

San Mateo County Zero Waste Schools Frequently Asked Questions

*Prepared by members of the San Mateo County Zero Waste Education Alliance
Last Updated: May 2021*

Thank you for checking out the San Mateo County School Zero Waste Frequently Asked Questions! The San Mateo County Schools Zero Waste Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) is a resource to support anyone who is interested in Zero Waste principles and practices for school sites.

Zero Waste schools are an effective way to reduce the ecological footprint, engage students in educational opportunities, and create an environmentally friendly community. For further support, questions, or to learn more contact members of the San Mateo County Zero Waste Education Alliance (ZWEA) through our [webpage](#).

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The FAQ has four categories of questions for common school stakeholder groups: General, Student, Teacher, and Administrator. Readers can explore the group they generally belong to as well as the others, depending on what zero waste project they are doing.

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GENERAL QUESTIONS

Questions that apply to all school stakeholder groups. General questions are a great way to get started and learn the fundamentals of waste diversion!

Q: Who is my waste hauler?

A: Check out the [SMC Community Partners & Haulers](#) resource for public school district waste haulers. If you are still unsure, find the waste enclosure on your campus and look for the waste hauler logo on the waste receptacles. The [OOS interactive map](#) has information on private residence and business waste hauler service areas.

Q: General tips on how to reduce waste in the classroom?

A: The San Mateo County ZWEA partners have prepared a teacher-friendly poster with our top ten tips for reducing waste in the classroom. Visit the ZWEA webpage to download the poster.

Q: What are some examples of successful zero waste efforts in schools?

A: For inspiration and information about school waste programs, view these local examples:

- [Palo Alto Unified Reusable Foodware](#) - Local school district switches to reusable foodware and saves ~\$25,000/annually
- [Green Star Schools Program](#) - Local classes that reduce greenhouse gas emissions through waste reduction

- [San Mateo County Waste Solutionary Examples](#) - Local districts, teachers, and students tackling waste through campus, curriculum, and community projects

Q: Where can I go to get assistance or learn more about zero waste?

A: Review the [Zero Waste Campus & Community Resources](#) and [Zero Waste Initiatives: Big Picture Goals, Mandates, and Strategies](#) for detailed information about how to implement waste reduction initiatives on your school campus.

Q: How do we sort milk cartons?

A: Check directly with your waste hauler by calling their customer service phone number or contacting your school or district’s rep.

MILK CARTON SORTING IN SAN MATEO COUNTY		
Hauler Company	EMPTY Cartons	FULL Cartons
GreenWaste Recovery Inc.	Check directly with hauler	Check directly with hauler
Kunz Valley Trash	Check directly with hauler	Check directly with hauler
Recology San Mateo	Clean & Empty cartons go in Recycling	Full cartons go in Garbage
Recology Peninsula/San Bruno	Clean & Empty cartons go in Recycling	Full cartons go in Garbage
Recology of the Coast	Check directly with hauler	Check directly with hauler
Redwood Debris Box	Check directly with hauler	Check directly with hauler
Republic Services	Check directly with hauler	Check directly with hauler
South San Francisco Scavenger	Empty cartons belong in organics stream (for now, may change to Container Recycling in future)	Full cartons go in Garbage

Special note: Installing a milk dispenser with reusable cups can eliminate disposable milk cartons. Alternatively, remind students that they do not need to take milk with each meal if they do not want one (confirm with your Nutrition Services)! If students are required to take milk, consider starting a Food Share Table for unopened milk (post-COVID).

Q: Which types of plastics are recyclable (#s)?

A: Not all plastics can be recycled. The “chasing arrows” or triangle symbols on materials indicates what type of material that object is, and not all plastics can be recycled. As a general rule, hard plastics are accepted in recycling in San Mateo County. Each hauler will have specific guidelines, so it is best to check directly with them for questions on specific items. Many haulers use the phrase empty "bottles, jugs, and tubs" when training participants on which plastics are acceptable in recycling waste streams. School stakeholders should check with their schools waste hauling company to confirm the plastic recycling guidelines for their school and request no-cost sorting guides and resources.

- For those in the RethinkWaste Service Area check out this handy guide: [The Hard Facts About Plastics](#)

Q: Are tetrapacks (juice boxes, coconut water, Pringles cans) recyclable?

A: No, tetrapacks are not currently accepted by any waste hauling service in San Mateo County. **ALL** tetrapacks belong in the garbage.

Q: Why are recycling rules different for different service areas within San Mateo County?

A: Recycling rules vary based on the waste hauling company, the current recycling market rules and regulations, and available processing for recyclable materials. School stakeholders are encouraged to learn more about the recycling market in the United States using these [curriculum resources](#) developed by the San Mateo County Office of Education and ZWEA partners.

QUESTIONS THAT STUDENTS ASK

Students in all K-12 grade levels benefit from learning about zero waste! Materials, cycles of decomposition, and life cycle analysis are common themes in California education standards. We have included some common questions that students ask as they start to learn about how waste affects their community! Before diving into this section, please refer to the [General Questions](#) on page 1. To learn more about educational programs for K-12 students in San Mateo check out the [Zero Waste Educational Alliance partner webpage](#).

Q: How much energy is saved when we divert waste from landfills?

A: The amount of energy saved by keeping material out of landfills varies depending on many factors, including the type of material and the distance materials travel to the landfills. Here is an example for aluminum cans:

- Recycling of aluminum cans saves 95% of the energy required to make the same amount of aluminum from its virgin source. One ton of recycled aluminum saves 14,000 kilowatt hours (Kwh) of energy, 40 barrels of oil, 130. 152.32 million BTU's of energy, and 10 cubic yards of landfill space. Reference: [Stanford University](#)

Q: What are the recyclables being made into?

A: Items are recycled into a variety of products depending on what material it is. Some materials can be recycled indefinitely, while some can only be recycled one to three times. Example include:

- Indefinitely Recycled
 - Glass - becomes glass
 - Aluminum and metal - becomes aluminum, baseball bats, and metal cans
- One to Three Times Recycled (with reduced quality each time)
 - Paper - becomes lower quality paper
 - Hard plastic - becomes lower quality plastic
- Plastic water bottles - becomes fleece and clothing fabric

Q: What to do with hard to recycle items for example clothes, glue sticks, toys?

A: Common items generated in school programs such as clothing, glue sticks and toys can be tricky to recycle or simply cannot be recycled. Firstly, consider how to reduce the consumption of these items through using things like bulk glue, or purchasing gently-used items. Next,

consider reusing items for activities such as art or STEM projects. If possible, share or donate gently-used, good-quality items that you no longer need. Often schools host clothing swap programs at the end of the school year for lost-and-found items. For hard-to-recycle items, you can consider using the following:

- Set up a [Terracycle](#) account to recycle chip bags, candy wrappers, soft plastic tubes, and other items that usually have to go in the trash
- Check [recyclestuff.org](#) for more local disposal options

QUESTIONS THAT TEACHERS ASK

Teachers often take on multiple roles when it comes to zero waste in school programs including leading zero waste education programs, championing waste diversion, and facilitating events. Before diving into this section, please refer to the [General Questions](#) on page 1. Learn about common questions from teacher leaders championing waste reduction in schools below!

Q: Does compost in the classroom attract rodents and other pests?

A: Proper sorting and integrated pest management strategies, such as preventative maintenance, in classrooms can greatly reduce the risk of rodents and pests. Sorting waste differently does not change the likelihood of pests as the contents of the waste bins stays the same (more food waste is not generated by including an organics bin in a classroom). Pests are not as common of a problem as one may think, as waste bins are most often serviced daily. However, there is no guarantee that pests will not find their way into a classroom. Check with your custodial staff for how often your school's compost bins are being serviced consistently and partner with them to troubleshoot problems if they arise.

Q: What are the best practices for building and maintaining green teams?

A: There are lots of ways to build and maintain a green team at your campus! See below for tips and tricks:

- BUILDING A GREEN TEAM
 - Begin student engagement early on in the school year - this way you can build momentum throughout the year.
 - Make morning announcements to spread the word.
 - Schedule regular meetings for the green team during times of the day when the most people can attend.
 - Generate clear tasks, roles, and schedules for students - help students know their tasks are important.
 - Involve parents - parents can support through volunteer positions such as lunchtime sorting, or co-hosting events.
 - Empower the Green team through leadership training - Example: Teach the students how to teach others classmates to sort so that the students become the teachers.
- MAINTAINING A GREEN TEAM
 - Make the green team fun! - include games/incentives into meetings
 - Check with Zero Waste community partners for activities developed specifically for green teams!
 - Identify Student champions within the green team and empower them with leadership roles and recognition.

- Provide “refresher education” for the green team so they can be ambassadors for their school.
- Host parties and celebrations to recognize accomplishments - school-wide recognition helps acknowledge the green teams and custodians hard work and recruit other students to join.
- Prioritize “Legacy Projects” - these set the groundwork for future teachers and students to build off the current team’s efforts. Examples of this include documentation (notes, guidelines, vision statements) or large-scale projects such as school-wide organic collection programs or garden composting programs.

Q: How can I address concerns when a school/staff member has already tried compost/recycling and it didn’t work well initially?

A: It’s great that your school has tried to implement waste sorting in the past! This past project may have some important lessons and could help inform your school on how to re-introduce waste sorting on your campus. We recommend you consider the following:

- When did this staff member last try to set up compost/recycling? What resources are available now that were not available at that time?
- Who was involved at that time, and are any of those team members still at the school? Are there other staff members or parent volunteers that are interested in co-leading to bolster the program?
- What staff members or community partners can you connect with to add more resources or further support to this project? Examples are San Mateo County’s Office of Sustainability and RethinkWaste.

Q: How do I host waste free lunches and parties?

A: A waste free lunch or party can be as simple as a classroom event or as complex as a school-wide special event or grade level field trip. For whatever your event may be below are some helpful tips to get started:

- PREPARATION
 - Prepare participants through multiple announcements, include this on flyers/outreach materials, and be ready to answer questions or concerns if they come up.
 - Utilize County of San Mateo Office of Sustainability grant funding opportunities to purchase waste-free lunch kits that include dinnerware and utensils. If you have questions regarding the 4Rs Grants Program, please email sustainability@smcgov.org or call 888-442-2666.
 - Have a prepared kit that teachers can check out for parties. This could be stored in office or other campus storage.
- HOSTING
 - Make it exciting and recognize success! Thank participants for doing their part to reduce waste and acknowledge the reduced ecological footprint.
 - Have areas for participants to place used dinnerware and utensils. Provide organic waste collection for participants who have food leftovers and scraps (like orange peels). Scrape dinnerware clean if possible for easy washing in a dishwasher.

Q: How do I generate community buy-in for expanding waste diversion programs at my school?

A: Generating community buy-in is a vital step in a waste diversion program as it takes a whole school to make these programs run smoothly. Below are some tips to get you started:

1. Learn from past waste diversion programs at your school site or other schools in your district.
2. Identify who can be an ally in setting up and maintaining an expanded waste diversion program (multiple teachers, parent volunteers, etc.).
3. Emphasize that this is a paradigm shift towards waste diversion, and zero waste is happening in many places, not just school programs. In San Mateo County most residents have access to commercial organics waste hauling. We can help everyone if we sort on campus and in the home. Remind school leaders that a school's mission is to prepare students for life in higher education and the workforce, both of which are transitioning in the [green economy](#). Waste diversion is a part of these larger goals.
4. Explore ways to incentivize waste reduction with methods that can save money and resources at your unique school or district.

Q: How can I get funding for zero waste projects on my campus?

A: Some community partners in San Mateo County offer funding, grants, free or low-cost technical assistance, and grant writing assistance to schools and community groups. RethinkWaste provides no-cost resources/equipment for schools in the agency's service area (learn more on the [RethinkWaste Service Area Webpage](#)). The County of San Mateos Office of Sustainability offers a [4R's Grant Program](#). San Mateo County's Office of Education also has a [funding opportunities webpage](#). Get creative and reach out to community-based partners who might want to see successful programs in schools.

Q: How can I support my high school students if they are interested in zero waste or other themes outside of our Green Team?

A: There are several options available specific to San Mateo County:

- The County of San Mateo Office of Sustainability and San Mateo County Office of Education host a Youth Climate Ambassadors program! This knowledge to action program leads high school students through a community impact project focused on reducing climate change. The applications open every fall: [SMCSustainability](#).
- Host guest speakers, mentorship check-ins, or internships with ZWEA partners such as SSF Scavenger, RethinkWaste or San Mateo County's Office of Sustainability.
- Search for career shadowing or tabling events.

QUESTIONS THAT ADMINISTRATORS ASK

School administrators are often the primary decision makers when it comes to implementing a waste diversion program or changing purchasing policies to reduce waste. Before diving into this section, please refer to the [General Questions](#) on page 1.

Q: What are the costs of waste hauling services, and how do those costs differ between haulers and schools in San Mateo County?

A: The costs associated with waste hauling depend on the contract with the hauling company, levels and frequency of service, and material types. School districts will either have an independent contract with a hauling company, receive hauling services under a jurisdictional (city) franchise agreement, or self-haul waste to transfer stations or landfills. The best way to

understand the costs of your schools waste hauling is to contact your district's or school's accounting department or the waste hauler company representatives.

Q: Is there a cost savings related to waste diversion programs?

A: Costs will vary depending on the hauler company and the franchise agreements or contracts. Generally recycling services are offered at a lower cost than landfilling garbage, or it is incorporated into the garbage fees already. For many haulers the cost of organics collection might be the same as landfill or possibly lower in cost. It is possible for a school to save costs through reducing their landfill weekly service and increase their recycling and organics services. Increasingly, the best way for schools to save costs is through changes to their purchasing policies so that less waste is generated and all waste services are reduced.

Q: Where can I find the nearest plastic bag recycling program?

A: Check with the following search engine: <https://www.recyclestuff.org/>. For residents in Belmont, East Palo Alto, Foster City, Menlo Park, Redwood City, San Carlos, and San Mateo, refer to the RethinkWaste's [Plastic Bag Drop-Off Locations Guide](#).

Q: Where can I recycle “hard to recycle” materials such as textbooks, metals, e-waste, hazardous waste?

A: It is generally recommended that each school district have a point person who is the coordinator for the environmentally safe and healthy way to dispose of hazardous waste. This is often the person who is the school districts integrated pest management coordinator as there is overlap with those responsibilities. Items such as textbooks and metals can be more challenging for schools to divert from the landfill. Refer to the chart below for strategies on how to recycle these types of materials.

Material	Where to Recycle
Textbooks	SMC Partners put together a handy one page overview to textbook donations and recycling . Contact your local hauler for recycling paperback textbooks in bulk and proper sorting of hardcover textbooks.
Metals	Sims Metals in Redwood City may offer a container to collect metals for free.
Hazardous Waste <i>Defined here as materials such as e-waste, paints, cleaning chemicals, laboratory science chemicals, medical waste, refrigerant gases, etc.</i>	Hazardous waste items have specific safe storage, handling, and disposal requirements. Schools must contract with a local company for the safe and healthy disposal of these types of materials. Depending on the quantity of materials generated check with San Mateo County Health at https://www.smchealth.org/vsqq if your school is eligible for this service. Below are some frequently used companies that partner with schools for these services: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● InGenium - Milpitas ● Clean Harbors/Safety Kleen- San Jose ● Stericycle - VSQG and Sharps for/with the San Mateo County

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quick Light Recycling - South San Francisco • Valley Electronics - San Jose
<p>E-Waste <i>Electronics</i></p>	<p>Schools must contract with a local company for the safe and healthy disposal of these types of materials. Depending on the quantity of materials generated check with San Mateo County Health at https://www.smchealth.org/vsqq if your school is eligible for this service. Schools can also check out E-Recycling of California: https://erecyclingofca.com/.</p>

Q: How can custodians adapt their current procedures to handle servicing a third bin for organics?

A: There are many successful strategies for how to adjust custodial procedures to include a third waste stream (most often organics). When a school program is getting started a key step will be to involve custodians in the planning process in order to develop a procedure that will work for that school site. Some things to keep in mind are :

- Dollys: If custodians use a two bin dolly then the school can consider adding a third, one bin dolly, or adding a cart to the existing dolly.
- Liners: Standardizing liners will simplify the task of emptying waste receptacles. Dark bags are generally used only for garbage, while clear liner bags can be used for both recycling and organics. Check with your local hauler company about which bags they will accept in their collection waste streams.

Q: Where should I place an organics dumpster for servicing? We don't have room outside/inside of our waste enclosure.

A: Contact your hauler company for expert advice on the placement of an organics dumpster or cart. The hauler will check that you are using the right size dumpster or cart, and can help locate a safe and secure pick-up location on campus.

Q: Does compost in the classroom attract rodents and other pests?

A: Proper sorting and integrated pest management strategies, such as preventative maintenance, in classrooms can greatly reduce the risk of rodents and pests. Sorting waste differently does not change the likelihood of pests as the contents of the waste bins stays the same (more food waste is not generated by including an organics bin in a classroom). It is not as common of a problem as one may think, as waste bins are most often serviced daily.

Q: Are there legal considerations for waste management tasks for custodians and/or students?

A: Yes, there are legal considerations regarding waste management for both custodial staff and for students.

- Custodians: Check the school program contracts with custodial unions for more information. Generally, the considerations will be on liability with lifting bins, amount of time spent on waste management related tasks, and job roles and responsibilities.
- Students: Student rights are protected through many laws and regulations that should be a top priority of all school programs. Generally, the considerations for students will focus on liability. For instance, students should not be the sole party responsible for emptying classroom bins into dumpsters due to safety and health concerns.

Q: Are there legal or policy requirements when it comes to waste?

A: Yes, waste management is regulated through multiple agencies in San Mateo County and the State of California. These legal requirements focus on maintaining environmental health and the health and safety of students and staff. The main agencies to be aware of for waste policies include San Mateo County Environmental Health Department and State of California Department of Resources, Recycling, and Recovery (CalRecycle).

The State of California has legislated mandatory commercial laws for recycling and organics:

- Commercial recycling ([AB 341](#)): Goal of 75% recycling diversion by 2020
- Commercial organics ([AB 1826](#)): Goal of 75% organics diversion by 2025
- Edible food recovery ([AB 1219 - Chpt 619](#)) and [SB 557 - Chpt 285](#)): Goal of 20% food recovery by 2025
- Regulations ([SB 1383 - Chpt 395](#)): Requires school districts to report diversion rates and educational outreach efforts by 2022 and include compliance measures

For a printable version of the California waste mandates related to school programs view [Zero Waste Initiatives: Big Picture Resources, Mandates, and Strategies](#).

Q: What is the County of San Mateo's Disposable Food Serviceware Ordinance and does it apply to me?

A: The Disposable Food Serviceware Ordinance was adopted by the County of San Mateo in Winter 2020. The ordinance will reduce the use of non-compostable plastics in food service ware, and reduce waste through promoting bulk or optional service options. As a county ordinance it applies only to private schools that are in unincorporated San Mateo County. Many jurisdictions have begun to adopt the ordinance, in which case the private schools in those areas will also need to comply. Public school districts could adopt a policy similar to the ordinance which would greatly reduce their plastic waste. Learn more with these helpful links:

- [A Roadmap for School Districts For Reducing Single-Use Plastic and Food Ware Waste](#)
- [Disposable Food Serviceware Ordinance](#)
- [Disposable Food Serviceware Ordinance FAQs](#)

Q: What are the best practices around introducing zero waste on a school campus?

A: For a full description and resources on zero waste campus initiatives check out the Environmental Literacy and Sustainability Initiatives Page on [Zero Waste](#). Here are some general considerations:

- Involve multiple stakeholder groups in the planning process including custodial staff, teachers, and students.
- Plan and purchase infrastructure that will fit your schools needs and follow statewide guidelines (such as making organic bins green, recycling blue, and garbage black/grey)
- Waste sorting training should be given to everyone within a short period of time when the initiative kicks off. This is best done after a school-wide break such as winter or summer. Refresher training will be needed on a quarterly or bi-annual basis. The refresher training can be short while the initial training should be more robust so that stakeholders can ask questions and get familiar with the new system.
- Utilize [San Mateo County Environmental Partners](#) as guests to lead assemblies and waste activities and staff training.

Q: How do I generate community buy-in for expanding waste diversion programs across my school district? How do we build consistency across a district?

A: Generating community buy-in is a vital step in a waste diversion program as it takes a whole school/district to make these programs run smoothly. Below are some tips to get you started:

- Learn from past waste diversion programs in your district.
- Identify who can be an ally in setting up and maintaining an expanded waste diversion program (hauler company, community-based partners, multiple teachers, parent volunteers, etc.).
- Emphasize that this is a paradigm shift towards waste diversion, and zero waste is happening in many places, not just school programs. Waste diversion in schools is also [mandated](#) in multiple ways by the state of California.
- Explore ways to incentivize waste reduction with methods that can save money and resources at your unique school or district.

Thanks for reading the San Mateo County Zero Waste FAQ!
For more information visit the [Zero Waste Education Alliance Webpage](#) or contact elsi@smcoe.org

