

# Karen Telleen-Lawton: Students Cutting Waste with Composting

Local schools take the next step in trash reduction and reap the dividends



Green Team members Samantha Hill and Alyssa Miller stand by to help other Hope Elementary School students sort their trash during lunchtime. (Karen Telleen-Lawton / Noozhawk photo)

By Karen Telleen-Lawton, Noozhawk Columnist | **UPDATED** | Published on 04.05.2010

When the [city of Santa Barbara](#) decided to dig deeper into trash reduction, it discovered unmined gold at the schools. Schools are the largest aggregators of trash, according to [Environmental Services](#) specialist Eric Lohela. Environmental Services designed a composting program for businesses and schools that is beginning to pay big dividends for the early adopters.

It's very rewarding to work with the schools," Lohela says. "When we reach children, we are not only educating, but also saving the school district money."

[Harding Elementary](#) and [Peabody Charter](#) schools joined the program first; [Hope](#) and [Monte Vista](#) elementary schools started in February.

Barbara LaCorte, principal at Hope Elementary, walked me though their process.

“We started awhile back with the 80-20 program: a large blue recycling can in every classroom, with a little black trash can hooked to it. Now we’ve added a yellow bin — composting — which we line with a compostable bag made from corn,” she says.

[MarBorg Industries](#) comes twice per week. Since the program is new, there aren’t yet figures about cost reduction, but LaCorte says the school already has a net savings because it has reduced the trash pickup.

Large schools spend about \$2,000 per month on trash pickup, Lohela says. Schools that are good at recycling reduce that cost to about \$1,000 per month, and with composting it may shrink to about \$500 monthly. There are some additional costs, such as the compost bin liners, but those are more than offset by the savings. These figures are scaled back for a small school such as Hope.

At lunchtime, I watched the sixth-grade Green Team at work. First-graders dutifully lined up to sort their trash, watched over by Samantha Hill and Alyssa Miller wearing “Hope School Goes Green” T-shirts as the day’s Green Team.

“We’re going to help everyone sort their stuff,” Alyssa says. “It’s fun to help people put away trash. At home I help my Dad compost, but my sister says it’s kind of yucky.”

“Our family recycled before the school program, too. I want to take care of the Earth when I grow up,” Samantha adds.

LaCorte watches over like a proud mother. “The kids are getting trained; it’s easy to do. The Green Team keeps it moving smoothly.” Is there any resistance, I asked her? “None at all,” she says.

The main challenge is keeping the compost “pure.” Some items have to be trashed because they can’t be recycled or composted, such as ketchup packets, foam cups and juice boxes (because of the metal tab). The school thought it would be difficult for young children to separate these out, so they are phasing them out completely. Indeed, Harding has made everything in its cafeteria compostable.

The adults are a bit more difficult to train. Lohela works with each school’s educational staff. “The kids get it quickly; they chide their teachers about the rules,” he says.

He says he hasn’t encountered contamination issues. “I personally jump in the food scraps every week. I have steel-toed galoshes,” Lohela says. “Occasionally I find a plastic bag or a soda can, but it’s 99 percent pure.”

After lunch I chat with the sixth-graders who designed an explanatory video for their classmates. “It was a good experience to do a movie; we learned a lot,” Jacob Panossian says.



They are all impressed by the effect of composting on the quantity of trash.

“Some days, I see no trash in the bins at all,” Brian Eddy says.

— *Karen Telleen-Lawton’s column is a mélange of observations supporting sustainability. Graze her writing and excerpts from Canyon Voices: The Nature of Rattlesnake Canyon at [www.CanyonVoices.com](http://www.CanyonVoices.com).*