



# WASTE SORTING STATIONS

## OPTIONAL ACTIVITY

**OVERVIEW:** Have you ever noticed how many lunchtime items end up in the trash that could have been recycled, composted, or even donated instead of going to a landfill? Items that end up in a landfill take hundreds and sometimes thousands of years to fully break down, and they take up space that could have been used by native plants and animals instead. The Waste Sorting Stations Activity helps spread awareness about the need to divert waste from landfills while also giving students a chance to help divert this waste by utilizing waste sorting stations!

- **Number of Adult Volunteers:** 1+
- **Number of Student Volunteers:** 2 students at each sorting station every day for 2 weeks; then 2 students at each sorting station 1-2 times per week
- **Time Commitment:** 1-2 hours to set up sorting bins and signage, 1 hour per week per volunteer to monitor sorting stations
- **Expected Cost:** Free! All bins/signage can be created from existing materials on campus

### STEP 1: SET GOALS AND START TRACKING

What do you want to accomplish with this Activity? Whether it's setting a goal of the number of students involved or the number of bags diverted from landfills, set a goal and begin tracking your progress so you know when it's time to CELEBRATE!

### STEP 2: GATHER BASELINE METRICS

Gather data on how many bags of trash, recycling, compost, etc. your school or community group is producing before setting up the waste sorting stations so you can measure your improvement later. You can use the "before" column of [Grades of Green's Waste Metrics Chart](#) to help you keep track of your progress.

### STEP 3: DETERMINE HOW OFTEN YOU WILL SET UP THE WASTE SORTING STATIONS

This will depend on whether you think you need to ease your school or community group into sorting one day a week or if the students will respond well to waste sorting stations every day. If you decide to sort one day a week, plan on switching to every day as soon as you feel the students are ready. Implementing daily sorting stations will create consistency, making waste reduction a habit!



#### **STEP 4: RECRUIT VOLUNTEERS**

Setting up and maintaining the waste sorting station is an ongoing effort, and will require multiple student volunteers from your Campaign Team to help monitor the waste sorting stations. If you need additional adult support, consider asking parents, noon aides, and staff if they'd like to help too. Good candidates are people who garden, compost, recycle or are involved in another green activity.

Looking for extra help? Ask students who participate in clubs at school such as Student Council, Green Club, Garden Club, etc. to get involved in assisting with waste sorting station set-up and education.

#### **STEP 5: COLLABORATE WITH YOUR CUSTODIAL TEAM**

Meet with your custodial team to share your ideas and ask them how waste is currently managed, and what types of containers they think would be best to include in your waste sorting station. Share this [slideshow with examples of different sorting stations](#) to get their ideas and feedback. Make sure your custodial team knows you appreciate all the work they do, and that you want to make sure the Waste Sorting Station Activity compliments their current best practices and procedures. It is **very important** to have approval and support from the custodial team.

#### **STEP 6: DO YOUR RESEARCH**

Determine with your custodial team what waste sorting station layout would benefit your school or community group the most and where the station(s) should be placed. For example, if your school or community group has a garden, you may want to consider adding a compost collection bucket to your station. [Click here](#) for examples of waste sorting stations implemented by Grades of Green schools and community groups. Here are some options:

- **Recycling and Trash Bins:** Placing trash and recycling bins next to each other makes it easier for students to discard all their trash at one time versus having to go to another location. You will have a much higher recycling capture rate and cleaner recyclables by placing trash and recycling bins next to each other. Put a sign on or near the recycling bin with pictures of what is recyclable to educate the students and remind them what goes in the recycle bin. This is an [example](#) of a flyer prepared by a city about what can be recycled.
- **Tray Stackers:** If your school serves a lunch on foam or cardboard single-use trays then a Tray Stacker is helpful to keep trays together, and takes up less space in the bin when trays are discarded or recycled. By implementing Tray Stackers, it also encourages students to separate their trash, and you will decrease the number of bags of trash you generate each day significantly.



- **Share Box/Food Donation:** Ask your cafeteria manager if they would be comfortable putting a Share Box in the eating areas for any unopened, prepackaged cafeteria food such as chips and sealed bags of carrot sticks. This food can then be offered to students on campus who are still hungry during lunchtime.
  - If your cafeteria manager is uncomfortable with students taking snacks from the Share Box, you could set up a Food Donation box instead. Sealed food from the cafeteria can be collected in coolers to be donated to those who are in need of food. Research food collection organizations in your area to see if there are any that can offer direct donation pick ups at your school or community group.
- **Liquid Pails:** When recycling drink cartons such as milk, water, and juice boxes from the cafeteria, the liquid must be poured out first before the drinking container is placed into the recycling bin. Liquids can be dumped into the custodial sink drain. Not only does this ensure high quality recyclables, it also makes the custodial team's job of hauling trash much lighter because all the liquid has been removed!
- **Composting Bucket:** Ideally, you will place your compost bucket next to the trash and recycling bins, the tray stacker, and the liquid pails. This makes it very easy for students to throw any leftover fruits and vegetables into the composter. At the end of lunch, fruit and veggie scraps collected in the compost bucket can be taken to a compost bin. Your compost bin may need to be placed over dirt or gravel because it will leak "compost tea" as the food is breaking down. Placing the tumbler over concrete or asphalt will cause a stinky mess. Print and laminate this [educational compost flyer](#) and this ["Fruits and Veggies Only" sign](#) for your compost bucket. Remember, educate, educate, educate! To learn more about setting up a successful composting program, check out [Grades of Green's Campus Composting Activity](#).

## STEP 7: SET UP YOUR WASTE SORTING STATIONS

After you determine what the components of your waste sorting station will be, make sure you have the proper bins. We suggest you repurpose bins that you already have on campus. For example, if you will be recycling, you can paint a grey trash can blue to transform it into a great recycling bin! Here are some more helpful tips:



- **Visual Cues:** Give the students as many visual cues on the containers as possible – make sure your recycling bin is blue (or the same color as your community’s recycle containers) with the recycle sign and the word “recyclables only” on the can as well as a lid with a cutout that only allows cans, bottles, paper, or other recyclables to enter the bin.
- **Clear Trash Liners:** Use clear trash liners for all recycling bins and dark bags for trash. Clear trash liners in recycling bins increase the capture rate and encourage clean recyclables. Your custodial team will also be able to tell which bags contain trash and which contain recyclables when it’s time to take them to the dumpsters.
  - Most states have mandated laws to reduce and divert their solid waste. Check your state guidelines for what is mandated in your region. Because waste hauling facilities must meet these goals, they are often happy to work with schools to help them reduce their waste. Contact your school or community group’s waste hauler to see how they can help support this program.
  - Contact your local city personnel to see if there is anything they can do to support this program. Because the city may be required to divert a certain amount of trash, they may be able to work with schools to get recycling and trash reduction programs in place. They may be able to donate items like a composter or trash and recycling bins.

### **STEP 8: MAKE SIGNS**

After you set up your waste sorting station bins, create a sign for each bin so that students know what they are for and how to use them. Make sure that your signs have a large font, so people can easily read them. [Click here](#) to download Grades of Green’s waste sorting station signage which you can print and decorate. It may help to glue, tape, or draw examples of real lunchtime items that belong in each bin to serve as a guide. Make sure your signs are as visible as possible. For example, post them above your waste sorting station so they are at eye-level for students. Consider laminating your signs or making them out of a durable material such as cardboard or card stock to make sure they last the entire school year. [Click here](#) for examples of successful waste sorting stations and signs.

### **STEP 9: EDUCATE YOUR VOLUNTEERS AND COMMUNITY**

After you have the waste sorting station bins ready to go, make sure your volunteer sorting monitors know which lunchtime items go in which bin so they can help educate others at lunchtime. You may want to contact your waste hauler to determine exactly which items can be recycled if you are unsure about certain items.



Grades of Green has a walking assembly script for Campaign Team leaders who want to go from classroom to classroom to teach students about the waste sorting stations. We suggest using [this script](#) to ensure all of the students at school know about your waste sorting program!

Your Campaign Team can also educate students in a fun way using the [Grades of Green Trashy Trivia Quiz Cards](#). Additionally, teachers or adult leaders can explain the concept to the students or you can demonstrate and educate them at a school-wide or community group-wide assembly to introduce the concept. If you will be recycling, you can use our [Be Green and Recycle Flyer](#) to educate your volunteers and peers.

Share information about the waste sorting stations in your school or community group's newsletter. You can send out information on [waste sorting](#), [recycling](#), and [composting](#) to inspire the whole school community to reduce their waste.

Support the custodians (or person handling the station) to implement the new procedure. You will need to work with them on how to empty the liquid pails, put the stacked trays in a clear recycling bag (or compost or trash bin depending on what the tray is made of), open the composter before lunch and shut it after lunch, and distinguish between dark and clear trash bags. Make sure your custodians can wipe down the tops of the bins, tray stackers, and rinse out the liquid pail. Your custodians may not be familiar with what can and cannot be recycled, so take the time to educate them and get them excited about their contribution to our earth. Explain how the new system is saving money in trash-bag liners and waste hauler fees for your school or community group. Make sure your custodial team knows how much you appreciate them and all their hard work! Consider making them a colorful thank you card or recognizing them at a school or community gathering.

### **STEP 10: KICK OFF THE ACTIVITY**

Set a starting date to implement your waste sorting stations. Hand stamps are a great, inexpensive, and environmentally-friendly reward for students sorting lunchtime waste. [Use this artwork](#) or [this artwork](#) when you order your stamps online by [clicking here](#).

Pick one day a week or more to have volunteers come to lunch to reward students who sorted their lunchtime waste with a hand stamp. You can use our [Grades of Green Team schedule template](#) to stay organized, and also check out our [examples of other schools' volunteer schedules](#). While you stamp the students' hands, ask them questions such as "What is compostable or recyclable in your lunch?" Students enjoy the interaction and, before you know it, they will be going home and educating their families.



If you notice students sorting their waste in the wrong bin, we recommend giving the stamp, but gently educating the student by saying something like, “Foil can actually be recycled if there’s no food in it. Next time, make sure to put it in the blue recycling bin”. Always be positive and encouraging. Do not reprimand or make a student feel ashamed about their mistakes at the sorting stations; it is an ongoing learning process! Remember, the goal is to make students feel great about their contribution.

### **STEP 11: KEEP IT GOING**

Schedule sorting station monitor volunteers at your sorting stations every day you will be implementing your waste sorting stations. Create excitement through contests and games, such as:

- Encouraging students to come up with ways to educate other students on which items go in which bins.
- Playing music when the student volunteers are stamping hands to keep waste sorting stations fun.
- Giving away finished compost in biodegradable bags. Purchase some seeds and you will have a cute craft. For more details on setting up a composting program at your school, check out our [Campus Composting Activity here!](#)
- Setting up educational games during lunch. For example, bring a bag full of things that are trash, recyclable, and compostable, and ask the students to guess where each item goes. You can time them while the students sort the items for added fun. Have your Campaign Team members walk around the tables and quiz students for a fun interactive lesson.

### **STEP 12: MEASURE THE RESULTS**

Fill out the “after” column of the [Grades of Green’s Waste Metrics Chart](#). Remember that goal you set earlier? How’d it go? How many students participated and how many bags and pounds of waste were diverted from landfills?

### **STEP 13: CELEBRATE AND SHARE THE RESULTS**

Congratulations! You completed Grades of Green’s Waste Sorting Stations Activity for your school and we couldn’t be prouder. Email your Mentor the results you achieved, photos or videos of your completed Waste Sorting Station and tag @gradesofgreen on social media so we can help share your story. And don’t forget to also let your school district and/or city government know about your great and green accomplishments.



**BENEFITS TO THE ENVIRONMENT:**

Setting up waste sorting stations is a fantastic way to inspire schools, students, staff and the broader school community to “Think Before You Toss!”, greatly reducing the amount of waste that ends up in landfills and contaminates our environment. In addition, the carbon emissions generated by hauling all that waste to the landfill are greatly reduced when trash is reduced.

**COST SAVINGS:**

By reducing school waste, the school can save money by working with their waste hauler to reduce pick-ups. In addition, the compost created from leftover fruit and veggie scraps can be used as fertilizer on campus which also helps the landscape retain water. These actions can help reduce fertilizer and water costs.