

By [Brian Tomasik](#)

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See [here](#) for my updated thoughts on environmentalism. --Brian, 4. Aug. 2014

*Topic: In the space provided below, please describe which of these activities (extracurricular and personal activities or work experience) has had the most meaning for you, and why.*

For the past two years, I have been working to convince my school district to purchase recycled copier paper. I have been concerned about environmental degradation ever since I was a small child, and this endeavor—more than any other—has given me the opportunity to convert that concern into determination to make a real and meaningful change.

In addition, this effort has shown me how things are done in the real world, outside of the sheltered walls of the classroom. There was no teacher to assign the project and set a due date; rather, the task was the result of my own volition, and I moved along at my own pace. I was not given any rubric or formally instructed in how to proceed; instead, I found online guide articles and went for advice to parents, teachers, friends, and even representatives from colleges and universities that already purchased recycled paper. The activity was neither theoretical nor contrived; to the contrary, my letters to paper retailers inquiring about their bulk prices, my tests of the quality of various brands of recycled paper in copiers, and my success in encouraging the administration to conduct a bid for recycled paper alongside the usual bid for virgin paper so that actual prices could be compared all represented concrete ways to overcome real obstacles.

And yet, none of this would have been possible without formal education. I needed the writing skills that I had learned in English and history classes for my research report on the environmental benefits of recycled paper and for the letter that I prepared for the Board of Education. And I never would have been able to calculate the exact magnitude of estimated resource savings that the school district's conversion to recycled paper would entail had I not taken science and math. The lesson of this project, then, is not that theoretical instruction is a useless waste of time but that it must be reinforced and enhanced by its application to real-world situations.