

AUSD's "Green Schools Challenge": Helping Students Make a Difference

Waste in landfills is a prominent environmental problem. Landfills can contaminate local air and groundwater and create noxious odors and noises. In addition, when food waste breaks down in a landfill, it creates methane, a greenhouse gas that is many times as potent as the more commonly known greenhouse gas, carbon dioxide. Recycling (in which paper, plastic, metal, and glass are turned back into useable products) and composting (in which biodegradable waste is turned into soil) helps keep material out of the landfills, reduces greenhouse gas emissions, and creates jobs in the community.

The Alameda Green Schools Challenge (AGSC) program was created in 2009 to create comprehensive recycling and composting programs at public (and private) schools in Alameda. That same year, AUSD received a three-year grant from the Altamont Education Advisory Board to develop the infrastructure needed for such a program, including multi-colored bins, custodial carts, lesson plans, stickers, and posters, at all 17 public schools in Alameda.

From Transitional Kindergarten to the Superintendent's Office

When the AGSC program began, AUSD had a recycling program, but no food scrap composting in place, and the district recycled only 41% of its trash (by volume). Working with principals, teachers, custodians, parents, students, and the waste management company, a team of volunteers, along with district staff, set up a pilot food scrap (or "green waste") diversion program at five schools. The program – including the color of the bins – was designed to match that of the residential service to make it easier to learn and adopt. Specifically, blue bins are for recyclable materials, such as glass, aluminum foil, clean paper and cardboard, and some kinds of plastic. Green bins are for food waste and paper and cardboard that has food scraps on it. Gray bins are for materials going to the landfill – such as plastic bags, plastic wrap, and straws.

Within six months, the pilot programs had increased their recycling and composting rate from an average of 30% to nearly 64%. Within three years, the program had been expanded to all the elementary schools, middle schools, and high schools in the district. Program volunteers created lesson plans, including books, videos, and other visuals, for every elementary grade; kindergarten teachers received instructional kits with games and lesson materials to begin the process of teaching our youngest students how to

properly sort their waste at school and at home. Signs and labels, bins and waste collection equipment had all been designed or purchased with the goal of creating a program that is uniform and consistent at all schools.

Within five years, the district was diverting 68% of its waste (by volume) from the landfill, with some schools able to divert as much as 85% of their garbage to recycling or compost. These rates are well above the county average of 43%.

The program is now expanding both to Transitional Kindergarten classes and to the district office, making it clear that sustainable practices are a priority of the entire district.

The Role of Green Teams

The AGSC is sustained through "Green Teams" at each school site. Each team is comprised of a principal, teacher liaison, custodian, and at least one parent volunteer who works to get other volunteers to help with the program. A Green Team list serve and annual meeting help program participants share best practices. Custodians, who agreed to take on recycling duties during contract negotiations in 2010, also receive training at semi-annual "Green Glove Symposiums." These trainings often include visits to schools in other districts and a trip to the regional waste transfer center, so the custodians can get an up-close view of the issues surrounding waste disposal.

The program also benefits from the deep support of AUSD's Board of Education. The Board adopted a Green Schools Resolution in April, 2010, which mandates an annual presentation on environmental initiatives, to coincide with Earth Week. In April 2013, the Board adopted a resolution to be a Preferred Partner with StopWaste.org, a joint agency of the Alameda County Waste Management Authority and Alameda County Source Reduction and Recycling Board that aims to promote sustainable consumption and disposal patterns. By becoming a priority partner, AUSD has committed to the StopWaste goal of diverting 90% of its garbage to recycling and compost by 2020.

The Importance of "Trash Talkers"

The Green Schools program relies heavily on student service at each school site. At some school sites (such as Lincoln Middle School) all students have to take turns as "recycling monitors," meaning they coach students on sorting their waste properly every day at lunch. At other schools (such as Haight Elementary School) students volunteer to be waste monitors. Whether mandatory or

volunteer, serving as a waste monitor helps students learn about proper waste-sorting protocols and the barriers to sorting experienced by adults and children alike. Such barriers include ignorance, confusion, and lack of incentive.

Because elementary school students receive lessons on the ecological consequences of waste, the program also serves as an environmental education unit that helps build lifelong environmental awareness and sorting habits. Many parents have commented that, since the program began, their children automatically look for recycling and green waste bins, both at home and out in public, and urge their parents to sort their own waste more carefully.

Managing waste used to be solely the responsibility of the district's custodial staff, but because of the AGSC, this is no longer the case. AGSC provides students of all ages with opportunities to lead, provide service to their community, and take action to address the issue of local and global climate change. Many serve as classroom and lunchtime recycling monitors and participate in school-wide waste audits to increase their school's diversion rate. Many go beyond these efforts. This year, for instance, students at Alameda High School implemented a "Beyond the Bottle" campaign, which included fundraising for a school hydration station and a contest to encourage use of reusable water bottles at school. AHS, as well as Wood and Lincoln Middle Schools, have all achieved "Ocean Guardian" status through the National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration because of their efforts to reduce single use plastics at school and lead efforts to clean up the coastlines of our island community.

Students have also begun to step into leadership roles at community events. Wood Middle School student, Katrina Chak, for instance, volunteered to teach waste-sorting skills at the city's Earth Day festival in April, 2014. Community members who stopped by Katrina's booth could play the "Clean Up Game," which is a component of our program's instructional materials. Similarly, ASTI student Kasia Metkowski has organized and led teams of student "trash talkers" at local events where large amounts of waste are generated. These students guide residents to dispose of their garbage properly at waste-sorting stations. At all of these events, these students interact with hundreds of community members, sharing what they have learned through the school program about the importance of recycling and waste reduction.

Materials for Other School Districts

In other school districts, such ambitious "go green" projects often start with a flurry of inspiration and activity, but then peter out, especially in schools lacking parent volunteer help. To surmount this problem, AUSD's superintendent at the time, Kirsten Vital,

created standards and expectations that, combined with the grassroots interest and enthusiasm, created a strong, sustainable program. Those top-down standards include mandating waste-sorting programs, "green" teacher liaisons, and custodian training at every site. Due to the consistency across grade levels, students carry the understanding and habit of sorting waste from kindergarten through their senior year.

The AGCA has twice received grants. The first one, received in 2009, allowed the district to set up the infrastructure for the program. The second one, received in April 2014, funds a part-time, paid "green facilitator" to work with each school's Green Team to maximize recycling and composting. This will help to further standardize and stabilize the still-young program, as well as help the district meet its 90% diversion goal.

The program can also be replicated to other school districts. Stopwaste.org has now placed AUSD's materials — including lesson plans, posters, stickers, and the kindergarten kit — on its website so that other schools and districts can use them. Already schools across California (including those in Berkeley, Walnut Creek and San Diego) have downloaded and customized our posters and stickers.

By promoting comprehensive waste prevention, recycling, and composting in the schools, AGCS has also modeled sustainable behavior as an example for the rest of the community. Since the AUSD program was implemented, the city of Alameda has expanded its residential three-stream waste program to both businesses and multi-family housing. Implementing the program in all three areas —residences, schools, and businesses — both codifies and normalizes the habit of sorting waste. This is a habit that has been shown to decrease the volume of garbage going to landfills. More importantly, it is a habit that empowers students and adults alike to feel they are helping to address environmental problems not only in their own community but across the globe.

"The idea of saving the planet can be overwhelming," says Michele Kuttner, a first-grade teacher at Bay Farm School and the Go Green coordinator for AUSD. "The Alameda Green Schools Challenge provides our children with a manageable and meaningful place to start. And it serves as a reminder of the responsibility we all have to take care of the environment. "