

Elmwood Elementary

2026 Second Place - Middle/Elementary Division



The Project:

Elmwood Elementary launched a student-led waste reduction initiative designed to improve recycling systems, reduce landfill waste, and strengthen environmental literacy among students in grades 3–5. Guided by school self-assessment data, building walkthrough observations, and student leadership through Earth Club and STEAM Club, this project transformed sustainability awareness into meaningful schoolwide action.

Project Focus: Waste Management

Students involved: 30

Staff Involved: 4

Location: Zion, IL

Students impacted: 200



Students became more aware of how daily habits impact the environment. Sustainability became a visible and empowering topic rather than an abstract concept.



The Process:

Students in grades 3–5 began by investigating where school waste goes, leading “reality check” walkthroughs and conducting Elmwood’s first student-led waste audit and building-wide bin inventory. Throughout the project, students used clipboards, tally sheets, and reflection activities to analyze data and design solutions. They documented contamination patterns, bin placement issues, and gaps in signage. Using their IGSP Mini Grant, students sourced educational recycling stickers and posters to guide correct sorting in real time. They shared their learning with classmates and staff, using peer education to reinforce best practices and integrate sustainability into daily routines.

The Outcomes:

Through their project, Elmwood’s Earth and STEAM clubs completed the school’s first formal waste audit, developed a strategic signage plan, and identified key recycling challenges. The students strengthened leadership, data analysis, and problem-solving skills while building environmental responsibility and civic pride. With signage installation underway, the school anticipates reduced recycling contamination, improved waste sorting, and cleaner shared spaces, supported by ongoing student-led monitoring and annual audits.

