



# TEACHING STUDENTS TO RECYCLE

GRADE

Grades K-12

PLACE

Classroom

DURATION

15 minutes

## OVERVIEW

One of the simplest and most important lessons that you can teach your students is simply what can and can't be recycled in your classroom and school. While clearly labeled containers help students understand what goes into the recycling bin, nothing substitutes for a quick hands-on lesson, particularly for younger students. These hands-on lessons may be particularly useful if your school has recently started a recycling program or if you have made major changes to your program.

While the simple "dos and don'ts" may be enough for younger students, this quick lesson can also serve as a launching point for more in-depth discussions with older students about the conservation of natural resources, pollution and greenhouse gases, energy conservation, and a variety of other topics that are related to the impacts of waste and the benefits of recycling.

## 1 - SET UP DISPOSAL STATIONS

Set up your classroom's blue "Recycle" container and "Landfill" container side by side. This is an important best practice that will ensure your recycling stream does not become contaminated with materials that are not accepted for recycling at your school and should be a consistent practice in your room and all locations in the school. Containers should have clearly marked openings with simple labels that include pictures of what is accepted for recycling and what should be landfilled. SWACO has created a variety of suitable labels that are available for download.

## 2 - EDUCATE ON ACCEPTABLE MATERIALS

Place a variety of recyclable and non-recyclable items that are likely to be generated in your classroom on a desk or table. Examples of recyclable items could include writing paper, construction paper, printer paper, cardboard, etc., and non-recyclable items could include tissues, paper towels, candy wrappers, etc. There is no "universal" list of what is accepted for recycling in your school - it is dependent on the company that is providing your recycling



service. If you have any questions, contact your service provider or feel free to contact SWACO. We may be able to help figure out the answer.

There are many ways to educate the students, from a simple question and answer for each item ("Can this be recycled?"), to dividing the class in two groups and having them vote on each item before you reveal the correct answer, etc. Be sure to emphasize that the labels on the containers have pictures of what should go into each container, so that they can always look to check whether something is recyclable, or ask you, another teacher, or a custodian.

Why can't some things be recycled, like a paper towel that is made from paper? These questions are likely to come up. For younger students, the easiest answer may be that your recycling company only accepts certain items for recycling, and everything else must go to the landfill. A slightly more complex answer is that some materials can more easily be recycled into something new - like printer paper can be recycled into a cardboard box - but for other types of materials it is very difficult to recycle it into something new. Older students should be able to understand that there are strong *markets* for some types of materials - meaning that there are companies that want to buy the materials to use as raw materials to make something new. For other items there aren't enough companies out there to buy the materials to create a strong market and make it worthwhile for the recycling company to collect the item.

### 3 - PARTICIPATE

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Allow students to help with all aspects of your recycling program. If your classroom collection must be emptied into a centralized container, have students take recyclable materials from the classroom to the collection container. If they see an item that is in the wrong container, encourage them to speak up to a teacher or custodian to make sure that things are being done correctly. You might create a student Green Team to help educate students and staff on how to recycle correctly.

### 4 - PRAISE

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Are your students doing a great job? Let them know! Kids loved to be praised and positive reinforcement will only encourage their recycling efforts. Consider passing out "SWACO Recycling Champion Stickers" to younger students as an incentive. Students can also be recognized in school or district newsletters, social media, websites or daily announcements. To download SWACO resources that can help, please visit our School Recycling Resources webpage on our website: <https://www.swaco.org/316/School-Recycling-Resources>.