

# Waste-Free Lunch 2: School Contest

## Snapshot

This contest can significantly cut down on lunchtime trash for the entire school and can empower students to actively reduce food waste and disposable packaging.

**Objective:** Students will learn strategies to reduce the volume of lunchtime waste.

**Age Groups:** K-12<sup>th</sup> grade

**Setting:** Cafeteria

**Project Duration:** 2 weeks

### Materials:

- Bathroom scale
- School lunch menu
- Poster decorating supplies
- Premade posters (or posterboard)
- Prewritten audio announcements and family newsletter insert
- Internet access for researching environmental impacts of waste

## Why This Project Matters:

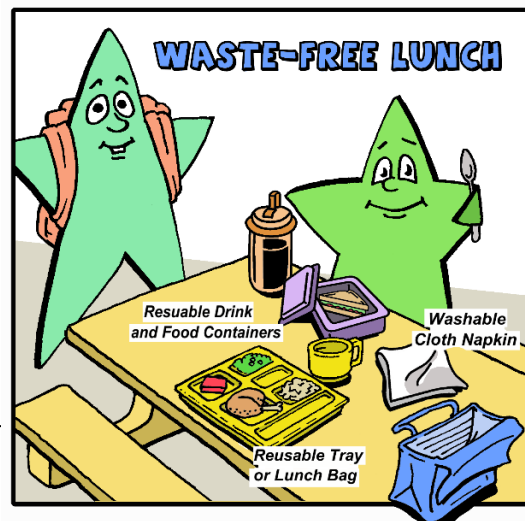
Convenience products are, well, convenient. It is easy to become dependent on them, and nowhere is this more evident than in the school lunchroom. A typical lunch might include single-use plastic bags, plastic wrap, drink pouches, plastic utensils, paper napkins, and single-serving items that are individually wrapped. What is the environmental cost when we rely so heavily on these disposables? Landfill space consumption, natural resource extraction, energy use, and pollution, for a start. Lunchtime at school is one of the biggest impacts a school has on the environment.

## Project Summary:

A Waste-Free Lunch Contest is an easy project with a big impact. It makes a great Earth Day activity. All students can participate, whether they bring a packed lunch from home or buy their lunch at school. The contest is designed to be facilitated between several competing schools or to have grade-levels compete within the same school. Lunch trash is weighed before and during the contest to see how much students can reduce their waste. The school or grade-level with the greatest reduction wins!

### *Ways to involve a student group:*

A student sponsor group can help promote the contest within the school whether the contest is between several schools or between grade-levels within a school. Find a student group that is interested, such as student council, eco-club, a science class, or a leadership group.



## Implementation:

Recruit three to six schools (or grade-levels) for the contest. The five-day period that each school chooses to conduct their Waste-Free Lunch Contest may not be the same for all schools, but the whole contest should not span more than a month. (Competing grade-levels in one school should conduct the contest during the same week so that the lunch menu is the same for everyone.)

Keep a record of each school or grade-level's success and report a winner after all have completed their contest week.

1. Identify the participating schools or grade-levels and the student sponsor group(s) that will be promoting the contest. Coordinate with each school's administration (or grade-level teaching teams) to determine the five-day time range for the contest.
2. Ask office staff responsible for the school newsletter to include contest information and waste-free lunch tips in the newsletter right before the contest (see sample below).
3. Schedule and facilitate 30-to-60-minute meetings with the student sponsor group(s).
  - Inform and motivate sponsor group members by sharing why this contest matters. Have students research facts and statistics about the environmental impacts of trash (natural resource consumption, litter, landfill space, air and water pollution, etc.).
  - Explain to the sponsor group(s) that they are responsible for advertising the contest to their school community. Supply them with premade posters and announcements (see samples below).
  - Allow students to decorate posters and practice reading announcements. Encourage them to add their own drawings and phrases to the posters ("Eat all of your food!" or "Recycle as much as you can!").
  - Have students create a 30-minute kick-off presentation that introduces the school community to the contest, identifies reasons why this project is important, and displays examples of school-made and home-packed wasteful and waste-free lunches.
  - Create a timeline for promotions. Plan to display the posters one week before the contest begins and share the announcements on the two school days prior to the kick-off event. Schedule an all-school kick-off assembly (or grade-level presentations) to be held on the school day before the contest officially begins.

## Extensions:

- Have the student group act as "waste goalies" in the lunchroom during the contest, guiding fellow students to place their recyclable items in the recycling bin and encouraging them to eat their food or take uneaten food home for a snack.
  - Implement "Waste-Free Wednesdays" as a challenge to keep the message of lunchtime waste reduction in students' minds throughout the school year.
  - Take weights randomly throughout the school year and compare with the contest weights. Share results as audio or video announcements.
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4. Meet with the custodians at each school (and/or grade-level teams) to explain the project and determine the procedure for setting aside the lunch trash for weighing. Take two or more pre-contest-week weights to establish a baseline of normal daily lunchtime trash. Take two or more weights during the contest week (including the last day of that week) to determine if and by how much the trash weight has been reduced. Check the school lunch menu calendar before setting dates for weighing. Avoid days that have special hot lunches, like Thanksgiving feasts, for example.
5. To weigh the lunch trash, stand on a bathroom scale while holding each trash bag and record the total weight of each. Subtract your own weight from these numbers to get the total weight of the trash. Divide the trash weight by the number of students at lunch each day to establish a per-capita weight. Determine the percentage of overall trash reduction by subtracting the average contest-week per-capita weight from the average pre-contest-week per-capita weight. Then, divide this difference by the average pre-contest per-capita weight. For example:

$$\begin{array}{r}
 1.1 \text{ lbs. (average pre-contest-week per-capita weight)} \\
 - 0.8 \text{ lbs. (average contest-week per-capita weight)} \\
 \hline
 0.3 \text{ lbs. (weight reduction per-capita during contest)}
 \end{array}$$

0.3 divided by 1.1 = 0.27 ➡ 27% reduction in trash

The school or grade-level with the greatest percentage of reduction is the winner! Prizes can range from cash awards for an entire school to pizza parties, extra recess, juice pops, or principal recognition for the winning grade-levels.

6. Summary of project tasks and timeline:
  - Recruit schools or grade-levels.
  - Choose contest dates for schools or grade-levels.
  - Identify a student sponsor group at each school.
  - Prepare contest info for family newsletter; meet with sponsor group(s) to prepare posters, announcements, and grade-level presentations or assemblies.
  - Take one or more pre-contest trash weights at each school or for each grade-level.
  - Schedule kick-off assemblies or grade-level presentations for the day before the contest begins.
  - Display posters a week before and start announcements two days before the contest begins.
  - Take two or more weights during each school's contest week (including the last day of the contest).
  - Determine winners and award prizes.

### Extensions: (continued)

- This chapter assumes that the school has a recycling program. See Chapter 18 if your school does not recycle and would like to get started. Starting a school composting program is another way to significantly reduce lunch trash. See Chapters 23, 24, and 25 for three different ways to compost at school.



### **Assessment:**

Weighing the lunch trash before and during the contest can serve as the project's assessment. If possible, do occasional pop-interviews with kids in the lunchroom throughout the rest of the school year to see if they are still employing the waste-reduction ideas they learned from the Waste-Free Lunch Contest.

### **Related Activities:**

Waste-Free Lunch 1: Classroom Challenge – Chapter 2

Waste-Free Lunch 3: Durables in the Cafeteria – Chapter 2

Take a Bite Out of Food Waste – Chapter 4

Making Cloth Napkins – Chapter 13

## **Sample Waste-Free Lunch Tips for Newsletter**

### **Follow These Tips to Reduce Lunch Waste at School!**

#### **Home-Packed Lunches**



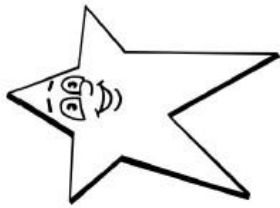
- Cut cloth napkins from old fabric.
- Fill reusable drink containers from bulk jugs.
- Choose recyclable drink containers like plastic bottles, metal cans, or paper cartons/juice boxes.
- Use washable containers in place of zip-top bags.
- Wrap food in recyclable foil instead of plastic wrap.
- Reuse metal or plastic eating utensils.
- Return school utensils to the cafeteria if they accidentally come home.
- Bring uneaten food back home for a snack.

#### **School-Made Lunches**

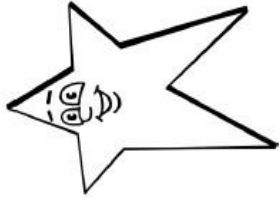


- Recycle empty drink cartons, bottles, and cans.
- Eat your lunch for good nutrition.
- Compost leftover food, napkins, and food boats.
- Return any reusable utensils, trays, plates, bowls, or cups to the kitchen for reuse.
- Place uneaten fruit and packaged food in the share bin, when available.

**Printable Waste-Free Lunch Week Poster**

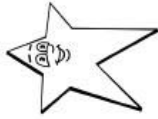


# Waste-Free Lunch Week



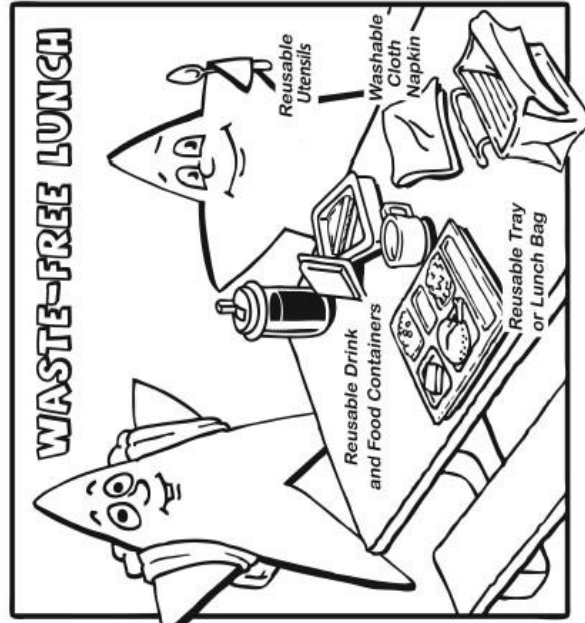
**REDUCE**

**Lunch Trash**



**RETURN**

**Reusables**



**REDUCE**

**REUSE**

**RECYCLE**

**COMPOST**

## **Sample Waste-Free Lunch School Contest Announcements**

**Two school days before the contest begins:** Next week our school's Waste-free Lunch Contest begins. Most of a school's trash is made at lunch time. If you bring your lunch, try to pack it so that you make as little trash as possible. Here are some ideas: bring your lunch in a reusable lunch bag or lunch box, recycle or reuse your drink container, and bring your food in bags or containers that can be reused or recycled. Food waste is also a big part of our garbage. It is important to eat all your food instead of wasting it by throwing it away. Or save it for a snack that you can eat later. If you get a school lunch, it is also important to return all your reusables back to the kitchen. We need everyone to participate!

**One school day before the contest begins:** One third of garbage in America is packaging. Normally we throw a lot of packaging away at lunch time. If you bring your lunch from home, pack your food in reusable or recyclable containers. If you eat a school lunch, make sure to return all reusables back to the kitchen. You can help the earth every day by making less lunch trash. Don't forget! Help us to win the contest next week!

**First day of the Waste-Free Lunch Contest Week:** Today begins our school's Waste-Free Lunch Contest Week. Did you know that everything we have comes from nature? Every time we throw something away, part of nature is polluted or used up. You can help the earth by throwing away as little packaging as possible, and by returning all your reusables to the kitchen. You can help the earth and yourself by eating all your food for good nutrition. Look to see what things other students are doing to make less lunch trash. See if you can make your lunch even more waste-free.

**Mid-way through the Waste-Free Lunch Contest Week:** Americans fill 64,000 garbage trucks every day! We make twice as much trash each day as most other people in the world! No wonder we have a big garbage problem! Cutting our lunch trash really makes a big difference. Help us win the contest by making as little lunch trash as you can. Here are some reminders: bring your lunch in a reusable lunch bag or lunch box, recycle or reuse your drink container, and bring your food in bags or containers that can be reused or recycled. It is also important to eat the food in your lunch (or save it for later) instead of throwing it away.

**Last day of the Waste-Free Lunch Contest Week:** Today is the last day of the Waste-Free Lunch Contest. We hope you had fun thinking of ways to make less garbage. Remember, just because the contest is over doesn't mean you have to stop making less trash. We hope you will continue to keep our earth healthy by using less packaging and yourself healthy by eating the nutritious food in your lunch. Please also help the kitchen staff by always returning your reusables to the kitchen to be washed and used again! Waste-Free is the way to be!

