

From Garbage to Green

Creating a student-led recycling club to develop a school-wide waste-reduction plan



Photos by Shannon N. Dishong

By **Shannon N. Dishong**

HOW CAN ONE TEACHER get a whole school to start recycling? How can he or she get middle school students — preteens and teenagers — to think about their garbage and where it goes?

As I watched student after student throw plastic bottles and cans in the trash day after day (despite my daily pleas), I was determined to do something, and I knew the only way to have a strong impact was to enlist the help of student leaders to help me. This is how the Eastlake Middle School Green Team was born.

I needed a group of kids to talk to other kids about the importance of recycling. I wanted to share my passion for all things “green” with the future generation, and I wanted them to share their new passion with their peers.

Before I dug in my heels and started preaching about the importance of recycling, I did my homework and learned some startling statistics about the relationships between schools and waste production. The United States makes up

only 5% of the world’s population, yet creates more than 17% of the world’s trash.¹ What’s even more astonishing is that, combined, school districts contribute 20–35% of total waste produced in the US.² In 2008, almost 35% of the ¼-of-a-billion tons of municipal solid waste was recyclable materials. Recycling reduces greenhouse emissions, lowers pollution, conserves energy and prevents greenhouse gases from being released into the atmosphere. According to James, school environments can be a center for influencing change and instilling a culture of sustainable living.³

My research also reinforced the idea that schools are ideal hubs for change and can alter the way people think about the environment and also help maintain the natural world for many years by modeling best practices for recycling.³ School faculties have the potential to establish a culture of environmental stewardship by promoting conservation and sustainability. They can be central to facilitating change and establishing a culture of sustainable living, but to do this, changing student behaviors is essential. Some practical ways schools can accomplish the culture of sustainability include installing many visible

recycle bins throughout the school (ideally, 1:1 recycle bin to waste receptacle ratio), including the gymnasium, cafeteria, classrooms, and hallways; getting administration and teachers to model recycling behaviors consistently; reducing paper consumption by increasing use of digital resources and technology in the classroom; and making conservation “cool,” perhaps by hosting contests throughout the year that boost recycling efforts and offer incentives to participating students.

Spreading the love of being green

Before I took on the big endeavor of changing the behaviors of all 400+ students in my school (which to me seemed like a very daunting task), I wanted to form a group of students who were passionate about the environment. I began by assembling a team of adolescents who also wanted to make a difference, so I actively recruited for Eastlake Middle School’s first environmental club. I advertised my need by giving a 3-minute spiel to all of the science classes, made daily announcements over the PA system every morning, and advertised on the five television screens throughout the school (cafeteria, lobby, upstairs hallway, and entrance to gymnasium). The message was the same everywhere and on every medium: Mrs. Dishong is recruiting for a team of passionate students who are concerned about the environment and want to help make EMS a “greener” place to learn and grow.

The first meeting was held on September 25, 2018 and 12 students attended. (On a side note, seven months later, 10 out of the 12 original members still eagerly attend meetings twice a week.) Named The Green Team, the new club’s purpose

was to teach students about the importance of recycling, to create an awareness of the impact one person can make, and to model that having an interest leads to creating an action, all while creating a vessel for student-led environmental endeavors.

A result of the first meeting was the establishment of a cafeteria presence. Green Team members began monitoring the garbage habits of their peers. With the help of the school custodian, a bucket was placed by the three garbage cans and the one recycling bin (for plastics, milk cartons, and aluminum cans). Members explained the procedures for emptying liquids and recycling milk cartons. Students had never recycled their milk cartons before, so they were all introduced to a new procedure. The Eastlake Middle School student body was instructed to pour leftover liquids from their single-use drink containers, such as milk and water, into the bucket and then recycle the containers. Since the first meeting, one or two Green Team members have been present in the cafeteria every day during lunch time to monitor students’ waste separation.

At the second meeting, the students completed a bin audit of the school, which entailed mapping the school and discovering where and how many bins are located in the building. Additionally, by the end of the second meeting, the same 12 students who attended the first meeting plus two new recruits took a pledge to come up with one action they can do to help the environment at home, at school, or in the community. The pledges were then shared with the student body via the televisions scattered throughout the school.

WE WANT YOU TO JOIN EMS’ GREEN TEAM!

The Eastlake Middle School Green Team is a group of students who are passionate about recycling and the Earth and want to make a difference at our school and in our community!

- ★ Share your passion for the environment with others
- ★ Be a leader and make an important impact
- ★ Have fun with other students while doing something positive

The Green Team meets after school
EVERY TUESDAY in Room 203
See Mrs. Dishong for more information

Copy of the advertisement used to recruit members of EMS’ Green Team

The Green Team also created a bulletin board that was displayed near the cafeteria to create further recycling awareness and used as a backdrop for part of a member-made video to encourage recycling.

Creating this video was the biggest endeavor that the Green Team members have accomplished to date. It was aired to the student body on America Recycles Day (November 15th), and it helped introduce the Green Team to other students and staff. In the video, members promoted reasons for recycling, where recycling receptacles are located, and the proper procedures for recycling in the lunchroom. The Green Team also began an initiative to recycle school supplies by starting a dried-marker drive. They designed a box and placed it in the cafeteria and created an advertisement for the school televisions encouraging staff and students to recycle their old markers instead of throwing them away. At the end of the school year, Crayola will send the school a mailing label, and then all that is left is to ship the markers.

Finally, the Green Team initiated a recycling contest in conjunction with America Recycles Day. They used this contest as a connection between home and school recycling by encouraging fellow students to bring in large, empty, plastic jugs that were used for laundry detergent, juice, milk, and other home products. During the week before America Recycles Day (November 15th), the Green Team promoted a recycling contest in which each student to bring in a plastic container on November 15th earned entry to a draw for a free pizza. On that morning, the Green Team set up a table and the school's plastic recycling bins in the lobby to collect the recyclables brought in from home. As the students entered the school, they dropped off their containers, got their tickets for the drawing, and headed on their way to start the school day. As soon as the collection was done, which amounted to more than sixty containers, they were immediately disposed of in the school's mixed recycling dumpster.

Milk, it does recycling good

Prior to the launching of The Green Team, there was no cafeteria presence to monitor student waste disposal at meals.

Only bottles and cans were recycled, and only if a student chose to do so; otherwise all else ended up in the garbage. Now, it is a habit for all students to recycle their milk cartons instead of throwing them in the trash. Up to 250 milk cartons are now recycled *daily!*

Getting students to become difference-makers

The implementation of a student-centered Green Team made a significant, positive impact on the recycling efforts and culture at Eastlake Middle School. Green Team members set examples for other students to follow. They provided environmental awareness and education to their peers. The members

began to develop 'green' habits by taking an active role in what they do, at least while at school.³ The inception of The Green Team created change through promoting conservation and provided the foundation for establishing a culture of environmental conservation and a means of reducing waste, while increasing alternative practices to help reduce Eastlake Middle School's carbon footprint.

It has taken a team, a "Green Team," to create more change. The student members are the citizens who are going to be the pillars of the sustainability movement (Avan, Aydinli, Bakar and Alboga, 2011).⁴ Without the students' efforts, the impact of the recycling culture would not be as profound as it has turned out to be. The students that joined The Green Team has had a direct and indirect impact on the recycling efforts at

Advertisement The Green Team made to promote the container recycling drive

Eastlake Middle School.

As the Green Team continues to evolve, some of the students' leadership skills have blossomed. They are offering ideas for moving forward and making the Green Team more visible in the school community. It may sound cliché, but the possibilities for The Green Team are endless. The team just completed an action plan for the 2019–2020 school year. Below is a list of just some of their ideas. Coincidentally, they are also great ideas for anyone wanting to start an environmental club at his or her own school:

- Create a calendar/vision board for the year.
- Update your Green Team's webpage/electronic news-



Advertisement The Green Team made to promote the marker recycling drive

letter and link it to the school's webpage. (A link to our current webpage can be found here: <http://www.weschools.org/GreenTeam.aspx>)

- Work with the art teacher to design and create artwork out of recycled materials.
- Inform parents about the environmental club and work with "green-minded" parents to spread the word about the club's initiatives.
- Come up with a new, fun activity to spread awareness and include other students.
- Conduct a waste audit.
- Contact your municipality's waste disposal facility and request a bigger mixed recyclables dumpster. If you don't have one, contact your local waste disposal company to see if one can be delivered and utilized. Doing a proper waste audit will help determine the appropriate size of dumpster you will need. Open communication between yourself and facility management personnel will prevent the removal of waste dispensers from becoming burdensome.

Before you start your own environmental club, make sure that you get approval from your administration before you begin recruiting students. I gained permission by proposing the club to my principal at the beginning of the school year. I stated my vision for the club and how, in turn, it would benefit the school as well. It was my first pitch for The Green Team, and it was effective. I gained approval to start the club and I have had continued support throughout the inaugural year. Once you gain approval, you can begin your recruitment stage, and build your team of environmentally-conscious young adults who want to make a difference.

At your first meeting, share your goals with the students and have them share theirs in return. Most importantly, listen to what they say; kids can have the greatest ideas! With the right support, they will lead the charge and facilitate the change. They might have the whole cafeteria recycling. They

could make videos, bulletin boards, and commercials. They may host whole-school recycling drives that have the students excited and engaged! Before you know it, they may fill the school with recycling initiatives — and want to do it! Can you think of a better way to spread the recycling message? I can't, and this project is proof that it works!

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Endnotes:

1. Starr, J. & Nicolson, C. (2015). Patterns in trash: Factors driving municipal recycling in Massachusetts. *Resources, Conservation and Recycling* (99) 7-13.
2. United States Environmental Protection Agency. Tools to reduce waste in schools. Washington, D.C.; 2007.
3. James, L. (2016). Facilitating Lasting Changes at an Elementary School. *International Electronic Journal Of Elementary Education*, 8(3), 443-454.
4. Avan, C., Aydinli, B., Bakar, F., & Alboga, Y. (2011). Preparing attitude scale to define students' attitudes about environment, recycling, plastic and plastic waste. *International Electronic Journal of Environmental Education*, 1(3), 179-191.

Additional Reference:

Prestin, A. & Pearce, K (2010). We care a lot: formative research for a social marketing campaign to promote school-based recycling. *Resources, Conservation and Recycling* (54) 1017-1026.