



# ZERO WASTE SCHOOLS EVENT GUIDE

Make your next school event a good time for everyone, including the planet— go for zero waste!

With a little advanced planning, school picnics, festivals, sporting events, graduation parties, meetings, and more can all be accomplished with a lot less waste. Zero waste school events also serve as great opportunities to teach others how it can be done. Zero waste is a path, and even small steps toward the goal of zero waste can make a difference.

## What is zero waste?

According to the Zero Waste International Alliance, zero waste is the conservation of all resources by means of responsible production, consumption, reuse, and recovery of products, packaging, and materials without burning and with no discharges to land, water, or air that threaten the environment or human health.

## Get to zero waste with the 5 Rs: Rethink, Reduce, Reuse, Recycle, Rot (Compost)

While recycling and composting are important ways to divert waste, it's even better to rethink, reduce, and reuse to avoid creating waste in the first place, so prioritize those strategies whenever possible.

## BEFORE THE EVENT

### Volunteers

Think about what volunteer roles you may need in advance and allow enough time to recruit them. Depending on your event, you may need volunteers to:

- Monitor sorting stations and help guests sort their waste into recycling, compost, and landfill.
- Purchase or bring existing foodware and other items that are reusable, recyclable, or compostable.
- Purchase food that minimizes waste.
- Wash and store reusable items after the event.
- Coordinate with the school custodian to set up sorting station bins and make sure the sorted materials get to the right place after the event.

For larger or more complex events, it can help to appoint a zero waste coordinator to oversee waste reduction initiatives and assign tasks to volunteers.

### Event promotion

Make sure to advertise that the event will be zero waste in advance so guests know what to expect and can come prepared, if needed. For example, if you'd like guests to bring their own water bottle or other reusables, include that information with your event promotion. Promoting the event electronically, rather than with physical invitations or flyers, is also a great way to reduce waste.



PTA event using reusable dishware.  
Photo credit: Sylvia Wooler

## Preparing to recycle and compost

Familiarize yourself with what your school can recycle and/or compost. Request recycling and compost containers (if applicable) from the school custodian and discuss the logistics of set-up and take-down. Create signs for your sorting station bins so guests know what goes where. See below for additional set-up guidance, including downloadable sign samples.

## Food

The kinds of foods served and how they are packaged can significantly impact the amount of waste generated at your event. There are many simple ways to reduce, or even avoid altogether, a lot of this waste:

- Consider serving foods that do not require utensils.
- Purchase food in bulk quantities rather than in individual servings to reduce packaging.
- Use this [food waste reduction calculator](#) to determine how much food to serve in order to minimize food waste.
- Choose foods that have minimal or no packaging.
- Use large reusable pitchers or water coolers to fill water bottles or eco-friendly cups rather than purchasing single-use water bottles or juice boxes.



Photo credit: Beth Flintoft

## Foodware

Go with reusable foodware for eating and serving whenever possible. Purchase a set of reusable dishes (plates, cups, utensils) to use at school events and designate a volunteer to wash them after the event. Check with your school principal and/or local public health department to determine the guidelines for washing the foodware.

Alternatively, ask guests to bring their own water bottles, utensils, and plates to the event. If guests are bringing food to share, ask them to bring their shared items in a reusable container.



If reusable dishes aren't feasible, there are still many ways to minimize your impact on the environment:

- Purchase items that are recyclable, compostable, and/or contain recycled materials and provide organizers with a list of stores/internet sites with recommended products.
- Avoid buying plastic and polystyrene products since these are generally not recyclable and their production has a significant environmental impact. Note that the widely used red plastic cups labeled #6 are not accepted by a majority of recyclers. If a plastic cup is needed, look for clear cups labeled with a #1 recycling symbol as they are more widely accepted by recyclers. Check with your hauler first to determine which products they will accept.
- Paper plates are a better choice than plastic plates since they cause less harm to the environment when produced and paper biodegrades in a landfill more easily.
- If composting, check out the [Biodegradable Products Institute](#) or the [Compost Manufacturing Alliance](#) to find products that are certified compostable. Many haulers no longer accept compostable foodware, so be sure to confirm which compostable products, if any, they accept.
- If using disposable cups, provide a marker for each guest to write their name on their cup.

- Avoid offering straws and sauce packets since they create unnecessary waste and can easily contaminate compost and recycling.

### Decorations and other party needs

- Use reusable tablecloths and designate a volunteer to wash them after the event.
- Avoid disposable decorations, such as balloons. Instead, purchase reusable decorations such as fabric banners and signs, which can be reused at future school events. Real plants, flowers, or other natural objects can make festive seasonal table decorations.
- Consider alternatives to disposable prizes and party favors, such as:
  - Tokens to select a schoolwide activity
  - Punch cards in order to earn one prize at the end of the event
  - Gift certificates for local experiences such as restaurants or movie theaters
  - Homework passes or extra recess
  - Pajama party or movie in class
  - Lunch with the principal or a teacher
  - Zero waste lunch gear like reusable utensil sets or water bottles

## DAY OF THE EVENT

### Sorting stations with composting and recycling

Set up one or more sorting stations with signs that are clearly labeled. [Here](#) is a set of downloadable signs from the SGA website that include signs for four sorting categories: Liquids, Recycling, Landfill, and Compost. These signs are just examples since items accepted for recycling and composting can vary from school to school. Here are a few other tips to keep in mind:

- Attach the signs above the bins at eye-level so they are easy for everyone to see.
- Consider taping actual items (compostable plates and recyclable bottles) to the appropriate sign.
- Remove or cover any extra landfill bins that are not part of your sorting station to prevent them from being used instead of the sorting station.
- If food is being prepared onsite, provide recycling and composting containers to the cooks.
- Post signs communicating that the event is zero waste and where the sorting station is located.
- Provide training for volunteer sorting station monitors and make sure someone is always at the sorting station to help guests sort properly.
- Take photos of the sorting station(s) and other zero waste practices in action.



## AFTER THE EVENT

### Waste check

- Double check the bins for contamination and properly sort any contamination that occurred.
- Optional: In order to better understand and celebrate the impact of your efforts, weigh or tally the number of bags from the different waste streams (landfill, recycling, compost) and make a list of all of the various measures taken to get to zero waste, including reduce and reuse efforts.
- Dispose of sorted waste into proper outdoor bins or coordinate with the custodian to do so.

### Food

- Send guests home with unserved leftovers or packaged foods.
- Donate packaged leftover food to a shelter or food bank.

### Reflect

- What worked well?
- What could be done better next time?
- What kind of feedback did guests provide?
- Communicate the amount (in pounds or bags) of waste that was diverted from the landfill and highlight other zero waste successes from the event.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[Illinois Food Scrap Coalition](#) is a not-for-profit organization advancing diversion and composting of organics in Illinois through advocacy, program implementation, market and business development, policy, and outreach. See their page for [Compost Pick Up/Hauling Services](#) to find out if there are compost hauling or drop off options near you.

Seven Generations Ahead

[Zero Waste Schools Program](#)

[Zero Waste Schools Toolkit](#)

[Zero Waste Schools Newsletter](#)

[Food Waste Reduction Toolkit for Illinois Schools](#) is a comprehensive resource from the [Wasted Food Action Alliance](#) that identifies the main sources of wasted food and offers strategies for food waste prevention, recovery and redistribution, composting, education and engagement, and celebrating success.

FOR MORE INFORMATION AND TO SHARE YOUR PHOTOS & SUCCESS STORIES, CONTACT US AT:

[ZEROWASTE@SEVENGENERATIONSBEFORE.org](mailto:ZEROWASTE@SEVENGENERATIONSBEFORE.org)