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Recycling? What's that?

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Leon County's public schools aren't making the grade when it comes to recycling.

Only 4 percent of trash generated at schools is recycled, while at least half of it could be, according to city and county solid-waste departments.

"It's pretty low. Some schools do a lot better than others," said Adam Schlachter, recycling coordinator for Leon County.

The school district doesn't have a well-defined policy, and the School Board agreed that needs to change - especially since there's a potential to save at least \$72,000 per year if it improves its recycling efforts to 20 percent.

Schools like Gilchrist and DeSoto Trail elementary schools and SAIL high school have relatively high recycling rates based on a combined waste and recycling analysis by the city and county for 2006.

DeSoto Trail has about a 23-percent recycling rate, SAIL has close to a 20-percent rate, and Gilchrist has a 13-percent recycling rate.

Schlachter said some schools didn't have recycling information recorded with the county or city, but he said that didn't necessarily mean there wasn't a recycling plan in place.

Superintendent Jackie Pons said there isn't a designated person who monitors recycling for each school in the district. He also said he questions the information provided by the city and county for schools with no recycling information listed in the report.

"I don't know if we can say that's true or false," Pons said.

Dornell Hunt, 41, said there's a recycling bin outside at Ruediger Elementary School where her daughter, Emily, will be a fourth-grader this fall. But she felt like more could be done within the school.

"They need to do something," Hunt said, referring to the school district.

For instance, she said it would be a good idea to have containers in each classroom to collect paper that can be recycled.

School Board member Dee Crumpler said he would like to walk into any school in the district and see recyclable bins in each class, too. Some schools have bins, but that's not the case for the whole district.

"I think we can do a whole lot more," Crumpler said. "We're a long ways from where we should be."

Schlachter said recyclable bins would be nice, but it's not likely at this point.

"Neither (the city nor county) can commit to that kind of investment," Schlachter said. He said it could cost anywhere from \$25,000 to \$30,000 to provide that volume of bins. "We want this to be more student-driven."

Schlachter said a short-term solution to not having the bins would be to use some of the copy paper boxes that already come to each school. He said students could decorate the boxes and make the effort a fun part of the curriculum. That way, students will be more proactive in their school's recycling efforts.

Schools also can come up with fundraisers to help pay for the bins in each classroom, Schlachter said. He said many school PTOs are very active, and fundraisers could help ease the costs.

School district joins city, county in seeking grant

Another option may be the Innovative Recycling/Waste Reduction Grant, which provides money to local governments to improve their recycling efforts. The city, county and school district are teaming up for the state grant.

The grant application is due in September, and if awarded to Leon County, it would be given out in September 2008. Schlachter said the grant could help pay for some of the bins in classrooms, in addition to producing a manual for recycling that other Florida school districts could follow.

This is one of the rare times all three local governments have made a combined effort for the same cause, said Bill Berlow, an associate editor at the *Tallahassee Democrat* and chairman of Greenovation, a volunteer-based group whose goal is to make the community and region a green-technology capital.

The group offered help to the school district by creating benchmarks and an official district policy for recycling. It also suggested appointing liaisons at each school who will keep track of recycling efforts.

During the last School Board meeting, the board agreed to work with the group so that it may improve its efforts. The first meeting will take place Monday. It will include Greenovation members and Merry Ortega, executive director of secondary schools, representing the district.

Danielle Bedard, 13, will be a ninth-grader at Lincoln in the fall, and she said it's going to take a joint effort to make things better. She said she wants to see the teachers, staff and students pitch in.

"I think it's necessary," Bedard said.