Digging Deep Through School Trash

A waste composition analysis of trash, recycling and organic material discarded at public schools in Minnesota

Minnesota Pollution Control Agency

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b. Reuse - trays, utensils and food

Promoting and implementing reuse is an excellent way to reduce waste.

Disposable trays in the cafeteria can be a meaningful target for reduction. Reusable trays, dishes and utensils can be washed and used repeatedly. Any school evaluating the materials used in its cafeteria must consider procurement and disposal costs for disposable items. Comparing those costs to a one-time procurement cost, and staffing and washing costs can be challenging, but it is certainly a worthwhile exercise from an environmental standpoint. One of the schools that participated in this study uses reusable trays, and many other schools across the state have found it practical to use reusable utensils and trays. While waste from compostable and Styrofoam trays was tracked in separate categories for this study, disposable utensils were tracked within the true garbage category. A number of other potentially reusable containers also contributed to the true garbage category.

Food waste can be reduced through reuse. To accomplish this, a number of Minnesota schools have set up tables where students can place uneaten and unwanted wrapped items (such as granola bars and chips) or unopened milk cartons. These items are then available for other students who want them.

Food reuse tables, and most composting or food-to-animals programs, tend to work best when cafeterias have an orderly and systematic recycling, composting and disposal process. In most situations, the best way to accomplish this is to have students pass through a line adjacent to recycling, compost and trash containers which can be paired with a food reuse table. Having a person designated to monitor this process can also help keep things orderly and ensure that materials are disposed of properly. The role of monitor can be filled by a teacher, student or parent volunteer and indications are that students quickly learn how to use the system, making the monitoring process relatively simple.

There are many factors that contribute to the generation of food waste at schools. Policies that define quantities and types of food which much be served to students impact waste generation. Students who are served food that they do not eat generate more waste. Another contributing factor to food waste generation may be the amount of time students have to eat – less time to eat may contribute to less food being consumed and more food being wasted.

c. Bulk purchasing and distribution

Additional waste prevention is possible through a strategy that has been common in cafeterias for many years: providing products in bulk. Container and packaging waste accounts for 30.8% of all municipal solid waste and is one of the more substantial sources of waste (EPA, 2008). Distributing items without packaging is a viable option for a wide variety of food items. It is particularly effective at reducing waste when paired with the use of reusable containers and/or utensils. In a cafeteria, bulk distribution of condiments, chips, salads and even beverages may be feasible. Other sources of unnecessary packaging, such as the film packaging surrounding packets of disposable utensils, napkins and straws, can be eliminated through bulk distribution.