



# School Food Waste Recycling Guide

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BREATHE CALIFORNIA SACRAMENTO REGION

JUNE 2020

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# Introduction

## AB 1826

In 2014, California passed Assembly Bill 1826 that mandated schools to recycle organic waste, including food waste. Schools that generate more than four cubic yards of solid waste must have a system in place that separates food waste from landfill waste to be composted. Mandatory organic waste recycling helps California meet their goals set out in the Global Warming Solutions Act, Assembly Bill 32.

## Why Food Waste?

In the United States, households are the number one producer of food waste, including schools. Schools create tremendous amounts of food waste during lunch. While there are limited studies on the amount of food waste school's produced, waste audits conducted by BCSR staff at two elementary schools in the Natomas Unified School District found that nearly 60 percent of waste produced in the cafeteria during lunch was food.

When food waste is thrown away, it goes to a landfill where it rots and emits greenhouse gases that have massive implications on the environment. Incorporating a food waste recycling and reduction program diverts food waste from landfills to compost facilities that recycle the waste back into the ground.

This guide is designed to bring together students, teachers, and staff to reduce and recycle the amount of food waste produced during meals. Getting students, teachers, and staff involved in recycling at school is good for the environment, educational, and can be a lot of fun. Educating our children about the importance of stewarding the earth provides the country with a path to a greener future. As children learn about food waste recycling, they will be more likely to carry these habits into their adult years.

This report was created by Breathe California Sacramento Region with support from the Sacramento County Solid Authority.



## **Program Phases**

The pilot program has four distinct phases: a Planning Phase, an Implementation Phase, an Assessment Phase, and Maintenance Phase. The Planning Phase consists of gaining approval and support from school district administrators and the school principal, as well as onboarding cafeteria staff and designing the program. The Implementation Phase consists of training teachers, staff, and students on the benefits of recycling food waste and how to sort waste, followed by kicking-off the program. Once the program is launched, the Assessment Phase consists of tracking program progress, providing technical assistance, and gathering feedback from program participants. Afterward, the Maintenance Phase consists of developing a Sustainability Plan to maintain the program beyond the pilot year and into the future.

# PLANNING PHASE

## 1. Obtain School District Approval

Before planning a food waste recycling program, you will need approval from your school district. They will provide the necessary supplies for your food waste recycling program. To receive approval, first, identify the appropriate department to contact –typically, this will be one of the following departments: Maintenance and Operations, Nutrition Services, or General Services. Once you identify the appropriate department, schedule a meeting with their lead administrator.

In the meeting, be sure to share:

- ✓ Information on AB 1826
- ✓ Benefits of recycling food waste
- ✓ Examples of successful food waste campaigns from other schools

**TIP: Involve School District Administrators**

This program needs to be a district-wide program if it is not already. Involving administrators in the program development gives them an opportunity to integrate measures into district procedures that oversee and maintain the program at a district level.

## 2. Obtain Principal Approval

Following approval from the school district, schedule a meeting with your school's principal to obtain approval to start a food waste recycling program. The structure of the meeting will be similar to the meeting with your school district. Work with your principal to make the program fit with your school's vision. In the meeting, plan the following logistics:

- ✓ Staff training (see *Implementation Phase, "Train Staff"* for ideas)
- ✓ Student training (see *Implementation Phase, "Train Students"* for ideas)
- ✓ Program launch date (allow up to four weeks for program development when considering the launch date of your program)

**TIP: Drive it from the Top-Down**

Culture is the number one driver of success. Often recycling programs fail because no one makes them a priority, however if your principal is seen to be actively involved in the new program and taking it seriously, then everyone else in your school is going to take recycling seriously too.



### 3. Onboard Cafeteria Staff

Following approval from your principal, ask your principal to schedule a meeting with cafeteria staff to go over program specifics and how the program will be implemented. The cafeteria staff includes the head custodian, kitchen lead, noon duty staff, and any other personnel who oversee cafeteria functions at lunchtime. The cafeteria staff will be required to work together to maintain order and cleanliness throughout the program.

The structure of the meeting should be similar to your meeting with the school district and principal. It will be important to explain how food waste will be sorted and where food waste will go. Afterward, go over program specifics:

- ✓ Color-coded food waste and trash containers
- ✓ Container signage
- ✓ Waste collection and sorting process
- ✓ Waste disposal and pick up process
- ✓ Difference between food waste and landfill waste

**TIP: Generate Support from Cafeteria Staff**

Organize an opportunity for staff to see an existing program in another school or invite someone involved in an existing program to speak to staff. This can help reduce initial concerns they may have and generate trust and openness towards the program.

### 4. Design Your Program

At this stage, you will need to conduct a site assessment to identify budget needs and determine the best location for the sorting stations. A site assessment looks at the existing setup in the cafeteria, kitchen, and outdoor storage area. Notably, it is vital to design the program with assistance from the cafeteria staff who know their cafeteria the best. Including their input helps generate shared responsibility and ownership of the program, as well as ensures minimal disruption of existing functions.

To assist with program design, use the [Recycling Plan Template](#) in the toolkit to help your team conduct a site assessment and identify:

- How many bins and types of bins your school will need

- Sorting station location(s)
- How the sorting station(s) will be maintained and monitored
- How progress will be measured
- Storage, safety, and security

Refer to the “Sorting Station Quick Guide” in the toolkit for best practices on how to set up a sorting station.



**TIP: Stack Trays**

Set up a table at the end of the sorting station for students to stack their disposable trays. Stacking trays saves time and space in the landfill bin so that bags can be changed less often.

**TIP: Set Up a “Share Table” to Reduce Food Waste**

Set up a “Share Table” in the cafeteria for students to place unopened and uneaten food for other students to take. Share tables reduce food waste while alleviating food insecurity. For more information, visit:

<http://district.schoolnutritionandfitness.com/seymourcs/files/SharingTableNews.pdf>

**5. Request an Outdoor Food Waste Bin**

Once a site assessment has been conducted, contact your garbage hauler to request an outdoor storage bin specifically for food waste. Your hauler will work with you to create space to properly store the bin.

**IMPLEMENTATION PHASE**

**1. Train Teachers and Staff**

At least two days in advance of the program launch, train teachers and staff on the new program and how they can be involved. Leverage your principal’s support to coordinate a meeting with teachers and staff or share information on the program via email. Set expectations that everyone participates. The best way to get people involved is to help them understand the importance and purpose of the program, how to sort waste, where the waste will go, and how they can be involved.

Some ideas to involve teachers and staff:

- Create a recycling guide for teachers
- Coordinate older students to teach younger students about the benefits of recycling food waste and how to sort
- Create a program for students to monitor sorting stations during lunch
- Include announcement school newspaper or newsletter (see [Parent Flyer](#) in Toolkit)
- Use the school's website, email, and social media
- Have students create educational posters and videos
- Present to the school board or PTA
- Include lessons about food waste recycling in the classroom (see [Teacher Resources](#) in Toolkit)

**TIP: Educate the Entire School Community**

Support extends outside of the school. Include an announcement about the food waste recycling program in a parent flyer.

## 2. Train Students

On the day of the program launch, train students how to sort waste. The training must emphasize the importance and purpose of the new program and set expectations for students to sort their waste. There are several approaches that your school can use to train students, such as school-wide assemblies, classroom presentations, or student-made videos.

See Toolkit for the "Stop, Think, Sort" presentation slides.



**TIP: Include "Healthy Eating" Messaging**

Partner with the School District's Nutrition Services to incorporate information on healthy eating into the training materials to make the program more impactful and relevant to students.

**TIP: Separate Waste on the Tray**

Teach students to separate food waste and landfill waste on their tray before they are dismissed to make the waste sorting process easier and faster.



### 3. Kick-Off Your Program

On the same day as students are trained, set up the new sorting stations and signage. Moving forward, the new sorting station(s) will be placed during each meal served in the cafeteria. The initial first three weeks will require someone to stand at the sorting station(s) to help students through the new sorting process. This is important to help students learn as they adjust to the new process. If possible, recruit student monitors to guide their peers.

**TIP: Recruit Student Monitors**

Emphasize that student monitors are important for reducing contamination and maintaining cleanliness in the cafeteria. Refer to “Recommendations for Sustainable Plans” for information on how to create a Green Team

**TIP: Let Students Practice**

Allow students to learn by disposing of waste on their own and re-teaching them when necessary. Students learn faster through practice. This also helps to develop personal responsibility for the waste they create.

## ASSESSMENT PHASE

### 1. Track Program Progress

Once your program is implemented, track your program’s progress to identify areas that may need adjustment. During the initial three weeks of the program, it will be important to be on-site to observe the program for any bugs in the system, such as assessing the location and number of waste bins to improve the efficiency of the program. You can use the [Recycling Plan Template](#) to create a plan for:

- Measuring how the trash and recycling volumes or weights are changing
- Making observations about contamination and inefficiencies

- Informally surveying cafeteria staff and students to understand existing issues or inefficiencies

**TIP: Make A Lot of Noise**

**Get a commitment.** During your kickoff, create an activity for people to commit to your new program. For example, create a recycling goal and use a giant poster to track your school's progress in the cafeteria, or ask students and staff to write their reason for recycling food waste on white boards and post their picture.

**Give feedback.** Let staff, students, and visitors know how their recycling efforts are working. Put posters next to the bins or use the school communication networks to publicize recycling milestones, when a goal is met, or when adjusting the program.

## 2. Adjust Your Garbage Hauling Contract

Use the waste and recycling tracking sheets in the [Recycling Plan Template](#) to assess whether your trash and food waste recycling bins are meeting your program needs. Consider the following questions when reviewing your hauling services:

- How often is the trash bin (dumpster) serviced?
- Is the trash bin full each time it is serviced? If not, ask your hauler to reduce the frequency of pickup or reduce the size of the bin(s).
- How often is the food waste bin serviced?
- Is the food waste bin full each time it is serviced? If yes, is the food waste bin full a day or two (or more) before it is serviced? Ask your hauler to increase the size or number of recycling bins or ask them to increase the frequency of pickup.

**TIPS for Assessing Garbage Hauling:**

**Meet with your school district** to address ideas for changing the school's garbage collection. Be sure to bring the waste and recycling track sheet. Afterwards, meet with your waste hauler to request the service changes and receive a price estimate.

**Continue to track the garbage hauling** after your hauler makes the requested services changes to ensure that the changes to the collection are meeting the needs of your school

### 3. Gather Feedback

At the end of the school year, survey program participants who were involved in the planning and implementation to better understand and evaluate program challenges, constraints, and best practices. Program participants include cafeteria staff and the principal. Gathering feedback is extremely important for developing a Sustainability Plan that contributes to the program beyond the pilot year.

**TIP: Ask What's Missing**

When you send the survey to program participants, ask if there was something, they wished they had known before the start of the program. In addition, ask if there are resources that would help the program improve next year. This will help improve program and onboard new participants in the future.

## MAINTENANCE PHASE

### 1. Develop a Sustainability Plan

To ensure that a successful program continues, work with your school to make food waste recycling a part of school culture.

The Sustainability Plan is the most critical component for ensuring the food waste recycling program continues and is utilized in future school years. This plan should incorporate feedback from stakeholder interviews and offer a system that provides consistent monitoring of the program and marketing to remind students and staff how the program works and why it is important.



- ✓ The need for identifying roles and responsibilities associated with the program and strategies
- ✓ Strategies for the re-education of students, teachers, and staff, each year
- ✓ Written documentation and reflection that include lessons learned and helpful resources (like this guide!) for new team members to take ownership of the food waste recycling program responsibilities

For more resources, visit the toolkit [here!](#)