

Food Diversion at Schools

Introduction

School district food service managers constantly look for new and better ways to meet the nutritional needs of their students while cutting costs and minimizing overhead expenses. Improving integrated waste management practices is one way a school district's food service department can increase overall efficiency and save money.

Food waste is unfortunate in terms of lost opportunities to feed hungry students and to get excess food to those that need it. To make the best use of food residuals and leftovers, try to follow the food waste reduction hierarchy: 1) waste prevention 2) human consumption 3) consumption by animals 3) composting or vermicomposting 4) environmentally sound disposal.

Reduce

Preventing food waste is the best option. School district kitchens and cafeterias can minimize disposal and procurement costs by implementing simple waste prevention procedures used by many restaurants, such as those described at this site: www.ciwmb.ca.gov/BizWaste/FactSheets/FoodSrvc.htm.

School food service directors should also consider the following food waste prevention strategies:

Offer Versus Serve

This option allows students to decline lunch items they do not intend to eat, and pick what they like. This reduces food waste by not insisting that students take food they do not like (which usually ends up in the trash), while still meeting federal nutritional standards. For more information, see: www.ciwmb.ca.gov/Schools/WasteReduce/Food/OfferServe.htm.

Zero Waste Lunches

Zero waste lunches eliminate packaging that creates waste. They require a little extra thought



when packing, but they create considerably less waste and reduce costs in the long run. For more information on zero waste lunches, see: www.ciwmb.ca.gov/Schools/WasteReduce/Food/ZeroWaste.htm

Reuse

The following food waste reduction strategies outline how school districts can reduce solid waste by facilitating the donation of suitable surplus food.

Food Donation

Excess edible food that has not been served or is packaged can easily be used to feed hungry people. Schools are a natural choice for such food recovery efforts, since food service managers have the expertise to handle and store recovered food until it can be delivered safely to organizations that serve the needy.

Food recovery can make a significant contribution towards reducing hunger in the local community and save the school district money in avoided disposal costs. For more information on donations from schools, see: www.ciwmb.ca.gov/Schools/WasteReduce/Food/Donation.htm.

Schools may also place free “available” or “wanted” ads for reusable materials in the CalMAX catalog and online database at www.ciwmb.ca.gov/CalMAX/.

Animal Feed

Leftover food not suitable for human consumption can be used to feed animals. In addition to the use of preconsumer produce waste for school pets, livestock farmers sometimes use excess food as animal feed. Arrangements can sometimes be made with local farmers to supply preconsumer food. In some areas pig farmers are certified to accept postconsumer food waste such as plate scrapings.

Check with your local University of California Agricultural Extension to identify local farms that might be interested. For a current list of pig farms that are licensed to accept postconsumer food scraps, please contact the California Department of Food and Agriculture, Animal Health Branch, at (916) 657-5225. This option may only be viable for school districts located near one of these farms.

Recycle

Food service generates many recyclable materials, such as glass, plastic, and metal bottles and cans; corrugated cardboard; and other paper products. Recycling includes the collection and transportation of recyclables for processing. Check with your local recycling coordinator, refuse hauler, and local recycling companies to find out what recycling opportunities exist in your school district.

Rendering companies will take fats, meat, bones, grease, and oils from a school or business and make new products from them. These companies may be located by looking in your local phone directory under rendering or tallow companies, or at this Web site: www.ciwmb.ca.gov/FoodWaste/Render.htm.

Composting

Composting vegetable scraps from a food preparation or dining area can be done on-site. Composting yields a rich soil amendment that can be used in school gardens and landscaping, and it can save money spent on soil conditioners and fertilizers. Composting programs also complement school garden program efforts, and both can supplement and support classroom instruction. For

more about composting, see www.ciwmb.ca.gov/Schools/WasteReduce/Food/SchoolGarden.htm

If on-site composting is not an option for your school, check with your refuse hauler or local recycling coordinator to see if it can be taken to a composting facility that is permitted to accept food scraps. A list of these facilities can be found at www.ciwmb.ca.gov/FoodWaste/Compost/Facility.htm.

Food Service Ware

For composting programs, biodegradable food service ware should be considered. A list of biodegradable food service ware is maintained at www.ciwmb.ca.gov/FoodWaste/Compost/Biodegrade.htm.

Vermicomposting

Vermicomposting uses worms to transform non-meat or non-dairy food scraps into a nutrient-rich product called vermicompost. In a school setting, a vermicomposting system can set the stage for a variety of interdisciplinary activities that can utilize school cafeteria waste for the worm bin. Vermicomposting can provide a variety of interesting experiments, and students can use the finished product in a school or classroom garden.

The CIWMB publication *The Worm Guide: A Vermicomposting Guide for Teachers* helps the reader start vermicomposting and provides references for curricula materials. It is available at this site: www.ciwmb.ca.gov/Schools/Curriculum/Worms/. The CIWMB also has an interactive game that teaches young children about waste management concepts by following Vermie the Worm through the vermicomposting process at this site: www.ciwmb.ca.gov/Vermi/.

Publications

Other CIWMB publications that may be of help include:

“Food for Thought: Restaurant Guide to Waste Reduction and Recycling.” CIWMB Publication # 441-98-016. Overview of waste management practices for the restaurant industry. Also available in Spanish and Chinese.

“Food Service Waste Reduction Tips and Ideas.” CIWMB Publication #500-94-027.” Information on proper purchasing, handling, preparation, and storage of food, and other general information to assist cafeteria staff in reducing waste and saving money.

These publications can be obtained through the Board’s Web site at www.ciwmb.ca.gov/Publications/ or www.ciwmb.ca.gov/Organics/Pubs.htm, or by calling or writing:

CIWMB Publications Clearinghouse
Public Affairs Office, MS-6
P.O. Box 4025
Sacramento, CA 95812-4025
(916) 341-6306

Other Resources

American School Food Service Association provides a very informative Web site that includes the “Waste Characterization Study to Quantify Materials for Composting and Recycling in a Metropolitan School Food Service Program” at www.asfsa.org/childnutrition/research/wastestudy.asp.

For More Information

The CIWMB’s Food Scrap Management Program maintains a Web site at www.ciwmb.ca.gov/FoodWaste/ that offers resources for food scrap generators. For more information, please call CIWMB staff at (916) 341-6596.

The energy challenge facing California is real. Every Californian needs to take immediate action to reduce energy consumption. For a list of simple ways you can reduce demand and cut energy costs, **Flex Your Power** and visit www.consumerenergycenter.org/flex/index.html.