

The Sharing TREE: Frequently Asked Questions

1. What is The Sharing TREE?

The Sharing TREE (Teachers Reusing Everything for Education) is a reusable resource center for donated new and gently used classroom materials that are available to public school teachers in Leon County free of charge. Manufacturers, businesses, government agencies and individuals routinely dispose of tons of perfectly usable items – not just paper, pencils and pens, but also calculators, beakers, and arts and crafts supplies -- that could be used in our classrooms to enhance student achievement.

2. Why do we need a reusable resource center in Tallahassee?

For several reasons. Many teachers, especially those just starting their careers, have a tough time making ends meet. The Sharing TREE will help them cut personal expenses while at the same time providing them with extra teaching tools. This also helps teacher recruitment efforts.

Many Leon County families also are strapped financially – roughly 40 percent of the district’s elementary students receive free or reduced lunch. They struggle to buy school supplies, too. The Sharing TREE will give teachers the ability to help their most needy students with supplies their families can’t easily afford.

Businesses benefit, as well. Most organizations generate a huge amount of reusable waste that winds up in a landfill somewhere. By donating reusable waste, private businesses reduce their disposal costs, help local schools and the community, possibly receive a tax write-off for the value of their donation, and send the message to customers and stockholders that they care about public education and the environment. An estimated 11,000 commercial and institutional organizations in Leon County produce between 50 and 60 percent of our local waste stream.

Finally, it will become even more important in the near future to divert reusable items from becoming trash in order to achieve increased local and statewide recycling goals.

3. What’s in it for our children?

Reusing safe, clean materials for classroom projects gives kids the opportunity to be innovative. Many items will be used for their intended purpose – such as pens – but other material may be adapted for project-based learning. For example, cardboard boxes can be cut up and made into masks from different cultures as part of a World Geography lesson.

This also emphasizes respect for the environment and reinforces the value of reuse and recycling, which will become increasingly critical as our children become adults.

Hands-on learning is often the most effective way to learn. For young children especially, “creative play” with reusable materials is an established, respected strategy for developing motor skills, building teamwork and encouraging initiative.

4. Is this a new concept?

Not at all. At least 15 reusable resource centers already operate in Florida alone. There are dozens more across the United States.

No two are exactly alike in how they’re run. In Jacksonville, for example, the Duval County School District has total operational control of the Teacher Supply Depot, which occupies an entire former elementary school. With a part-time director, a staff of volunteers and a large base of donors, it distributes almost \$4 million worth of reusable classroom supplies a year. In Gainesville, Tools for Teachers is a partnership of Alachua County government and Alachua County Schools. It’s run out of a converted convenience store. In Orange County, a nonprofit called A Gift for Teaching runs the reuse center there.

5. What’s the model in Tallahassee?

Ours is a public-nonprofit partnership. The founding partners are Leon County Schools, Goodwill Industries-Big Bend Inc., Sustainable Tallahassee and Leon County government. We say “founding partners” because they are the four parties to a Memorandum of Understanding, or MOU, that the boards of the four organizations approved in March 2010. But others throughout the community – including businesses, early childhood development advocates, the Foundation for Leon County Schools, the Chamber of Commerce, the Tallahassee Community College Foundation and the Leon Classroom Teachers Association -- are eager to help.

6. Where is The Sharing TREE located?

Lively Technical Center on Appleyard Drive is the home of The Sharing TREE. The reuse center is in Building 6, at the rear of the campus, which comprises more than 4,800 square feet. The site includes a loading area, lots of storage space, dedicated

parking, more than 1,200 square feet for the main “shopping” area, and two regular-sized classrooms that also will be used for shopping, at least initially.

7. What are the costs?

The largest actual costs will be in salary and benefits for a director to run the center and the costs associated with the site. Goodwill has agreed to pay for salary and benefits for a year; the school district has agreed to provide the building and pay for utilities, computer and other operational costs. Goodwill’s contribution is estimated to be between \$35,000 and \$40,000 per year. The value of the school district’s contribution is estimated to be almost \$63,000 annually. This includes the estimated cost of leasing a similar building on the commercial market. Estimated cost to taxpayers, however, is \$16,000 a year.

8. What happens when Goodwill stops paying the director’s salary?

Sustainable Tallahassee has agreed to take the lead in private fundraising and seeking funding from grants. But the partners view The Sharing TREE as a community project that will require strong community support to continue to operate in the future.

9. What kinds of items can – and can’t – be donated?

There’s a long list of reusable materials. It includes classroom and office supplies, arts and crafts materials, Styrofoam, plastics and other miscellaneous “stuff.” The Sharing TREE, however, won’t take old electronic equipment such as computers. This is where our partnership is unique and exciting.

Goodwill recently opened a Technology Reuse Center on West Tennessee Street that accepts computers and other electronic equipment, including cell phones, in any condition. The four founding partners have agreed to send their undesired electronic equipment to Goodwill’s local Technology Reuse Center, and suggest that other public, private and nonprofit organizations agencies send their undesired electronic equipment there as well. This keeps and creates local jobs and generates local revenue. In addition, Goodwill has made its 17 Leon County stores available as drop-off sites for reusable materials intended for The Sharing TREE, and Goodwill will transport the items to the center.

10. And when will The Sharing TREE open?

A public “preview party” was held Thursday, Aug. 5, from 4-7 p.m., which was the official opening of the center. The first “shopping” days for teachers will be Thursday, Aug. 12, and Saturday, Aug. 14, from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. on both days on a “first come, first served” basis. In subsequent months, teachers should check the Leon County Schools Web site for information about shopping days, which will be designated according to school.