollution.

If your school is like most, kids, teachers, and staff create lots of waste every day. Much of it gets thrown away and ends up in landfills, where it takes up valuable space. Many communities are running out of places to put their garbage, so using landfills wisely is important.

But crowded landfills are just part of the problem. Think about what happens when you throw something away: Usually, a new product will be created to take its place. Do you ever throw soda cans in the trash? When you do, manufacturers have to make more cans from scratch. That means they have to dig up more aluminum, which pollutes the water and the air. And to make cans out of this new aluminum, they use more energy than they'd need if they used recycled aluminum, and that creates even more pollution.

Classrooms often generate a lot of waste, especially in the form of paper. (See our fact sheet on Saving Paper in Schools.) Cafeterias produce a lot of waste, too. In many schools, cafeterias use disposable products like

plastic silverware. They serve milk in single-use cartons, or sell soda or juice in bottles and cans. And most lunchrooms throw out huge amounts of uneaten food each day.

What Kids Can Do

The cafeteria is a great place for reducing waste, because it produces so much of it — and so many different kinds. Here are some steps you can take to reduce the amount of waste your cafeteria produces.

- " **Pack your lunch in reusable items:** If you bring your lunch to school in a paper bag, switch to a lunchbox or another reusable container. Whenever possible, carry your food in reusable packing, such as plastic containers that can be washed and used again.
- " **Sort and recycle cafeteria trash:** Your cafeteria should have recycling bins. Use them! Take a minute to separate your trash according to your school's rules. (These will depend on the rules in your community.) Materials that are often recycled include paper, cardboard, milk cartons, aluminum cans and plastic and glass bottles. If it's clean, aluminum foil can be recycled, too. (If your cafeteria doesn't recycle, talk to your principal about starting a recycling program at your school.)
- " **Compost:** Instead of throwing out food waste, compost it. Compost — a crumbly material that looks like soil — forms naturally when organic materials (things that were once alive) break down.

Compost can be applied to soil to make it healthier without using chemicals. Your school can use the compost, or you can take it home. Be sure to learn the rules about what to include and how to store it — otherwise you could have problems with odors, or with bugs and rodents. (See the “Project Ideas.”)

What Your School Can Do

Kids are great recyclers. In fact, it was the energy and commitment of kids that helped make recycling common in this country. Kids have the will, but schools need to provide the way. Every school should have a recycling policy. And there should be recycling containers in your cafeteria and throughout your school, so it's easy to do the right thing and separate your trash. If your school doesn't provide them (or enough of them), speak up.

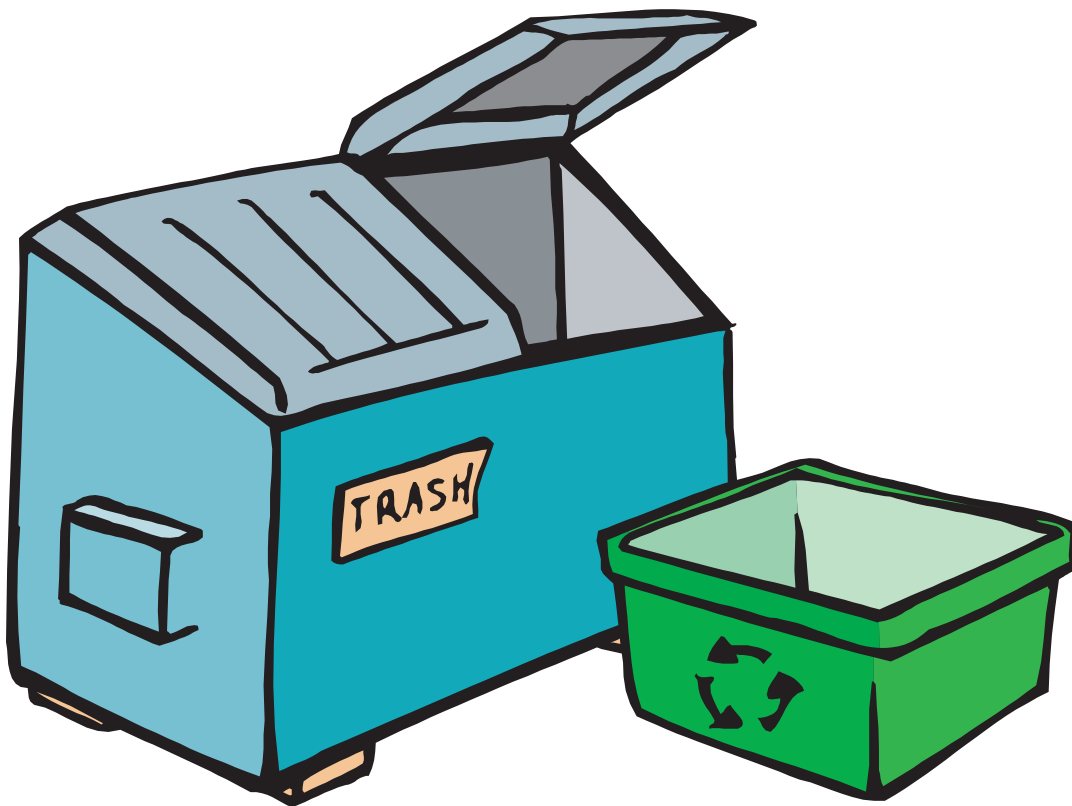
For More Information

EPA Office of Solid Waste Kids' Page:
<http://www.epa.gov/epaoswer/osw/kids/index.htm>

Virginia DEQ's Quick and Dirty Fact Sheet on Recycling
<http://www.deq.state.va.us/kids/library/recycling.html>

Annenberg/CPB's How Can My Community Reduce Waste?
<http://www.learner.org/exhibits/garbage/intro.html>

Waste-Free Lunches:
<http://www.wastefreelunches.org/>



Check out the **Project Ideas** fact sheet for examples of activities that you can do in your school. All of these projects can go toward earning the Green Flag Award at your school.

The Green Squad is a project of the Natural Resources Defense Council, in collaboration with the Healthy Schools Network.
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