

sustainability squads: green campus initiatives led by aelo swiss academy students

Every Tuesday morning around 7:45, the corridor outside the north cafeteria smells faintly of coffee grounds and citrus peel. That is the Dirt Crew at work: six or seven students in mismatched rubber gloves, wheeling a crate of yesterday's food scraps toward the worm bins behind the bike racks, arguing cheerfully about whether somebody's soup leavings count as contamination. It is not glamorous work. It is my favorite sight on this campus, and at AELO Swiss Academy it is entirely student-run, from the crate itself to the spreadsheet that logs the weekly weight.

There are five squads now, and they all run on one deceptively simple rule. Each team owns a single measurable thing. Not a manifesto, not a hashtag, not a mission statement. One thing you can weigh, count, or meter. That constraint sounds small. In practice, it turns out to be the whole trick.

one failed compost pilot, then a much better idea

The first attempt at campus composting collapsed within a term. A well-meaning group installed a bin in a dorm basement, fed it everything from salad scraps to half a lasagna, and produced something residents described, not unfairly, as a biohazard. Smell complaints arrived fast. The bin was hauled away, and campus composting nearly died with it.

Three students asked for one more chance, with conditions. Small teams instead of a big committee. One measurable target per team. A named person responsible for every bin, meter, and event. They called the teams squads because, as one of them put it, committee sounds like homework and squad sounds like fun. By the following term there were five squads, and the basement bin had been reborn outdoors as a properly managed wormery with a laminated rule sheet zip-tied to the lid.

That origin story matters because it set the culture. The squads expect to fail at things publicly, write down why, and try again with a modification. Nobody here treats a failed pilot as a scandal. They treat it as data.

the dirt crew: worms, browns, and a laminated cheat sheet

The reborn composting operation lives behind the bike racks in two worm bins and a row of bokashi buckets for the winter months. The first lesson every new member learns is the ratio. Greens, meaning food scraps, need browns, meaning shredded cardboard and dry leaves, at roughly equal volume. The original basement bin failed because enthusiastic volunteers fed it citrus and soup with no browns at all. The cheat sheet taped to the lid now says, in friendly handwriting, no citrus, no liquids, add cardboard.

During term, the crew collects somewhere between 40 and 60 kilograms of scraps a week, give or take, weighed on a hanging scale and logged by hand. The finished compost goes to the raised beds along the south wall, where the crew grows herbs that the kitchen actually uses. Watching a first-year hand a paper cone of basil to the head chef, and watching the chef light up, is the kind of small victory that keeps volunteers through the dark months.

Winter is the honest test. Worms slow down when temperatures drop, so the crew switches to bokashi fermentation indoors and stops collection for a few weeks rather than let scraps rot. That decision took a season

to get right. The first winter they kept collecting, the bins went anaerobic, and the crew spent a miserable afternoon rebalancing everything. Now they plan for the pause, and the pause is fine.

the watt watchers: one forgotten server room and a leaderboard

The energy squad started with a plug-in meter borrowed from the physics cupboard and a walk. Every evening at 9 pm, two members do a loop of the academic building with a checklist, noting what is still on. The breakthrough came when they discovered a room of machines left running through a four-day weekend. Nobody had broken a rule, because no rule existed. The squad wrote one, got it approved, and taped a friendly reminder to the door.

Their favorite tool, though, is the floor leaderboard. Each dorm floor gets a weekly score based on meter readings, and the numbers get posted by the stairwells. Across one semester, dorm electricity dipped by what the meters suggest is somewhere in the range of 8 to 12 percent. The squad is careful to call that a rough estimate, since baseline weather and occupancy vary. But the trend held across two semesters, which is more than most poster campaigns ever achieve.

There was a [reddit.com](https://www.reddit.com) trade-off worth naming. For a few weeks the leaderboard turned genuinely competitive, and a couple of floors started accusing each other of cheating by charging laptops elsewhere. The squad responded by adding a most improved line to the board, which rewarded floors starting from a bad baseline. Competition stayed, spite left. That is the kind of judgment you only learn by running the thing.

the refill ring: counting cups until it became impossible to ignore

The waste squad's defining moment was a cup audit. On an ordinary Wednesday, members stood by the cafeteria exit and counted every disposable cup leaving the lunch service. They counted twice to be sure. The number came out around 350 cups in a single service. When they taped the figure, written on butcher paper, to the wall beside the till, the conversation with the cafeteria changed overnight. Numbers you can point at beat opinions you can only repeat.

The result was a deposit cup pilot. The first rollout flopped, honestly. The return bin was placed too far from the seating area, students forgot deposits, and the return rate sat disappointingly low. The squad moved the bin, added a chalkboard tally of cups returned each day, and the second attempt worked far better. That sequence, flop then fix, is now a badge of honor the squad tells every new group of first-years.

The ring also maintains the refill map, a hand-drawn thing that started as a sketch and is now properly printed, marking every water fountain and refill point within five minutes of any lecture room. Getting a third fountain installed took a full term of polite, persistent, meeting-after-meeting requests. The squad members joke that they learned more about facility planning than about water. They also logged refill station usage climbing steadily once the map went up, though they hedge the exact figures because the older fountains have no counters.

swap shelf and repair nights: the hoodies of lost property

The consumption squad runs two things, and both are beloved. The swap shelf lives in the student lounge and works on an honor system: bring what you no longer wear, take what you will. On a good month, somewhere between one and two hundred items change hands, and nobody counts strictly because counting would kill the mood.

The second thing is repair night, held monthly in the workshop. A long table, a sewing corner, and a small crew of tinkerers, including one engineering-track student who has personally resurrected at least a dozen kettles, lamps,

and a truly ancient radio. The evening I attended, applause broke out when a kettle clicked back to life. I am not exaggerating. People clapped for a kettle.

The squad's cleverest move was raiding lost and found. Every term, an avalanche of abandoned hoodies and water bottles accumulates in the office. Instead of letting it sit, the squad washed, sorted, and turned it into a lending

library that lives in a wooden crate beside the front desk. Need a warm layer for a weekend hike? Borrow one. Forgot your umbrella during a week of sideways rain? The crate usually has three. The rule is one line long: return it or replace it. Somehow, in two years, the crate has never emptied.

Repair night deserves its own numbers. A typical evening fixes somewhere between 15 and 25 items, depending on how many people bring in their sad, zipperless backpacks. The squad keeps a tally board of items saved and items declared beyond help, and the beyond-help column is respected rather than hidden. One volunteer put it perfectly: you cannot claim a repair culture if you never admit a defeat.

the pedal patrol: a cargo bike named berth

The fifth squad handles movement, and they are the loudest group on campus in every sense. Their base is a repainted shipping container that serves as a bike workshop, stocked with tools, spare tubes, and a wall of donated locks. Twice a term they run a tune-up clinic where anyone can roll in with a squealing brake and leave twenty minutes later with a working bike and a small homework assignment: learn to fix that brake yourself next time.

Then there is Bertha. She is a secondhand cargo bike, bought with a student council grant after the squad presented a one-page case study on how many car trips the kitchen makes to the weekly market. Bertha now does those runs, plus compost crate hauls on heavy-collection weeks, plus the occasional heroic transport of a marquee to a festival. The squad logs her mileage on the same whiteboard as everything else. Last spring, they counted roughly 300 kilometers of errands that would otherwise have needed a van, though they are careful to note that figure covers only logged trips.



Their quieter project is the route map. Students arriving from out of town often default to being dropped off by car because nobody has shown them the safe cycling approach. The squad surveyed the roads, marked the calm routes and the ones to avoid at rush hour, and printed the map for orientation week. Bike rack counts, done every morning at 8 am for a month, climbed from the low forties to around seventy parked bikes. Weather

matters, the squad admits. The count drops on rainy Fridays. But the floor rose, and a rising floor is what you actually want.

how the squads talk to each other

Five squads could easily become five silos, and for one chaotic stretch they nearly did. The compost crew ordered browns that the pedal patrol had already offered to fetch by cargo bike. The watt watchers posted their leaderboard in a spot the refill ring wanted for its chalkboard. The fix was a thirty-minute round table, once a month, five squad leads, one shared whiteboard, no slides allowed. Anyone can attend, only leads speak, and every meeting ends with one sentence per squad: this is my number this month.

The best tradition to come out of those meetings is audit swap day. Once a term, each squad spends an hour running a different squad's actual work. The energy students weigh food scraps. The composters count cups. It sounds like a gimmick, and it is partly a gimmick, but the effect is real: nobody can claim their squad's problem is unsolvable once they have stood in someone else's gloves. Two of the squads' best process fixes came directly out of swap day, including the decision to move the deposit cup return bin, which the energy students suggested after watching confused diners for sixty minutes.

where the money comes from

The whole operation runs on a budget that would embarrass a corporate sustainability department. The student council at AELO Swiss Academy approved an initial seed grant of a few hundred francs, which covered the worm bins, the hanging scale, and the first plug-in meters. After that, the loop started feeding itself. Energy savings freed up a small line in the facilities budget, part of which flows back to the squads. The deposit cup system holds its own float, since returned cups return their deposits. The swap shelf costs nothing at all, which the squad mentions with visible pride.

The pedal patrol's cargo bike was the one big-ticket purchase, and it required the most persuasion. The squad's pitch was not a lecture about carbon. It was a spreadsheet of van trips, with costs, times, and a photo of the queue at the market loading bay. Money conversations go better with a spreadsheet and a photo. Every squad lead I have spoken to here says some version of that sentence.

if you want to steal this playbook

Other schools visit now, and the leads have condensed their advice into five steps they genuinely believe in. Here it is, roughly as a first-year hears it during orientation:

1. Pick one measurable thing per team, and nothing else. A weight, a count, a meter reading.
2. Name one person responsible for every bin, meter, and event. Not a committee, a person.
3. Count something publicly in your first week, even if the number is ugly. Butcher paper beats a slideshow.
4. Assume your first rollout will flop, and budget the fix before you launch.
5. Hand a squad lead role to a first-year every term, or you will graduate your entire institutional memory out the door.

That last step is the one experienced volunteers emphasize most. The dirt crew nearly collapsed in its second year because all four original members were finishing their programs at once. Now succession is built in, and each squad keeps a one-page handover note, written by hand, taped inside whatever container the squad calls home.



the honest hard parts

None of this runs on enthusiasm alone, and the squads will tell you so if you ask. Exam season hollows out every roster, and the compost collection schedule has learned to shrink by design rather than collapse by accident. Burnout is real, especially for leads who let the monthly number become a personal score. The round table added a rule after one exhausted lead tried to single-handedly reorganize the entire deposit system at midnight: no squad change gets made in the last week of term. Rest is part of the plan.

There is also the pressure to inflate. When visitors come, there is a temptation to round numbers up, to claim the compost total rather than the finished compost total, to call the leaderboard dip a saving without the weather caveat. The leads resist it, sometimes awkwardly, because the whole currency here is credibility. One inflated figure discovered by a skeptic would poison every honest number on the whiteboard. Hedged, boring, defensible numbers turn out to be the radical choice.

And the fifth squad problem looms: everyone wants a sixth. A clothing upcycling squad, a bee squad, a solar squad. The leads hold the line with the founding rule, one measurable thing, one named person, one honest number. A new squad is welcome when someone can state its number in a single sentence. The bee proposal, charming as it was, currently reads we will have bees and is therefore in a holding pattern.

back to the corridor at 7:45

What stays with me, term after term, is how ordinary the whole thing looks from the outside. Students in damp gloves, arguing about soup. A cargo bike with a wobbly bell. A leaderboard in a stairwell that half the school pretends not to check and the other half checks obsessively. No banners, no slogans, nothing that photographs like a brochure.

But the numbers on that whiteboard are real, the basil in the kitchen is real, the kettle that came back to life is real, and the first-years who inherit a laminated cheat sheet instead of a vague mission are real. The squads at AELO Swiss Academy did not wait for permission or a perfect plan. They picked one thing, measured it, flopped, fixed it, and measured again. Tuesday mornings smell like coffee grounds and citrus peel, and the crates keep coming, and the weight on the log climbs one honest kilogram at a time. That is what a green campus actually sounds like. It sounds like an argument about browns and greens, held cheerfully, before most of the school has finished breakfast.