

Waste-Free Lunch 3: Durables in the Cafeteria

eco-cycle

Snapshot

Celebrate the use of durable trays, utensils, and more in the cafeteria. Reusing these washable items reduces waste, protects natural resources, saves energy, and can even save money!

<https://bit.ly/eco-cycle-zero-waste-schools-guide>

Objective: Raise students' awareness of the environmental advantages of the durable, washable items used in their cafeteria and encourage their participation in keeping them out of the trash!

Age Group: K- 12th grade

Setting: Cafeteria

Project Duration:

- Preparation: 45-min meeting
- Implementation: 1-5 lunch periods

Materials:

- Poster board
- Markers
- Pencils
- Paper
- Examples of the durable food service items in the cafeteria



Why This Project Matters:

School nutrition programs provide billions of meals each year to students nationwide. These meals can be served using reusable food service items, disposable food service items, or a combination of the two. When a school serves meals using durable dishes, trays, cups, and utensils, trash volumes are drastically reduced. Using durables protects natural resources, saves energy, and may save money for the school or district!

Project Summary:

Some lucky schools already use durable, washable plates, forks, and cups in the cafeteria. Some are currently making the switch from items like disposable plastic utensils and polystyrene trays to reusable, washable options. And some have even replaced individual milk cartons with bulk milk dispensers and reusable cups!

Whatever the case at your school, don't let these environmental wins go unnoticed by students and staff. Through announcements, posters, and lunchroom monitoring, this project uses the efforts of a student group to bring awareness to cafeteria washables.



Implementation:

1. Assess which food service items in the cafeteria are currently reusable. If items are newly being implemented, see #6 below.
2. Choose a student group to implement promotions (student council, individual class, grade level, eco-club, etc.).
3. Meet with the group in the cafeteria and explain the goal of their work: to help students and staff understand that by using durable, washable items in the cafeteria, the school is taking care of the environment. Show students examples of the school's washable food service items and brainstorm ideas for how the reusables help save natural resources, reduce waste, and potentially save money.

4. Have students mathematically determine the cost and waste savings. For example: If every student in the school used one disposable tray and one disposable utensil during lunch, how many of those items would be thrown away each day? What would this add up to in quantities thrown away for an entire school year?
 - Work with cafeteria or food services staff to find out the cost of durable trays and utensils versus disposable trays and utensils for an entire school year's use. Factor in the durables use over several years and that a percentage are lost each year when students accidentally throw them away.
 - If possible, determine the cost savings from both the use of durables and the reduction of lunch trash (which translates to cost savings on trash hauling)! Operations staff can help with this calculation.
 - Explain that even though energy and water are used to make and wash durables, studies have shown that a significant amount of energy is saved over time when compared to the daily disposal and manufacturing of single-use food service items.
5. Students can use the information gained from this discussion to create posters, announcements, skits, newsletter articles, and more, to educate their school community. Consider also creating a display in a central location to highlight the cafeteria washables.
6. Lunchroom monitoring: The annual loss of durables from students accidently throwing them away adds to the annual cost of using the durables. When washable items are being newly introduced in the cafeteria, students may accidentally throw away a higher quantity merely out of habit of dumping their entire tray. Have sponsor students take shifts monitoring the cafeteria trash cans during lunchtime to remind other students to return their durables to the washing station. Reminders from peers are an effective way to change behavior.

Assessment:

Visit students at their lunch tables with a pop-quiz. Ask them to share one or more ways the washable cafeteria items help the environment.

Related Activities:

Waste-Free Lunch 2: School Contest – Chapter 2
Refillable Water Bottle Project – Chapter 3
Making Cloth Napkins – Chapter 13



Extensions:

- Implement a similar project to celebrate the reusable containers, utensils, and napkins that students are bringing in homemade lunches.

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