



BIOCYCLE

Search BioCycle

Search

Sign up to receive BioCycle's electronic bulletin

SUBSCRIBE NOW!

ADVANCING COMPOSTING, ORGANICS RECYCLING & RENEWABLE ENERGY

[Home](#)
[Current Issue](#)
[Contents by Issue](#)
[Article Database](#)
[About BioCycle](#)

[Equipment/Systems](#)
[Resources & Links](#)
[BioCycle](#)
[Advertisers](#)
[BioCycle Data](#)
[Update](#)

[Compost Science](#)
[In Business](#)

[findacomposter.com](#)

[COOL2012](#)

[Site Access - READ ME](#)



Launching Zero Waste Schools

BioCycle March 2010, Vol. 51, No. 3, p. 35

Seven elementary schools in Oak Park, Illinois have initiated zero waste programs that include reusable lunchrooms, increased recycling and food waste composting.

Gary Cuneen

BioCycle West Coast Conference 2010 Related Session:
Zero Waste Schools Workshop
Tuesday, April 13, 2010
Presentation:
[Transferring Zero Waste Practice To The Community](#)
Gary Cuneen, Seven Generations Ahead
Michelle Vanderlaan, Holmes Elementary School PTO

SEVEN Generations Ahead (SGA), a nonprofit in Oak Park, Illinois specializing in sustainable community development, has created an approach to implementing green initiatives that are economically viable and socially equitable. The focus on economic viability is particularly important as schools, municipalities, and businesses struggle in this economy and need to justify sustainability investments to stakeholders.

School districts are one of SGA's focus areas, implementing farm to school programming as well as zero waste initiatives. In 2007, SGA approached schools within Oak Park Elementary School District 97 in Oak Park to explore their interest in collaborating on a zero waste initiative. Holmes Elementary — a racially and economically diverse school of 450 students — decided to jump in, and worked with SGA Zero Waste specialist Michelle Hickey to implement an initial waste assessment.

Michelle Vanderlaan, Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) President, enlisted Principal Suzie Hackmiller and other parents, who organized the Holmes Waste Ambassadors — a group of 4th grade students — to conduct the initial assessment. "I was blown away by their enthusiasm to dig into the school's waste, and the chord that this initiative has struck with our entire school community," says Vanderlaan.

The assessment gave the PTO parent leaders and SGA the information needed to construct a strategic plan, which focused on three main areas: a) Eliminating waste at its

[Subscribe](#)
[Renew](#)
[Address C](#)
[Contact U](#)

[Advertise](#)

[Books & F](#)

[BioCycle](#)
[Merchand](#)

[BioCycle](#)
[Confere](#)
[25th Ann](#)
[BioCycle V](#)
[Coast 201](#)
[Renewabl](#)
[Energy 20](#)
[Internati](#)
[2009](#)

[Events Ca](#)



source; b) Increasing recycling; and c) Converting food residuals into compost. Some specific strategies have included creating a reusable cafeteria (i.e., converting over to dishware and silverware vs. disposables); implementing waste free home lunches; eliminating paper towels and installing hand dryers; analyzing recycling operations and training staff on recycling implementation improvements; increasing recycling bins throughout the school; reducing and eliminating wasteful "Thursday Packets" sent home to parents and using on-line technology; and purchasing a Green Mountain Technology's Earth Tub to compost all food residuals collected from the lunchroom.

Students selected as Waste Ambassadors have designed posters to educate other students, teachers, parents and visitors about their zero waste efforts. Waste Ambassadors are responsible for monitoring and maintaining worm bins; recycling and trash; sorting paper in the classroom to ensure use on both sides; and more. When they're done with lunch, the Waste Ambassadors separate food waste, recyclables and trash. Compostable food scraps go into one container, empty milk cartons into another and anything nonrecyclable into a third.

To help implement these strategies, a proposal was submitted to the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity's (DCEO) Zero Waste Schools Grant Program, a new initiative that provides funding for hard costs associated with zero waste implementation. The grant was supplemented by local foundation funding (Lumpkin Family Foundation, Oak Park River Forest Community Foundation), and helped to pay for an industrial washer, reusable cafeteria ware, hand dryers, and the Earth Tub composter.

COMMUNICATION AND TRAINING

Successfully implementing this initiative required a fair amount of communication to the school community at large and training for all involved. Faculty in-services were conducted to explain the concept of zero waste and the strategies being employed and to enlist ideas and support. Cafeteria staff members were trained on new equipment for the reusable cafeteria, lunch line procedures for waste separation, and overall operational changes. Custodial and building staffs were trained on the new recycling bin arrangement and pick-up system, and received a review of materials that could be recycled. Presentations combined with delicious local food were made to the parent community through the PTO. The initiative has been regularly featured through school newsletters, bulletin boards, on-line communications and school announcements.

In addition to classroom education about zero waste, the learning process for the 4th grade Holmes Waste Ambassadors has included field trips to the Educycle Recycling Center (a materials recovery facility); Chicago's Green City Farmers' Market to learn about the role of composting on farms; a local landfill; Whole Foods to learn about packaging through a scavenger hunt; and the Working Bikes Cooperative to understand reuse strategies. The Waste Ambassadors have played a lead role in instructing their peers about recycling and composting, including taking responsibility for implementing certain strategies.

After an in-class session with the Urban Worm Girl, some classrooms created worm bins to learn about vermicomposting. The students have also participated regularly in the preparation, planting, maintenance and harvesting of the Holmes School Garden, an outgrowth of the Zero Waste initiative developed to close the loop in students' learning about the role of food scrap diversion and composting in growing healthy food.

Through the implementation of these strategies, Holmes was able to reduce its landfill waste by 79 percent, increase its recycling volume by 546 percent, and this year will increase food waste composting from zero to 10,500 lbs (Figure 1). The cost savings, which don't include eventual adjustments in waste hauling contracts, total \$4,475. Through its second grant, Holmes recently installed four hand dryers and is projected to have an additional savings of \$3,700/year, boosting total savings to \$8,175 annually.

In October 2009, the Holmes community gathered for an all-school celebration of its zero waste efforts. The celebration included cutting the ribbon on the new composter. Later that evening, over 250 members of the Holmes community gathered in their lunchroom for a Harvest Dinner. Pasta dishes and salad were served using tomatoes, basil and swiss chard harvested from the school garden. "This was a terrific day of celebration for all the effort put toward achieving our Zero Waste goals this past year," says Vanderlaan. "It's also a launching point not only for Holmes to sustain these efforts, but for other schools in the district who are now initiating similar programs."





TOWARD A ZERO WASTE SCHOOL DISTRICT

SGA has been working with other schools in the district to follow a similar zero waste strategy and process. Through initial waste assessments, strategic plan development and grant proposal submissions, six additional District 97 elementary schools received Illinois DCEO grants totaling \$45,000 to cover some of the costs associated with becoming zero waste schools. Regular meetings of the PTO leaders from each of the schools were convened so they could work and learn together as they implemented strategies, share resources, and meet directly with district administrators to

coordinate grant implementation logistics.

“Through our Zero Waste School Initiative, we have undertaken a number of activities that have significantly reduced the amount of waste we produce and dramatically increased our recycling efforts,” notes Dr. Constance Collins, superintendent for Oak Park Elementary School District 97. “These efforts have resulted in cost savings for our district and, most important, taught our students the value of caring for our planet and giving back to our community.”

Though each school has taken their own approach to moving towards zero waste, a few common factors have helped them get started, especially the selection of students as Waste Ambassadors, increasing recycling and implementing food waste composting, with compost used in the school gardens. Parents have also played a key role. Each of the schools’ PTOs formed green committees, providing a vehicle for parents to volunteer as Green Team Leaders. These teams worked with SGA to conduct all-school waste assessments. The information was used to set goals for recycling, source reduction and composting. SGA helped the schools work with the District to select product vendors and negotiate discounts on many of the big zero waste items. Monthly meetings are held to address challenges and to collaborate on ways to educate and inspire students, teachers, parents and the community.

The process has not happened, of course, without hiccups along the way. Issues related to purchase orders, equipment delivery from the district warehouse to the schools, delineating district and school responsibilities, etc. have all needed to be managed on a regular basis.

The district has installed 23 hand dryers in four schools this year, which will ultimately save \$20,000/year in paper towel purchases. Four additional schools are switching to reusable lunchrooms, which have the potential for saving the district up to \$15,000/year from those strategies alone. As more schools come on board and additional strategies are implemented, the lesson here is clear: living in kinship with the natural world is good for kids, the environment, and can save money too.

Gary Cuneen is founder and Executive Director of Seven Generations Ahead in Oak Park, Illinois. Detailed information on SGA's various programs, including its GreenTown sustainable communities conferences, is available at www.sevengenerationsahead.org.

Sidebar p. 36

BIOCYCLE SETS ZERO WASTE GOAL AT WEST COAST CONFERENCE

IN A collaborative effort, BioCycle will work toward achieving Zero Waste at its annual West Coast Conference in San Diego, California next month. Representatives from the Town & Country Hotel, the City of San Diego, Good Green Graces and Novamont have teamed up with BioCycle to form a green team, which will seek to reduce waste and recycle and compost all other materials. “Attendees will see eco-stations in the registration and exhibit halls, where they can recycle or compost their waste instead of, well, wasting it,” says Janice Sitton of Good Green Graces, a company specializing in Zero Waste events. “Training will be provided for the janitorial, kitchen and service staff so they can help with recycling and composting behind the scenes.” Sitton and BioCycle staff will tally the results of the zero waste initiatives, and report the findings to conference

participants and BioCycle readers. — *Nora Goldstein*
Copyright 2010, The JG Press, Inc.