The Cart Before the Horse?

Concept
We need to redesign laws and revise habits in order for recycling to work.

Objective
Students will consider ways to reduce waste in the United States.

Method
Students will listen to quotes, read the articles and discuss ways to reduce waste and increase recycling.

Materials
Educators choice

Subjects
Social Studies, Economics, Language Arts

Skills
Analyzing, engaging in collaborative conversations, gathering information, using evidence

Time
One class period

Vocabulary
Policy, secondary recycled materials, redesign, tax advantages, economic competition.

Resources
Local recycling groups; your state’s department of natural resources; your state’s waste management department or agency

3R’s of the Common Core
Parallel Activities
4-6, Where to Recycle
7-8, Graphing Recyclable Information
Public Planning and Policy
Redesign and Reuse
Recycling Resources
Solid Waste and Recycling
Waste Management Agencies by State

How Can We Recycle Our Resources?

“An inventory of the world’s discards would reveal metals more valuable than the richest ores, paper representing millions of hectares of forests and plastics incorporating highly refined petrochemicals. That these products rich in raw materials and concentrated energy are frequently considered worthless is indicative of a distorted economic waste in the United States.”
—Cynthia Pollock

“We do not buy scrap out of altruism or patriotism. Neither do we buy it just because it saves energy or is good for the environment. It’s nice if those benefits follow along but we don’t have much patience with those who not only advocate, but would legislate, putting the cart before the horse.”
—J.J. Ferrigan.

“A city the size of San Francisco disposes of more aluminum than is produced by a small bauxite mine, more copper than a medium copper mine and more paper than a good sized timber stand. San Francisco is a mine.”
—David Morris, Worldwatch Paper #76

Leading Question
Why isn’t everybody recycling?

Procedure
1. Discuss the background quotes. If recycling saves energy and resources, saves landfill space, reduces pollution, why doesn’t it seem to be economically feasible? Does business pay the full costs of producing, transporting and disposing of its products? What are these costs and if not business, who does pay them?

Evaluation
Worksheet.
Classroom Activities

A. Develop a flow chart tracing all the costs of an object from extraction of a raw resource to disposal. Include environmental costs and subsidized costs. What would happen if the manufacturer were forced to pay the hidden costs? Why isn’t this the case?

B. Choose one recyclable. Check several different markets and haulers to see what prices, if any, are being offered for the material. What prices are they being paid for the materials by the end-user?

C. Write an essay defending or refuting any of the three given quotes.
A National Recycling Policy?

1. What reasons does the NRC give for pursuing recycling as a necessity?

2. Why do secondary recycled materials have difficulty competing with virgin materials?

3. What policies does NRC suggest to help secondary recycled materials compete?

4. What could a national recycling database be used for?

5. What does the NRC mean by Design for Recyclability?

6. What principles does the NRC suggest that a national recycling education policy should emphasize?

7. What specific recommendations does it make for its national policy for recycling education?

8. Do you agree with these recommendations? What other measures do you think would help recycling?