



Student Voice in Zero-Waste Advocacy

**A Comprehensive Guide for Students to Transition
Educational Entities to Zero-Waste Practices**



Introduction & Background

Plastics have played a critical part in the development of modern society. This might be a contradicting opener to a guide about zero-waste policy, but this is simply the bitter truth. From the material of your phone body to the pacemaker in someone's chest, most of humanity's modern inventions have some form of plastics in them. However, the real problem starts when we exploit this resource for our own convenience and lethargy. The single-use plastics of today aren't necessary for the functioning of society, rather a simple convenience. In today's world, single-use plastics have surrounded us completely, from straws and cutlery to bags and packaging, fostering a destructive single-use mentality that prioritizes short-term convenience.

This theme of convenience and lethargy is seen in all niches of waste management. Food waste has become rampant, driven by a culture of carelessness and an overall disregard for resources. If individuals were to put some thought into taking simple measures, such as planning out meals, redistributing surplus food, and composting, we wouldn't have a food waste problem in the first place. But the problem is that this behavior is not incentivized in today's face-paced world. There are no cultural or societal expectations on individuals to carry out these actions and play their part as responsible citizens.

So let us develop this culture of stewardship and responsibility, one school at a time. Every student in this nation has heard about the detrimental impacts of plastic pollution in our classrooms, yet they turn around to find lunch packaged in all kinds of plastic at the cafeteria. Only when we get schools to follow sustainable waste protocols, can we begin creating a culture of waste reduction and waste separation in our nation's youngest stewards. Every student should understand that using single-use plastics is NOT OK, that separating waste is a MUST, and that we as a society are responsible for the preservation of this planet and its natural resources.

This guide outlines the need for zero-waste policy in schools, the details of such policies, and a comprehensive outline on how you, as a student, can advocate for its adoption and implementation. Again, this isn't simply about preventing waste in the short term, it is

about creating a future generation that understands and prioritizes environmental sustainability in every aspect of life.



About Me

Hello everyone! I'm Tarun Rajesh, a Junior at Dublin High School in Dublin, California. I'm passionate about equity and sustainability in education. I am the Founder and President of the Student Climate Corps —a student-led organization to advance climate policy in the Tri-Valley —and the summer procurement team intern for the Center for Environmental Health.

I am the main author of the Roosevelt Resolution, a policy initiative adopted by the Fremont USD and Dublin USD to commit to zero-waste practices. The resolution has prompted both school districts to make ambitious investments in decreasing single-use plastics and food waste.

Currently, I am collaborating with numerous non-profits and district officials to advance further sustainability efforts, ensuring that these commitments lead to actionable, long-term environmental impact.



Resource Guide

The following resource guide is designed to provide you with a better understanding of many of the scientific and legislative concepts needed to maintain a grasp on zero-waste policy. You do not need every single source on this sheet, use as needed.

Plastic Pollution and Wildlife:

1. [The United Nations Ocean Conference Factsheet](#): General information on impact of single-use plastic pollution on marine wildlife

Magnitude of Plastic Pollution in Oceans:

2. [Plastic Pollution in the World's Oceans: More than 5 Trillion Plastic Pieces Weighing over 250,000 Tons Afloat at Sea | PLOS ONE](#)

Impact of Hydraulic Fracturing:

3. [Fracking Threatens Our Health, Community, and Climate | NRDC](#): Impacts of hydraulic fracturing on marginalised communities and ecosystems.

Plastic Waste Trends:

4. [Global plastic waste set to almost triple by 2060 | OECD](#)

Plastic Waste and Climate Change:

5. [Plastic waste and climate change-what's the connection? | World Wildlife Fund](#): How does the production, distribution, and disposal contribute to climate change?

Food Waste and Climate Change:

6. [IPCC Report on Climate Change 5.5.2.5 | IPCC](#): General Overview
7. [Quantifying Methane Emissions from Landfilled Food Waste | US EPA](#): Background and plenty of quantifiable statistics.

Waste Audits:

8. [Dublin High School 2023 Waste Audit Report](#): Example of a comprehensive waste audit report
9. [StopWaste School Waste Audit Resources](#): Comprehensive toolkit for completing waste audits at school site

Information Regarding Waste Management Guidelines in California

10. [CalRecycle](#): Homepage of California Department of Resources Recycling and Recovery
11. [California State Bill 1383](#): Organic Waste Reduction Guidelines in California State Bill 1383



Advocating for Change

Young people have been the cornerstone of some of the most important social movements in the history of the world. From the humble beginnings of the Civil Rights Movement to the millions of students today marching for environmental justice, youth have repeatedly shown that they have the ability to reject the status quo and bring about meaningful change. Sometimes they are the only ones who can. It is important as an environmental activist to realize that the struggle is not that of the individual, but of the collective. There exist millions of fellow advocates worldwide, seeking to make differences in their own communities. Only when we harness the support and collective power of the masses are we able to bring substantial and sustainable progress. We are hoping that this guide will

help to activate more youth in the movement to transform their local school community and give a realizable roadmap to implementing that change and quickly.

While legislation like SB1383 has made local lawmakers and elected officials more proactive towards adopting waste reduction policy, it is ultimately at the hands of the community to drive the implementation and success of these initiatives. While public support may or may not be needed to adopt waste reduction policy at the California school districts, building community awareness from the beginning is critical to help keep officials and board members accountable.

Leveraging Social Media

Building a large group of supporters for your policy proposal ultimately depends on your ability to leverage social media and communicate your message to a broad audience. Social media has undeniably helped social movements gain traction by offering a swift and far-reaching means of communication. This naturally calls upon you to use a variety of platforms to reach various target groups.

Instagram can help reach a wide base of students, given that a large number of student organizations and clubs already use the platform for announcements and promotions. Asking other clubs and accounts with large reach (i.e. ASB, PFSO, Sports Teams) and similar goals (i.e other environmental clubs) to repost your content on a regular basis can help you reach a wider network of peers. Similarly, asking fellow students to repost can also show vocal support for your policy proposal.

Platforms like LinkedIn can help connect you with parents and other professionals who have expertise in the project matter (i.e. school board policy, waste management, etc.). LinkedIn is also an excellent choice for publicity as every person on one's network is notified when they like or comment on a post, helping reach an even greater audience.

Last but not least, you should also focus on putting out content on platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp to reach parents that may otherwise not view your initiatives. It is in your ultimate benefit to use platforms that other teens may consider dead or ancient, to reach a different generation of potential supporters and advocates that can further your project.

Never shy away from potential opportunities to share informational videos and posters in group settings, whether that's in a discord group chat or a family get-together. You'll never know when you'll have the opportunity to gain an avid advocate or supporter for your cause.

Engaging Stakeholders

Good policy is often the result of days of discussions, debate, and negotiations. By engaging with critical stakeholders, you bring together valuable perspectives that ensure sustained progress in the later stages of implementation. You, as a student, are ultimately going to graduate high school in a matter of years and have other issues to take care of. In time, the success of your policy proposal will depend entirely on these stakeholders and their willingness to contribute time and money towards these issues.

Logistically speaking, the people that are going to be most affected by any sort of zero-waste policy are support staff. Custodians, for example, need to be able to accommodate a system where there exists three separate waste streams. Similarly, child nutrition staff may have to take additional steps in providing food in reusable containers. Engage in passionate, long discussions with these staff members. To craft successful policy, you must be able to understand the obstacles that the status quo presents to your proposed change. Your team must prioritize the feedback you receive from these staff as it ensures that your proposal does not result in an unfair shift of burden. Feedback from this group **must** be prioritized in later stages of revision.

Next, you should focus on contacting a wide range of administrators (i.e principals, asst.principals, activities director, etc.) from various schools within your district. Understand their responsibilities and visualize how they will change if your proposal is to be enacted. For example, high school principals often view measures to decrease single-use materials in school lunches favorably as they are able to minimize littering. On the other hand, elementary school administrators may be concerned as to how young students will adapt to using reusables and separating waste. Ultimately, the perspectives and feedback from these individuals provide a valuable insight into the logistics of public schools, given their extensive expertise and decades of experience.

Contacting the District

After taking into consideration the feedback provided by support staff and administrators, you are now ready to contact district leadership. There exist various avenues through which you can get into contact with these individuals. Depending on your situation, some paths might be more successful and efficient than others. Here we will consider three distinct paths that one may take to approach district officials:

1. Contact Your Student Board Member:

The Student Board Member (SBM) has the sole responsibility of representing a district's student body at board meetings. It is therefore apt for you to contact your SBM and ask them to push your policy proposal to the Superintendent.

2. Speak during Public Comment:

School board meetings have a designated block of time dedicated to allow members of the public to make comments on issues that may not be on the agenda. During this time you may introduce your initiative to board members and other district leadership (Superintendent, Asst. Superintendents, Directors, etc.). It may also be in your interest to present copies of your waste audit report to board members during this time. You **must** make it clear that you want to sit down with the Superintendent and other district officials to discuss issues pertaining to your policy and make revisions as necessary. While board members are not allowed to respond immediately to comments made during public comment, some members will talk to you when the meeting is in recess.

3. Just contact your superintendent directly:

In most situations, you will be able to directly contact your superintendent through email, expressing your needs for a meeting. This is most often the easiest and fastest way to get in contact with district leadership. However, in the rare scenario where the superintendent does not reply or declines to meet, you must resort to using the above two courses of action.

Meeting with District Leadership & Making Revisions

While the Superintendent is seen as the administrative head of the school district and manages a variety of tasks, they do not directly oversee every detail of operation at individual schools. Under the Superintendent there exist multiple Asst. Superintendents and Directors, each tasked with leading a specific aspect of day-to-day operations. How you interact with this group of people can differ. In Fremont USD, the Superintendent reviewed the resolution independently with district officials and proposed changes to be made. In Dublin, the Superintendent shifted the responsibility towards us to schedule meetings with the necessary directors to gain feedback and proposals. Here is an example of a change that was made on the Roosevelt Resolution:

Original Version:

“NOW, THEREFORE, IT BE RESOLVED that the Fremont Unified School District (FUSD) work to progressively discontinue the distribution of plastic to students by:

(a) Setting grade-appropriate expectations for students to bring their own reusable utensils.

(b) Providing compostable sporks and straws at school offices to students who do not have access to proper utensils.”

Revised Version:

“NOW, THEREFORE, IT BE RESOLVED that the Fremont Unified School District (FUSD) **will** work to progressively discontinue the distribution of plastic to students by:

(a) Setting grade-appropriate expectations for students to bring their own reusable utensils.

(b) Providing compostable sporks and straws at school offices to students who do not have access to proper utensils.”

While the changes in the revised version can be seen as miniscule and simply for the sake of readability, they carry significant policy implications. The first clause indicates that the Fremont Unified School District immediately implement the above set clauses after the adoption of the resolution. By adding “will work” to the second clause, the district commits to a future action rather than establishing it as an immediate priority. This simple addition impacts the accountability and expectations set for the district, as the original version suggests that efforts will be prompt, while the revised version implies that these efforts will begin sometime in the future. However, this leniency isn’t necessarily a bad thing. It is unreasonable to expect the district to implement such large scale programs for more than 42,000 students without time for planning and experimentation. Even though FUSD is far from eliminating plastic entirely from its system, it has made valuable reductions in the lunchroom and beyond in the past 3 years.

While the FUSD has been proactive in ensuring implementation, it isn't necessarily going to be the case with all school districts. Here is how we altered the resolution when working with Dublin Unified:

“BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that the Dublin Unified School District (DUSD) work to progressively discontinue the distribution of plastic utensils to students **throughout the 2024-25 school year** by:

(a) Setting grade-appropriate expectations for students to bring their own reusable utensils or providing incentive to do so

(b) Providing compostable sporks and straws at cafeterias to students who are unable to bring their own reusable utensils.”

While this third version isn't as lenient as the second version adopted by the FUSD, it still gives enough leeway for the district. It simply states that the district should begin implementing some aspects of this clause in the 2024-2025 school year. This ensures accountability without overwhelming or burdening the district.



Ensuring Accountability

Crafting and implementing a zero-waste resolution is only the beginning. To ensure long-term success, it is crucial to establish systems of accountability and follow-through. Without regular monitoring and evaluation, even the most well-intentioned policies risk falling into stagnation. Accountability ensures that the resolution evolves from words on paper into meaningful, sustainable action.

To hold districts accountable, it is important to set measurable goals and establish a transparent system for tracking progress. These systems should involve multiple stakeholders, including students, staff, and administrators, to ensure diverse perspectives and shared responsibility.

Here are two examples of accountability measures included in the Roosevelt Resolution:

1. Implementation Plan in Fremont USD

“BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, FUSD will bring forward an implementation plan for actions outlined above.”

This clause ensures that FUSD commits to a formal plan that outlines specific actions, timelines, and responsibilities for achieving the resolution's goals. By requiring an implementation plan, FUSD moves from broad commitments to concrete steps. The creation of this plan also facilitates regular monitoring, as the district can evaluate progress against the outlined milestones.

2. Advisory Committee in Dublin USD

“BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, DUSD agrees to establish a committee of students, teachers, administrative staff, and support staff to oversee the implementation of the actions outlined above”

This committee, comprising a diverse array of stakeholders, serves as a driving force behind implementation. Regular meetings provide a forum to evaluate progress and address logistical challenges, propose solutions, and maintain accountability.

These examples aren’t definitive models for implementing zero-waste policies but rather a demonstration that accountability measures need to be tailored to the unique needs and resources of each district. As a policy advocate, you must think ahead and design a way for you to question progress after adoption.