

## Littman: Plastic bottle recycling at Newton South. . .(Not!)?

By Annalise Littman/Guest Column

Wicked Local Newton

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For a Girl Scout Gold Award project, I conducted a survey at my high school, Newton South, about students' plastic bottle recycling habits and their use of tap and bottled water. I had been distressed by the number of students I observed throwing away plastic bottles in trash cans, rather than in recycling bins. Among other things, I wanted to know how often students recycle plastic bottles at school, and the difficulties they experience when recycling. I hoped to use the data to educate the school community about the importance of recycling; inform school groups working on improving recycling about the impediments to recycling at the school; and help them develop a more effective recycling program.

As I crafted survey questions and did pilot studies with my Girl Scout troop and members of the school's Environment Club, I learned something disturbing. The plastic bottles students placed in the recycling bins were not being recycled at all; they were being thrown away with the trash. The problem was bigger than I had thought. But I proceeded with the survey when I realized that most students at South, like me, believed that recycling of plastic bottles was taking place.

The survey, assisted by student volunteers, was conducted in November 2008. It consisted of 14 questions, organized into three sections: school and home recycling habits; bottled water usage; and tap water and water fountain usage (the latter two topics are not discussed in this article). A total of 1,347 Newton South High School students completed the survey, in 115 (out of 121) homerooms. The sample was equally distributed among students from all four grades.

Among students who drink from nonreusable plastic bottles in school, 16.3 percent said they "always" recycle, 30.4 percent said they "often" recycle, 35.4 percent said they "sometimes" recycle, and 17.9 percent said they "never" recycle these bottles at school. More than 82 percent of students are recycling at school now, to some degree.

The most common reason selected (66.6 percent) for not recycling plastic bottles by those who say they "never" recycle at school was "recycling bins are hard to find." In addition, 11.3 percent of the "never" group selected "I take recyclables home with me to recycle," 10.7 percent selected "Recycling bins are sometimes too full," and 5.7 percent wrote-in an "other" response box that the school does not recycle plastic bottles. But 17.6 percent of the "never" students selected "I don't have the time to recycle," and 11.3 percent selected "I'm not interested in recycling," expressing little or no motivation for participating in a plastic bottle recycling program.

Among the 82.1 percent of students who drink from nonreusable plastic bottles and *do* recycle at school, 88.2 percent selected "recycling bins are sometimes hard to find" and 32.3 percent checked "recycling bins are sometimes too full." Apparently, students actively participating in plastic bottle recycling do not perceive the current program as user-friendly.

Students reported a much higher rate of recycling plastic bottles at home than at school. 62.6 percent “always” recycle, 18.3 percent “often” recycle, 11.3 percent “sometimes” recycle, and only 7.9 percent “never” recycle at home. This suggests that it might not be difficult to generate higher compliance rates if the recycling program at school is improved.

Given that the major reason for not recycling by both students who never recycle and students who say they are already recycling is the difficulty in locating recycling bins and bins being full, it is likely that a recycling initiative at South that provided readily available recycling bins that were regularly emptied could be very effective. The high rate of students’ recycling of plastic bottles at home (81 percent “always” or “often” recycle at home) suggests that the Newton South student body, on the whole, understands the importance of recycling.

In June 2009, I presented the survey findings to the Newton South Senate, which implemented a paper recycling program this past school year and plans to develop a plastic bottle recycling program next year. For this program to be effective, students would probably have to take responsibility for transporting recycling bins filled with plastic bottles to the school’s loading dock where the custodial staff will store the bottles to be picked up for recycling. The students would probably have to empty bins filled with recycling material into larger containers. Large paper recycling containers are located close to the homeroom classes, but students will have to walk much further — to the loading dock — to empty plastic collected in the nonpaper recycling bins. Students are more likely to expend the extra effort to make the program succeed if the school community, aware of an initiative to start plastic bottle recycling at South, is encouraged to perceive efforts to recycle the large number of plastic bottles that are now being treated as trash as socially responsible behavior.

*Annalise Littman is a recent graduate of Newton South High School. She will attend Tufts University in the fall.*

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