

Report finds nearly 80 percent of school waste could be recycled

Written by

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Results from a first-of-its kind school waste composition study provide valuable insight on the best targets for reducing waste and improving recycling programs in schools.

The study was a collaboration of Hennepin County; the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA); the City of Minneapolis; and Minneapolis, Minnetonka and Hopkins public schools.

Significant findings from the report include:

- Nearly 80 percent of all the waste generated by a school could be recycled or composted.
- More than 60 percent of what is currently discarded as trash could be recycled or composted.
- Food waste and recyclable paper are two prominent materials thrown away by schools that could be recycled.

The full report, titled *Digging Deep Through School Trash*, can be found at www.pca.state.mn.us/schoolwastestudy.

Unlike most waste composition studies that focus only on what is thrown in the trash, this groundbreaking study was designed to yield a complete picture of the total waste generated at schools. During the study, all waste, including garbage, recycling and organics, generated at the six participating schools in Hennepin County over a two-day period was sorted and analyzed.

The participating schools were Burroughs Elementary, Northeast Middle and Washburn Senior High in Minneapolis; Hopkins West Junior High; Minnetonka Senior High; and Clear Springs Elementary in Minnetonka.

In many respects, these schools exhibit average characteristics. However, they are somewhat unique in Minnesota because each has implemented an organics recycling program to divert food waste, paper towels and other organic materials for composting. Each school has received a grant from Hennepin and assistance from county staff to start its organics program and make improvements to its recycling programs.

Hopkins West Junior High was an early pioneer among schools to establish an organics program and had the highest level of recycling and composting of the six schools studied. The school has an overall recycling/composting rate of 59 percent, capturing nearly 80 percent of its recyclable materials and 58 percent of the compostable materials. One way Hopkins West Junior High is able to reduce its waste is by using reusable trays, plates and utensils.

The report shows there are significant opportunities to improve recycling at schools. Some easy, low-cost options schools can take to boost recycling include educating students and staff, having properly placed and labeled recycling containers, and forming a green team to track and improve performance.

The county offers grants, technical assistance and educational resources, including the *Best Practices Guide for Organics Recycling in Schools*, to help schools implement recycling and organics programs. For more information on the

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program, call Hennepin County Environmental Services at (612) 348-5893, or go to the Hennepin County website –

www.hennepin.us

– and search “organics for schools.”