

Recycling School Waste for Healthier Environments and Kids

Esperanza Elementary and Fred T. Korematsu Discovery Academy – Oakland, CA

2013

WHY FOCUS ON A CAFETERIA WASTE SORTING PROGRAM?

The shared cafeteria for Esperanza Elementary and Fred T. Korematsu Discovery Academy produces large amounts of food waste—in fact, the cafeteria collects 5-10 gallons of tossed food at least four times each week. In an effort to teach young students about the benefits of recycling and reducing waste, as well as how composting cafeteria food can fuel school gardens and produce healthy foods, Wellness Champions and staff worked together to create a waste sorting program.

DEMOGRAPHICS

Esperanza Elementary

- K-5th grade
- 329 students
- 100% of students qualify for free/reduced-price meals

Ethnicity:

- 98% Hispanic/Latino
- 2% Other

Fred T. Korematsu Discovery Academy

- K-5th grade
- 374 students
- 100% of students qualify for free/reduced-price meals

Ethnicity:

- 77% Hispanic/Latino
- 17% African American
- 6% Other

ACTION STEPS

Over the course of one school year, Wellness Champions for the two campuses taught students about the value of waste sorting by creating hands-on opportunities for students to learn the uses of different items that would otherwise end up in the garbage. Bright bins were brought in and labeled for compost and recycling, students practiced waste sorting at lunch, and one Wellness Champion dressed up as a centipede to attract attention and increase student awareness on how to properly sort lunch waste. Cafeteria and custodial staff helped to implement a waste sorting system that fit well with the regular lunch and cleaning activities. Wellness staff also created informational sheets for teachers so that the messaging about health and recycling was reaching students not only in the cafeteria, but in the classroom as well. In addition to teaching kids how to recycle, the waste project took students into the garden, showing them how to make compost and plant fruits and vegetables, all while incorporating physical activity.



CHALLENGES & SOLUTIONS

School staff and parent culture that does not always support recycling and school gardening has been one challenge for the cafeteria waste sorting and garden programs. Although some parents and staff support the program by recycling in the classroom, others simply do not have the time to participate or are not interested in getting involved in the waste recycling or garden efforts. In response, Wellness Champions have tried to make the process less intensive so parents and staff want to be engaged. Rather than have to plant new produce every year, champions have started planting perennial fruits and vegetables to reduce the work for students and parents. The Wellness Champions also hope to keep parents engaged through the school's adult education program, since that is where they are able to share information about school programs and maintain parent interest in school activities.

IMPACTS & ACCOMPLISHMENTS

One major success of the waste program is that it allows students to learn about the environment and their food system while also creating a system that feeds the school garden. According to one Wellness Champion, with the new programs in place, "Students are learning new behaviors and ways of doing things," that will stick with them over the long-term. The principals of both campuses agree that the waste program has helped students become more aware of the importance of waste-reduction. They are more mindful of what happens to their remaining food and the composting and garden element has helped

"The after-school kids do all the composting and they love it... there are so many teaching moments in the garden."

Wellness Champion

improve students' eating habits and knowledge of nutrition, which is particularly important in a community without much access to healthy foods.

ADVICE FOR OTHER SCHOOLS

Having a school district that supports school gardens and waste reduction has helped Esperanza and Korematsu's waste sorting and garden composting projects succeed. Thinking strategically about necessary partners, such as OUSD Buildings and Grounds or mulch or recycling companies who can pick up waste, can also be helpful over the long-term. In addition, Wellness Champions highlight the importance of engaging the community in waste reduction and garden projects, so that families see them as assets and not more work. Not only does community engagement help projects succeed, it also creates a learning community, where students, parents, and school staff can interact with and learn from one another.

For More Information:

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