

Reducing Waste and Cost

It's time to ask for more from your waste management contractor

Erin Green



One of the places that K-12 schools can greatly impact the environment and our future as a habitable planet is our handling of waste. We generate a lot! Paper, paper towels, food and cafeteria waste — these types of items make up the bulk of our waste streams. With most of this going to landfills, except possibly recyclables, the environmental impact is huge.

Most districts have some kind of contract with a waste hauler to remove our solid refuse. Whether we realize it or not, the waste manage-

ment industry is changing. Services are now available that weren't only a few years ago. Considering the changing nature of the business, it may be time for school leaders to ask for more from our waste management contractors.

■ Seeking Solutions

The Greendale School District did exactly that this past winter when we sent out a request for proposal (RFP) to waste management contractors. Specifically, we were seeking firms that would be willing to work with the district to reduce waste and

save money. This RFP asked more from contractors than we had in the past. It clearly stated the school board's goal of reducing waste costs "year over year by improving traditional waste collection with services that inform and influence school waste generation optimization through recycling, composting, process design and optimization."

The RFP was very detailed and covered everything from the long list of items we wished to recycle to other waste reduction options such as composting. Now, several years later, the work that we put into the

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with most of this going to landfills, except possibly recyclables, the environmental impact is huge.

RFP is beginning to take hold. We have an established relationship with a provider who is willing to work with us to continually find ways to reduce our waste and expenses.

After completing the process and working with our provider, here are some areas to consider when completing a bid process or taking quotes from a waste hauler.

■ Customizing Waste Pick Up

The amount of information and data that is possible through most waste removal contractors is very impres-

sive. Schools should take advantage of these services so school leaders can better monitor its various waste streams.

Make sure to ask for weights and measures and regular reports from the vendor. This can include the weights of containers before pick up. A lot of waste collection trucks are now outfitted to provide weights at pickup. Reports can be generated by the vendor concerning waste composition, weights and measures.

There are also new and inexpensive gadgets that can be placed in

dumpsters to monitor the fill-level. The instrument uses wireless technology to report out how much waste a container holds. These kinds of tools can allow a district to easily monitor its waste and can also be used by the waste management contractor to collect waste more efficiently.

Another option is to ask for “right sizing,” which is a system based on the weights or measures of the waste or recycling bin. Oftentimes, this allows waste pick-ups to occur less often, which can help the

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district avoid “tipping fees” or land-fill fees. In some cases, containers may be downsized, which also can help reduce costs.

■ Educational Materials

When it comes to waste, everyone in your schools — teachers, staff, and visitors — all contribute. As busy as school leaders are, it's a lot to ask them to provide educational materials regarding recycling or other efforts or strategies to cut down on a school's waste.

Many waste haulers have excellent educational resources that can be used in your schools to help

educate staff and students, to help promote recycling, or explain how the waste is processed. Ask for signage, materials and recycling bins to help promote recycling and/or composting.

In some cases, providers will offer to host field trips for students to visit their facilities and see its new state-of-the-art recycling facility or to learn more about waste management.

■ Reducing Waste Stream

Educational materials can help your students and staff recycle more materials, which can go a long ways in cutting waste. However, even with

recycling, schools are going to produce a lot of garbage, such as food scraps, that can't be recycled.

Some waste management companies are beginning to offer composting services. Composting allows schools to collect food scraps, yard waste, and some paper products. Although composting services are still rare, make sure to ask your vendor if they are composting. It is likely that composting services will become more commonplace.

If your provider doesn't provide composting, a separate composting service may be available. The Greendale School District recently engaged



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the services of a new start-up composter, the Compost Crusader (see sidebar, right), with the goal of reducing our food waste and associated costs and to help pay the cost of composting. The Compost Crusader picks up the food waste and takes it to a processing facility. The finished product then goes to Wisconsin farmers to begin the cycle again. Our composter can take paper towels, non-recycled paper, any compostable items, and food waste. Through composting, we hope to reduce our waste stream by as much as 75 percent.

Making It Happen

Asking more from your waste management provider is a great way to reduce your schools' impact on the environment and maybe even lower expenses. If your district doesn't have one already, it may be helpful to adopt a policy stating your board's commitment to sustainability inside and outside of the classroom.

Our school board has adopted a board sustainability policy to formalize the district's focus on environmental stewardship. It commits the district to the "3E" approach, which focuses the district on "economy, education, and environment."

In some cases, simply asking for more from your waste management provider will go a long way in improving your service and reducing your waste. It's important to be able to work with your provider. If you think of something else in regard to waste management, recycling, or composting, ask for it. If you don't ask, you won't get it. We are talking big business here, and in most places there is competition. ■

Erin Green, former Director of Business, Greendale School District, is treasurer of the Green Schools National Network.

For a sample request for proposal (RFP), school board policy and other information about reducing waste, email Erin Green at erin.green1776@gmail.com.

Students Lead School-Wide Composting Effort

A student "Green Team" at Canterbury Elementary School in Greendale made it their mission this past school year to reduce the amount of waste the school was sending to the landfill. Recycling efforts were only going so far. Students knew they wanted to make a bigger impact.

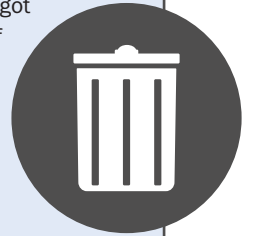
The team began researching composting and found a company, Compost Crusader, which collects compostable material from businesses and schools in southeastern Wisconsin. The school got special receptacles for compostable waste. The members of the Green Team monitored the bins at lunch and educated students about what could be composted.

Afterwards, the janitorial staff took the compost to a special dumpster outside the school, where it was picked up weekly by Compost Crusader. The company is run by Melissa Tashjian, who started the company when she saw the interest among Milwaukee-area companies to compost. She never thought schools would sign up for her services but is glad to see students leading the effort.

"I've found that many of these programs are driven by students," Tashjian said. "It's really exciting to see good habits being instilled in our youth. They no longer have the out-of-sight, out-of-mind mentality towards waste."

Principal Mike Mullen said the school has always had an environmental feel to it. The school is surrounded on three sides by forest and many of the students come to school with knowledge of recycling and composting.

"We've always felt it's absolutely key to teach students about environmental sustainability," Mullen said. "The composting effort has been another great teaching opportunity for our students." □



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