



San Diego County Elementary Schools Make Gains in School Recycling



With a long history of environmental activism and focus on sustainability, recycling has been an important part of California culture for decades. Recent research commissioned by the Carton Council reveals that the majority (71%) of Californians report they recycle their food and beverage cartons with 55% reporting they always recycle them.

This doesn't stop at the curb, as recycling is an important sustainability activity in California schools, fostered by California's Department of Resources Recycling and Recovery (CalRecycle). Not only are a substantial number of recyclables, especially cartons, consumed in schools, but there is an opportunity for students to bring recycling behaviors home and to create future life-long recyclers.

Recycling can also help schools improve waste diversion and reduce costs. Food and beverage cartons play a pivotal role in school recycling programs, especially in elementary schools. The average elementary school of 545 students consumes about 75,000 cartons per year, an average of 133 servings of milk or juice per student each year. More than four billion cartons are consumed in schools throughout the U.S. annually.



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THE CHALLENGE:

While good for the planet, recycling in California schools is also required. In San Diego County, some schools were having more success than others in getting school recycling programs off the ground and maintaining them. Relying on well-intentioned volunteers often works but without full buy-in, programs often aren't sustainable, and not all schools are lucky enough to have volunteers to help drive them.

WORKING SOLUTIONS:

With these challenges in mind, [BCK Programs](#) and the [Carton Council](#) stepped in to provide support. BCK Programs designed a strategy to launch or improve recycling and waste diversion practices, reduce costs and provide a cleaner environment. The Carton Council assisted with funding, tools, resources and recycling expertise.



These established steps for success utilized in San Diego County can be implemented in schools across the U.S.

Step 1: Firm Up Your Commitment to Recycling and Reducing Waste

From the superintendent and district staff to school principals, teachers and custodians, it's crucial to have everyone on board and committed to a school recycling program. Students are often underutilized, but in San Diego County, their support was critical from the very beginning, making them leaders in helping to sell the program internally. California is a leader in many sustainability efforts, including mandating reduction targets. Since food and beverage cartons are a high-volume package in elementary schools, recycling them is valuable in complying. San Diego schools now include waste diversion and recycling responsibilities in job descriptions to ensure everyone understands the commitment.

Step 2: Understand What is Currently Happening to the Food, Waste and Recycling

While some schools in San Diego County knew they had room to improve, others felt they were doing the right thing. That is until waste audits were conducted to see what items were being improperly disposed of as trash, including both organics (food) and recyclable materials. In total, waste audits at elementary schools typically uncover that over 80% or more of the waste collected is divertible, a trend also seen at the San Diego schools. Identifying these gaps also created opportunity for new solutions:

1. A significant portion of discards being trashed was unopened food, such as milk cartons, oranges, bag of chips, etc. This discovery can lead to new policies, including not requiring students to take one of everything if it is not wanted or creating a food share table making unopened food available to others.
2. Inconsistency of signage found on recycling containers. Clear labeling with images of items that go in each container is extremely helpful to educate and remind students while they are at the point of decision. While other education is important, making sure it is very clear immediately what each container/station is for, is crucial to success.
3. Recyclable items, such as milk cartons, incorrectly being trashed. Creating an orderly line for students to disassemble their lunch with containers for food scraps, remaining liquids, recyclables and last, trash for anything that remains proved successful.

The information obtained from the audits served as a baseline for understanding the schools' waste composition, allowing for setting measurable goals for waste reduction, recycling and composting.

Waste audits also provide schools a look at their disposal costs. Many waste haulers charge less for recycling and composting services than for regular trash disposal, so increasing diversion can lead to significant cost savings.



Steps for success (continued)

Step 3: Create and Direct the Process

Taking the learnings from the waste audit, the various schools developed their own signage and process that worked for them. Bins and containers needed to be fairly low to the ground to accommodate elementary age children. The distance between the containers/stations also played a role. Too far apart and students may forget, while too close together may make it confusing. Clear instructions to direct the process are crucial to a successful recycling program. Many schools have found success with color-coded-bins to differentiate liquids, recyclables, food rescue, and trash, while others, like the National School District, have aids during the lunch hours to help remind students and make sure items end up in the right spot.

Step 4: Educate, Educate, Educate

Schools serve as important platforms for educating the next generation about sustainability and recycling. Enhancing recycling programs helps integrate practical environmental stewardship into the curriculum, teaching students the importance of conservation and responsible waste management from a young age. Better yet, they often bring the knowledge and behaviors back home, educating their families and friends as well. Some highlights of success from various San Diego elementary school districts include:

1. Encinitas Union School District (EUSD)

- EUSD has been a pioneer in adopting progressive environmental practices. It was among the first to receive the National Green Ribbon School district award, recognizing their significant achievements in waste diversion and district-wide recycling improvements.
- The initiative started around 2012-2013, catalyzed by grants from organizations like the Carton Council and focused initially on carton recycling as a gateway to broader waste diversion strategies.
- While waste diversion savings varies at each school district, some can be significant over time. For EUSD, the District initially saved \$30,000 the first year after implementing recycling programs. They also saw a savings of another \$10,000 after students became more efficient recyclers.

2. National School District

- Located in an underserved area, the National School District significantly revamped its waste management practices. With support from BCK and the Carton Council, initial efforts focused on carton recycling, eventually expanding to more comprehensive waste diversion. The district went from 100% waste to implementing recycling with very low contamination.
- The district's engagement in these initiatives has spurred a broader commitment to environmental and sustainability goals, mirroring the successes seen in other districts like EUSD.



Steps for success (continued)

3. Escondido Union School District

- The program in Escondido addressed misconceptions and practices around recycling at the school level. Despite initial efforts, a detailed assessment revealed significant contamination in recycling bins.
- The intervention led to a more structured approach with the help of BCK and the Carton Council, including better separation of recyclables and organics, as well as education to ensure cleaner recycling streams.

Step 5: Don't Go it Alone

Success in schools in San Diego County exemplifies the potential for environmental education programs to facilitate significant waste diversion from landfills, particularly through food and beverage carton recycling. Their success not only improves environmental outcomes but also serves educational and compliance objectives within school systems. The continued expansion and refinement of these programs are crucial as legislative mandates evolve and the need for sustainable practices becomes even more important in educational environments.

Implementing recycling programs is not without challenges. Schools often operate under misconceptions or lack of adequate infrastructure for effective waste diversion. Securing grants for necessary equipment, such as bins and signage, comprehensive audits and targeted education are all key to success. There are resources from the recycling industry and stakeholders to help schools succeed.



To date, the Carton Council has supported **1,635 schools** across **92 districts** in California, involving **934,000 students** to ensure cartons get recycled. Visit the recyclecartons.com/schools for information and possible grants specific to school carton recycling programs.

