

# Recycler's Digest

Newsletter of Green Schools Project, Carlton County's  
Recycling & Waste Reduction Grant Program

Volume 2, issue 2

## Recycling: The **Contamination** Problem

Contamination. We've all seen it, we've all done it, whether by accident or on purpose. It's a huge problem in the recycling realm and **the most difficult problem with recycling in schools.**

So let's start with the basics.

### 1. What is **contamination**?

Contamination can take a few different forms:

- I. Garbage material placed in recycling containers (e.g. a chip bag placed in the plastics bin).
- II. Recyclable material placed in the wrong container (e.g. plastics placed into the paper bin).
- III. Recyclable material placed into the right container, but the material is dirty or full of liquid (e.g. plastic pop bottle with pop still in it).

### 2. Why is **contamination** a **BIG** problem?

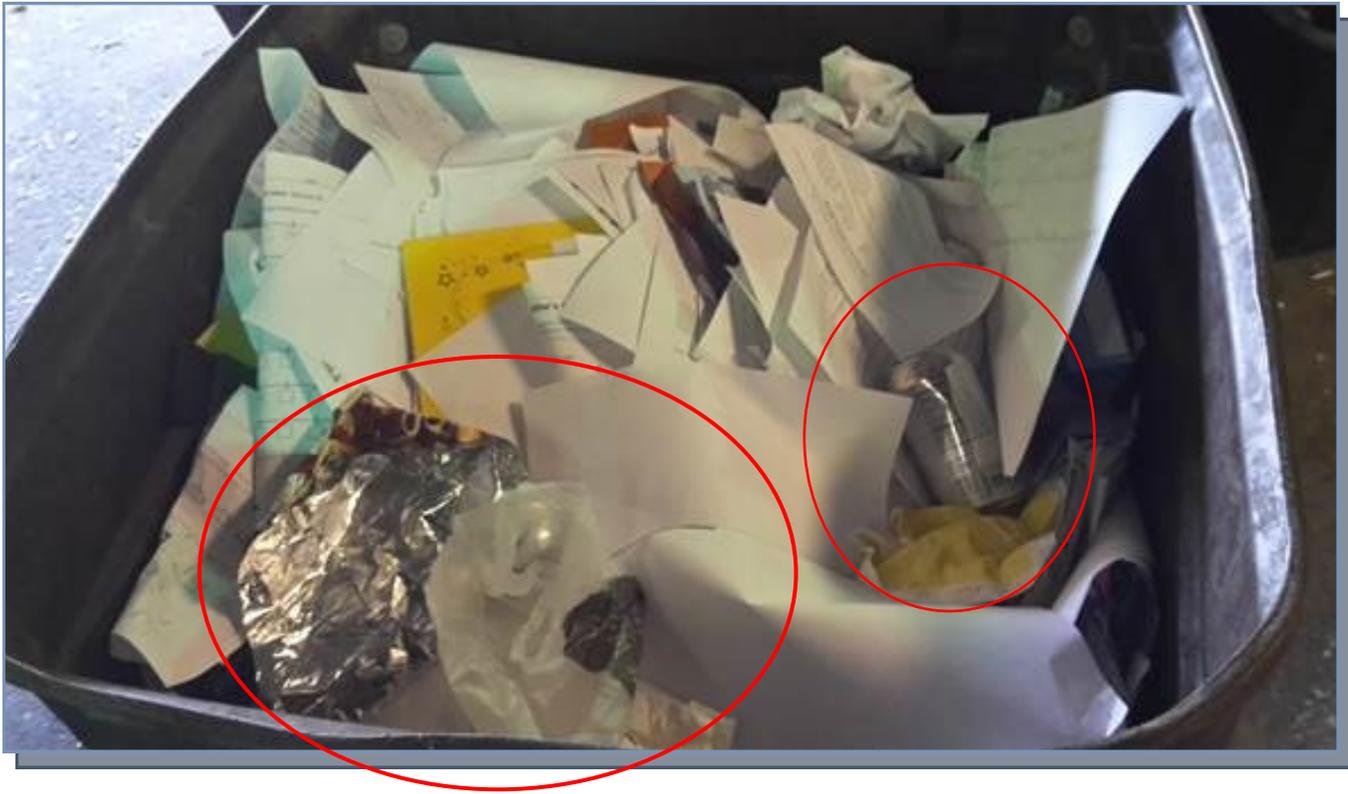
To understand why contamination is a big problem, you need to understand the path recyclable material takes. Items are put into a bin and then your school's solid waste hauler comes and collects them. Then the material is baled and stacked in a truck to be sold to a company that will recycle the material or distribute it to other recyclers. The material is inspected and if there is too much contamination, one of two things can happen: 1. the load can be rejected or 2. the selling price will decrease. Then the local solid waste hauler loses money. A rejected bale or load can also negatively affect the environment by being sent to the landfill. It is not cost-effective for a solid waste hauler to manually remove contamination from recyclable materials.

**Be Bright,  
Recycle Right!**



## Recycling: The **Contamination** Problem Cont.

Here is an example of some contamination in a paper recycling bin:



## Recycling: **Solutions** to the **Contamination** Problem

Below is a list of things your school can do to reduce contamination:

### 1. Signs for recycling bins.

Signs should list acceptable items AND non-acceptable items with text and images.

### 2. Recycling bins always paired with a garbage can.

This creates waste disposal substations with all options available for someone who needs to throw something away.

### 3. Recycling Guide.

A recycling guide serves as a resource for students and staff on what materials the school collects for recycling and how to properly recycle it. This guide should be a reference whenever there are questions on recycling at the school. Please visit [co.carlton.mn.us/green\\_schools\\_project](http://co.carlton.mn.us/green_schools_project) for a how-to document as well as some example recycling guides.

This guide should be available to all users of the school both online and in print form. It is best to have guides near all recycling substations and in all classrooms and offices. It is a simple way to help prevent contamination from happening at your school.

### 4. Recycling Memo.

A recycling memo should be sent twice a year to students and staff. It might be most effective to send via email to all teachers and have them read it to their students. With the memo, be sure to include a copy of the school's recycling guide. See an example memo on the next page!

## Recycling: *Solutions* to the *Contamination* Problem Cont.

### *Example Recycling Memo for Students and Staff:*

TO: Students and Staff

FROM: George Knutson, Recycling Elementary Principal

DATE: May 15, 2017

RE: Recycling Correctly

Recycling is an important practice. It keeps materials out of the landfill, but putting something into the recycling bin doesn't mean it will be recycled. Putting the wrong materials in the wrong bin is called contamination. Contamination decreases the value of the recyclable material and can lead to it being sent to the landfill. Because of this, we ask that you remember to recycle correctly by placing the right materials in each bin.

We collect paper, glossy paper, plastics, cardboard, aluminum cans, and tin cans for recycling. To assist you, we have recycling substations placed throughout the school, informational signs near each bin, and an accurate recycling guide that lists examples of what goes in each recycling bin. Each classroom should have our school recycling guide to refer to. Teachers will go over the recycling guide with you and identify the locations of the nearest waste bins for each material and give you examples of what goes in each bin.

Stop and think if you don't know which bin something goes in. First, look at the signs around the bins. If that doesn't help, look at the recycling guide. If you still have questions, ask your teacher for assistance.

Thank you,

George Knutson, Recycling Elementary Principal

Attached: Recycling Guide

### **5. Organize a sorting activity during the school year.**

One example of a possible activity is a recycling relay. The point of the recycling relay is to teach kids what items go in each bin (plastics, cans, paper, etc.). Here are some simple steps to setup a recycling relay at your school:

1. Grab common items that are used at your school (both recyclable and non-recyclable) as well as items that are most commonly placed in the wrong bin.
2. Prepare containers for different material types (plastics, paper, aluminum cans, garbage, etc.).
3. Have groups of students do a "relay race" where they take turns placing one material in the correct disposal bin. Go over the results. The group that was fastest at the relay race may have contamination in their recycle bins!

### **6. Make waste a topic in classes.**

Waste makes a great topic in a variety of subjects including math, science, social studies, and art. Below are some examples of waste topics in each subject:

Math: Have students complete waste audits of the school or just certain areas in the school.

Science: Compare and contrast the process of recycling and landfilling material.

Social Studies: Discuss the role waste plays in society. What factors have shaped this and why?

Art: Create something out of items that normally get disposed of (leftover paper scraps, paint, etc.)

Contact George for assistance on any of these tasks or to facilitate an activity in your classroom. He can be reached at [George.Knutson@co.carlton.mn.us](mailto:George.Knutson@co.carlton.mn.us) and at 218-384-9592.

## Have a “Zero Waste” Locker Cleanout!

Think of all the work your school has put into waste reduction and recycling this year! Think zero waste! Can end-of-year materials be reused, recycled, or donated?

Does your school have a Green Team or environmental club? If so, perhaps they would like to organize this clean-out as an end-of-the-year project. Have them follow these five steps to environmental stewardship.

### Five Steps to “Zero Waste” Cleanout

1. Gather a variety of boxes and label them ‘donation,’ ‘swap or reuse’ and ‘recycle.’ Ask the kitchen for its spare cardboard boxes. Label the swap boxes for easy use – e.g., ‘teacher supplies,’ ‘books,’ ‘notebooks,’ ‘pens, pencils,’ etc.
  - **Swap/reuse items:** Materials that can be reused by the school next year and that should be included in an end-of-the-year school supply swap or can be placed in a reuse area in the school.
  - **Donation items:** Materials that will not be useful to your school’s teachers or students next year, but that someone might be able to use.
  - **Recyclable items:** Used paper, cardboard, bottles and cans that can be placed in school recycling containers.
2. Identify a teacher, staff member, or parent who would be willing to take donated materials to a nearby donation center. Make sure they wait until the supply swap is over because there may be unwanted materials from the swap that could be donated.
3. Let the custodian know of your plans so that he or she can arrange for extra recycling bins for the collection event if needed.
4. Assign a student from each group to take recyclable materials to the outdoor recycling dumpster – or a central hallway recycling substation – after the cleanout.
5. Plan a school supply swap day with other teachers for the following day or make a share shelf somewhere in the school.



Zero waste cleanouts don’t have to be limited to just lockers! You can follow the zero waste cleanout guidelines to reduce the amount of waste you’re throwing away from anything you’re cleaning out!

## Green Schools Project Deadline Reminder!

To all schools currently participating in the Green Schools Project, all eligible purchases need to be made and the final report needs to be turned in by **June 5th**.

Final reports can be sent via email to [George.Knutson@co.carlton.mn.us](mailto:George.Knutson@co.carlton.mn.us). If you have any questions or concerns, please contact George via email or by phone at 218-384-9592.

Next year’s application announcement for Green Schools Project will be sent out in October 2017.