

The Plan Is In The Garbage  
Schools Parse Dumpsters To Beef Up Recycling Effort  
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It's a dirty job, but someone has to do it - that is, if you want to have the greenest school district in the country.

That's the goal of Doug Pearson, director of building services for the Madison School District. And that's why Pearson and his staff have been diving into school Dumpsters.

Armed with a \$35,000 grant from the state Department of Natural Resources, Pearson said, the district wants to improve its recycling effort to help the environment and save some of the \$80,000 a year it pays in tipping fees to dump more than 4.6 million pounds of trash collected from 46 schools and two administrative buildings.

"We're trying to develop a model recycling program for K-12 schools," he said. But before the district can improve its recycling, it has to know what is ending up in the trash. "You really need to dig through the garbage," said Sonya Newenhouse, president of Madison Environmental Group, research consultant for the project.

As part of the Waste Reduction and Recycling Demonstration grant, Madison Environmental Group will conduct interviews and collect data culled from four schools' trash. In addition, students and staff will be involved in developing materials to improve the district's recycling effort.

On Wednesday, the Dumpster divers -- all with up-to-date tetanus and hepatitis vaccinations -- delved into the trash discarded in the previous 24 hours at La Follette High School. Bag by gooey bag, the contents were sorted into separate bins for paper, cardboard, aluminum, plastic and other types of waste, which were later weighed to establish a baseline of data.

The stalwart sorters made the best of a messy situation and had some fun with their finds. "Where do we put the underwear?" asked one sorter, who was directed to the textile bin. "What about the deodorant?" asked another. "Joe can use some."

While the district does recycle mixed white paper, 310 pounds of it made it into one day's trash at La Follette, along with 157 pounds of plastic drink containers that could have been recycled. Of the 1,461 pounds of waste collected, 531 pounds, or 36 percent, was recyclable. That shows more recycling containers are needed, along with more education about recycling, Pearson said.

George Dreckmann, recycling coordinator for the city of Madison, also will be working with the district to improve its recycling effort and to see if the city's expanding recycling program can save the district money.

"We can make a big difference if we make incremental steps," Newenhouse said. "It all adds up. Imagine how much waste just the School District is sending to the landfill each day. If we could cut that by half, that's significant."

Earlier this week, garbage at Marquette Elementary and O'Keeffe Middle schools was examined. "You can tell what they had for lunch and what the kids didn't like," Pearson said. "Some visions I'm going to have a hard time getting out of my mind."

Dumpster data also will be collected at Spring Harbor Middle School and Memorial High School, where trash sorting will take place today. "We're always looking for volunteers," Pearson said.