

Reusable Foodware in Schools

California’s schools produce over half a million tons of waste each year, with much of this waste coming from the cafeteria. While the majority of the waste stream in schools is comprised of organics, the rest is primarily from the single-use trays, disposable plastic utensils, and condiment packets. This trash often escapes campuses and ends up in storm drains and as litter in neighborhoods.

To address these issues, a growing list of schools are piloting an innovative reusable foodware project, switching out single-use trays and plastic utensils for reusable items made from stainless steel. In addition to reducing waste, reusables in the cafeteria also help minimize plastic contamination in the organics stream. And there’s a health benefit to reusables, too, as single-use plastic and compostable foodware can contain harmful chemicals that can leach into food and the environment.

So far, two schools have launched the program – one at Bay Farm Elementary School in Alameda and another at Anna Yates TK-8 School in Emeryville.

Students put their used dishes in racks at the end of their lunch period and an outside dishwashing service picks up the dirty dishes every day and re-stocks the clean items. Condiments are offered in squeeze bottles, further minimizing the waste from single-use plastic packets and containers. The project at Anna Yates alone is expected to keep at least 50,000 items from going to the landfill this year. The Alameda Unified School District plans to expand the program into additional schools this year, and Berkeley Unified School District is nearing the launch of its pilot at Martin Luther King Jr. Middle School.

The success of these projects is a result of years of partnerships with school districts, teacher and student champions, StopWaste Advisory Group in Education (SAGE), as well as the Center for Environmental Health and Clean Water Fund, among others. StopWaste’s reusable foodware grants program is helping get these initiatives off the ground, awarding over \$245K over the past two years to help fund reusable foodware as well as equipment needs like dishwashers.

The Benefits of Reusable Foodware

- Reduces trash sent to landfill
- Educates students about reusable systems and the importance of waste prevention
- Mitigates environmental harm
- Reduces vulnerability to supply chain issues
- Minimizes contamination in the organics stream
- Reduces exposure to harmful chemicals



Single-use plastic utensils and molded fiber trays, which can contain harmful chemicals

▶ Reusable stainless steel utensils and trays

Single-use condiment packets

▶ Condiments in refillable self-serve squeeze bottles

High amount of contamination in the organics stream

▶ Less contamination in the organics stream

Higher disposal costs

▶ Lower disposal costs