

Lincoln Middle School

2023 First Place - Middle School Division



“ We have this wonderful audience of students who are willing to learn. They’re little sponges — if you present a new way of doing something, they’re willing to try it. - Melissa Johnson ”

The Project:

Coming back to Lincoln Middle School in person after a year of the pandemic, sixth grade teacher Melissa Johnson saw this “refresh” as an opportunity to get students thinking about and working towards sustainability goals at school.

“Adults have the best intentions, but when you’re working in schools, it should come from students,” Johnson said. “It’s their waste, so we wanted them to have a part in reducing it.”

Johnson conducted a student survey at the beginning of the school year so students could reflect on their own waste management and personally brainstorm ways for Lincoln to “go green.” The survey collected over 300 responses, many of which suggested similar ideas, such as posting educational signage, adding to the number of recycling and composting bins around the building and creating a student Green Team.

Johnson and Illinois Green Schools Project mentor and Sparkfund senior manager Robyn Munici structured the project around these goals. Pre-COVID, Lincoln received a grant from the Solid Waste Agency of Northern Cook County for a lunchroom sorting station. But the survey results meant they could build out a more comprehensive waste management system, all the way from promoting initial awareness to inspiring students to take action. Students created educational signs and videos on how to sort waste, which complemented the additional recycling bins and new terracycle boxes purchased through the support of an Illinois Green Schools Project mini-grant. Around 50 Lincoln students led a lunchroom waste audit on April 5, seeing firsthand the volume of waste that could be reduced or recycled instead. Across the three lunch periods, there were originally six bags meant for the landfill; the students’ sorting reduced it to just one. They filled four compost buckets and recycled or terracycled 106 items.

What is TerraCycle?

TerraCycle Zero Waste Boxes make it possible to recycle things that are likely not accepted through local curbside services, from plastic packaging to disposable PPE to art supplies.

“You can see that they’re learning that they make an impact,” Johnson said. “They’re very willing, they really just need to be guided and reminded.”

After building a foundation for student awareness and investment in waste management this year, Lincoln aims to become a zero waste school and inspire other schools in the district to do the same.

“We got a baseline. Let’s grow into this for next year,” Johnson said. “We’re not done.”

By Clare Zhang