

Hawaii 24/7

School Recycling Petition Aims to Protect Aina

November 9, 2012



Early in the school year of 2011, one of my favorite teachers invited me to join her in forming an Environmental Leadership Club at Kealakehe High School.

While I really had no idea what we might accomplish, for me or for our island, I thought it would be a great way to learn about becoming a leader.

The newly branded Environmental Leadership Club started out small, planning in-school education campaigns — to teach students about the impact we can have on the environment and the things we could do to make a difference.

We also spearheaded the weekly recycling program at our school. Every week students from each homeroom bring their classroom's recycling to the designated bins.

For more than a year, we have involved the entire school in this effort. Our high school campus takes pride in having one of the most effective recycling programs on the island.

Angela Kang, the former head of the county Environmental Management Office, came to observe our recycling efforts. She informed us that having a recycling program at our school was essentially illegal.

I was shocked! How could this be?

As it turns out, in Hawaii the contracts for the disposal of solid waste are awarded to just one company on each island -- whoever is the lowest bidder. On the Big Island, that company is continuously Pacific Waste.

Unfortunately, this company does not offer any recycling services. This meant the permanent recycling bins on our campus, the cornerstone of our entire program, were in breach of the contracts.

As a result, Kealahou High School is now in the midst of a legal battle with Pacific Waste who want to remove the recycling bins.

This whole scenario seemed really crazy to me.

How could it be illegal to recycle? Why would the Department of Education keep schools from being more environmentally aware? Surely as an island people we should be most concerned about our waste?

The other Club members were shocked too. We had no idea that there were so many politics to such a simple matter like recycling.

The thousands of school children on the Island are our future. They should be part of a future that is not bogged down by all this disposable waste.

So when the idea was presented to us to start a petition to bring recycling to our schools we jumped at the opportunity.

Over the next several months our Club worked closely with Kang and later Susan Cox to craft the petition. We also brainstormed ideas about how we could distribute it to as many people as possible. We created a solid mission statement and started collecting signatures.

For a time we were moving forward at an astounding rate. Then we ran into problems within our own school. The bins we had were being disrespected. We didn't have the full support of school administration.

In addition, several teachers felt we were taking away their personal right to make money from redeeming recyclables. In order to refocus our own internal efforts, we put the School Recycling Petition on hold.

This summer I was nominated by Jenny White, Environmental Leadership Club teacher to serve as a Sustainable Hawaii Youth Leadership Initiative (SHYLI) delegate to the annual Youth Leadership Summit for Sustainable Development.

I had a great time — traveling with five others from the Big Island to Martha's Vineyard. I learned about sustainable initiatives from islands around the world. I learned how young people were championing green initiatives in their schools, their communities and their islands. I met people who had worked together to overcome obstacles and realized their dreams.

We were grateful Mayor Billy Kenoi, Gov. Neal Abercrombie and U.S. Sen. Daniel Akaka all sent letters of support for our delegation.

Upon my return, I felt reinvigorated about the School Recycling Petition.

In September, the Environmental Leadership Team met with West Hawaii members of the County Council as well as State Rep. Cindy Evans. We requested her help to create a legislative change to allow and even encourage recycling at all Hawaii public schools.

We revised our goals and simplified our mission.

Our mission statement now reads:

“We, the students of Hawaii Island, propose that all schools of Hawaii should have equal access to a sustainable recycling program for our school campuses. We strongly request that all future Department of Education solid waste contracts require recycling services.”

This School Recycling Petition is now being circulated throughout all the public schools of the Big Island. We realize that community support is also essential to the success of our Petition.

Recycling is an issue that affects everyone on our Island. We hope to make a real difference for our community as a whole.

We would like to invite you to sign it too!

Imagine what could happen if all the trash from all the schools on the island was diverted — every drink can or bottle, every graded assignment and every old essay that is currently going straight to the dump -- was recycled.

Just imagine how much vital space and resources we could save!

As an island, it is critical that we are aware of how our actions affect our environment. With nowhere but the landfill to send our trash, recycling is a very powerful way for us as a community to give back -- and protect -- our land, the aina.

This School Recycling Petition serves not only to bring about recycling but also the reeducation of an entire generation. With time and effort we hope to make lasting change on our Island that will provide for a better tomorrow.

- Allie Kitchens, Kealakehe High School

Find out more:

Sustainable Hawaii Youth Leadership Initiative shyli.org