



Frequently asked questions about school recycling

1. Questions: Can paper with staples be recycled? How about paper clips?

Answers: Yes. Staples are fine. And it's OK to leave paper clips on paper.

Best practice: Remove paper clips before placing paper in recycling bin. The paper clips then can be reused.

2. Question: Can we place shredded paper in recycling bins?

Answers: No. Shredded paper is not accepted in commingled recycling bins. (Commingled recycling bins are for un-shredded paper, cardboard, and empty bottles and cans).

This answer applies to all shredded paper, even if it is bagged or bundled. As of mid-2019, recycling haulers stopped accepting shredded paper in commingled recycling bins.

Best practice: Shred less. Try to limit the amount of paper you shred. Ask if your school or district has a shredding policy stating what types of paper should be shredded.

Recycling options: If your school or district has shredded paper, see [shredded paper recycling options](#). Store the shredded paper separately for separate drop off or pick up. Do NOT add shredded paper to commingled recycling bins.

3. Question: Can we recycle envelopes?

Answers: Paper envelopes can be recycled, even with mailing labels, stamps, and plastic "windows" showing the name and address printed on paper inside the envelope.

But plastic envelopes or envelopes made with multiple materials, such as paper envelopes with foil or bubble wrap lining, cannot be placed in school recycling bins.

Paper packing materials (which come in boxed deliveries) can be recycled, but plastic bubble wrap or air cushions cannot be placed in school recycling bins.

Best practices: Paper and plastic envelopes often can be reused. Ask school suppliers to pack products in recyclable paper instead of plastic.

4. Questions: Are coffee cups and paper cups recyclable? How about coffee cup lids?

Answer: It depends on your recycling hauler. Ask your recycling hauler or your King County Green Schools Program representative before placing used paper cups in recycling bins.

Best practice: Avoid single-use cups. Instead, use durable, washable mugs or cups.

5. Question: Can we recycle paper napkins, paper towels, paper plates, and other paper food containers?

Answers: No, those materials cannot be placed in recycling bins.

- If your school collects compostable materials, you can place paper napkins, paper towels, food-soiled paper such as pizza boxes, and un-coated paper plates and other paper food containers in compost bins. Shiny, waxy, or plastic-coated paper products are NOT accepted in compost bins.

6. Questions: Are caps and straws recyclable?

Answers: No. Straws are not recyclable because the material cannot be readily recycled. Loose caps are not accepted in recycling bins because they jam equipment in recycling processing facilities.

If a bottle is **empty (no liquids or food)**, a cap can be placed tightly on the empty bottle before the bottle is placed in a recycling bin. In schools, it is best to discourage this practice due to time constraints during lunch.

Best practice: Many schools do not buy or provide straws.

7. Questions: Can we recycle milk cartons? What should we do with leftover liquids?

Answer: See the [milk carton and leftover liquid fact sheet](#)

Make sure all milk cartons are empty – no liquids!

If students are unable to finish their milk, ask them to empty leftover liquids into a leftover liquids bucket or container before placing the empty milk carton in a recycling bin. Ask students to “pour low and slow” and gently tap their milk cartons twice (“gentle tap tap”) against the side of the leftover liquids container to make sure no liquid remains in cartons.



Important note for schools in **Auburn and Federal Way school districts:** Milk cartons are not accepted for recycling, due to 2020 and 2021 changes in their recycling collection services. Ask your King County Green Schools Program representative for information.

Best practices: Encourage students to drink all their milk. Instead of buying single-use milk cartons, your school or district could switch to milk dispensers and reusable cups: [Analysis of milk dispensers and milk cartons for Auburn School District](#) and [Milk dispensers in Canby School District, Oregon](#).

8. Question: Can all types of juice containers be recycled?

Answers:

- Plastic juice bottles: Yes, plastic juice bottles can be placed in recycling bins if they are empty (no liquids!)
- Juice boxes: It depends on your hauler. Check with your recycling hauler before placing empty juice boxes in a recycling bin.
- Capri-Sun type juice containers: No, these cannot be placed in school recycling bins.
- Plastic juice cups with foil tops: No, these cannot be placed in school recycling bins.

9. Question: Can we recycle aluminum foil at school?

Answers: No, do not place aluminum foil in recycling bins. Although foil can technically be used to make new products, commingled recycling haulers in this region do not accept aluminum foil.

10. Question: Can we recycle plastic bags (including Ziploc bags) at school?

Answers: No, plastic bags are not accepted in school recycling bins.

Best practice: See [How to Pack a Waste Free Lunch](#) for tips on avoiding plastic bags in lunches packed at home.

11. Question: What items from the school lunch program can we recycle?

Answers: Recycle empty aluminum cans, glass bottles, and plastic bottles.

- **If** your school's recycling hauler collects milk cartons and juice boxes for recycling, then you also can recycle empty milk cartons and juice boxes. Your school kitchen can recycle empty glass jars and steel cans.

Do **NOT** place these items in your school recycling bins: Plastic utensils, condiment cups, plastic or polystyrene clam shells, plastic bags, and plastic wrap.

12. Question: Can we recycle pencils, pens, crayons, and markers?

Answers: Pencils and pens cannot be placed in school recycling bins or recycled. The Crayola [ColorCycle](#) marker recycling program was placed on hold during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Best practice: Use your pencils, pens, crayons, and markers until they are completely used up.

13. Question: Can we recycle scissors, tape dispensers, and other supplies?

Answers: No, those items cannot be recycled. But they can be reused.

Best practice: Unwanted supplies in usable or good condition can be **reused** by another person, school, or organization. Hold a **Zero Waste locker, cubby, or office clean out** and [School Swap Day](#) at the end of the school year or other times.

14. Question: Should recyclable materials be placed loose (i.e., not in plastic bags) in outdoor recycling containers, or should they be secured in clear plastic bags before they are placed in outdoor recycling containers?

Answers: The answer depends on your recycling hauler and the type of material you are collecting for recycling.

In general, it is best to keep materials loose (not in plastic bags) in outdoor recycling containers. *Here's why:* At recycling sorting facilities, plastic bags wrap around equipment and cause the facilities to shut down several times each day for workers to remove bags. This causes safety hazards for workers and increases the cost of recycling.



However, for milk cartons, bottles, cans, and similar items, some recycling haulers have different responses to this question. See below or check with your recycling hauler. Ask your King County Green Schools Program representative for information and guidance.

Waste Management, Inc.: All recyclable materials should be placed loose (not bagged) in outdoor recycling dumpsters or containers.

Other recycling haulers: Recyclable materials such as cardboard and paper should be placed loose (not bagged) in outdoor recycling dumpsters or containers. BUT empty milk cartons, plastic bottles, and aluminum cans should be placed in clear plastic bags and secured at the top before the bags are placed in outdoor recycling dumpsters or containers.

15. Questions: What happens if our recycling bins are contaminated with loose caps, straws, liquids, food, food-soiled paper, and other items that cannot be recycled?

Answers: Liquids, food, and other contamination – *meaning items that do not belong in recycling bins* - can ruin an entire load of recyclable materials. Your school's recycling hauler may refuse to collect the recyclable materials if the load is contaminated.

Recycle Right! Make sure all recyclable materials (such as cartons, bottles, and cans) are empty – no liquids or food. Only put items you know can be recycled in recycling bins. Make sure students and staff know what belongs in school recycling bins.

Food-soiled cardboard (such as greasy pizza boxes) should not be placed in recycling bins, but instead can be placed in compost bins if your school has a collection service for food scraps, paper napkins, and other compostable materials.

Ask your King County Green Schools Program representative for guidance and tools, including stickers (to be placed on indoor recycling bins) or signs (to be placed above bins) with information about what materials are accepted in the recycling bin. In the classroom, cafeteria, and other locations, make sure the sticker on each recycling bin faces the students (not the wall).

16. Questions: When outdoor recycling dumpster or container lids are not seal-tight, does the rain ruin the recyclable materials? If so, will recycling haulers provide better recycling dumpsters or containers with tight-fitting lids?

Answers: Outdoor recycling dumpsters and containers should have tight-fitting lids to keep recyclable materials dry. Your school or school district (whichever pays the recycling hauler for the collection service) should contact its recycling hauler to request outdoor recycling dumpsters or containers with tight-fitting lids. Recycling haulers also periodically clean out or replace outdoor recycling containers as needed or as specified in the hauling contract.

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