

Composting at schools: Students get into the act

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When they're done with lunch, students at an Oak Park school sort uneaten morsels into bins -- empty milk cartons and juice boxes into one receptacle, orange rinds and banana peels into another, and anything non-recyclable into a third, that one clearly labeled "landfill" to drive home the point.

Hatch Elementary this year joined a national movement to reduce waste headed for landfills. Not only are students and teachers composting leftover fruits and vegetables, but they're also promoting zero waste lunches and moving away from plastic spoons, straws and biodegradable trays. Instead, the school is installing dishwashers and buying reusable trays and silverware.

After mastering -- and then teaching their parents -- how to recycle pop cans and paper, elementary school students are moving beyond Recycling 101 and into more sophisticated terrain.

Zero waste initiatives at schools across the [Chicago](#) area have students aggressively reducing the garbage they produce and trying to avoid anything not biodegradable. Now they're separating food, determining what can and can't be composted. They do the composting themselves in outdoor bins or with worm composting in the classroom. They're learning how to reuse paper towels and use fewer of them. And they're no longer taking home endless fliers -- many schools now post announcements online with "virtual backpacks."

When a new state law goes into effect in January, expect some of these measures to become more mainstream. The law, passed in August, designates food scraps as organic -- not waste -- and will lead to widespread efforts to compost food waste.

It's a skill the little ones have already adopted. At a recent lunch at Hatch, parent volunteers asked a question: "If you don't eat all your broccoli, what do you do with it?"

"Compost" came the resounding answer.

Fifth-grader Jalen Floyd carefully picked out the orange peels from his biodegradable tray and put them into the compost bin. A classmate asked a student "zero waste" monitor if corn can be composted. Yes, it can.

"It's kind of easy," Jalen said. "It took two days to figure it out, and it feels good because we're saving our environment."

Environmentalists hope this new set of recycling skills will teach a younger generation how to dump less than the approximately 5 pounds per person per day of waste they currently generate. With studies showing organic decay in landfills contributes to global warming and with communities opposing new landfills, environmentalists say the problem needs to be nipped at its source: garbage production.

"We're trying to teach them about sustainability so as adults they won't take more than they can return to the earth," said Brett Ivers, a grants project manager at the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity, which doled out more than \$734,618 in zero waste school grants since 2004.

Nearly two dozen schools are currently directing students to separate food scraps for composting. Some bought compost bins or worm composts through state grants. Others started projects on their own.

"Food scraps make up 30 percent to 55 percent of what goes into a landfill," says [Gary Cuneen](#), founder and executive director of the non-profit Seven Generations Ahead, which helped many area schools design zero waste programs. "As more schools are looking at zero waste, diverting food scraps from landfills is a major part of that."

Jackson Middle School in Villa Park was among the first to teach students how to compost food waste, said Kay McKeen, founder of School and Community Assistance for Recycling and Composting Education, which helped the school and others in Wheaton start the effort. Initially, the composts were perfect for teaching science. But their recycling benefits can't be ignored. All of District 45 in Villa Park now reuses its food wastes through composting, she said.

McKeen helped write the law designating food scraps as organic material and will lead a composting seminar for government officials and waste haulers this month.

"The kids have been great teachers spreading this message," she said. "Once the law is up and running, we'll be sending 30 percent less waste to landfills."

But for some schools, going to zero waste was not that easy.

Before applying for and winning a \$10,000 zero waste grant, Owen Elementary School in Naperville had to conduct a waste audit in February. Parent volunteers collected, sorted and weighed a day's garbage, determining the school would produce 47,340 pounds of waste that school year.

In its first week, the program brought forth creative green ideas. Some students brought lunch in used juice boxes -- rinsed and refolded into containers that look like Chinese take-out. Some parents rewarded students who brought home sandwich bags for reuse with a dime apiece.

"It's critical we teach our kids these valuable life skills," said Jodi Trendler, who is a member of the Owen PTA, which drove the zero waste initiative. "Elementary-aged kids are at an age they pick things up quickly and get excited about it."

Officials hope to prevent 24 trash containers' worth of garbage from ending up in a landfill this year.

At Hatch Elementary in Oak Park, zero waste came on the heels of other healthy-living initiatives, including pursuing a food contract that offered more veggies and fruits and an organic garden. School officials see composting food waste as an extension of previous efforts.

"I just think that it's not enough for a school system to only worry about what they're teaching about geometry or English," said Cathi Knickrehm, one of the parents who helped secure a grant for zero waste programs at Hatch.

In [Chicago](#) Public Schools, several buildings have students separating food scraps and composting. Officials are working with Prosser Career Academy High School's construction program to build compost bins for other schools. The agency is planning to run a pilot program for five schools, hoping to develop a model for composting at city schools.

At Holmes, another Oak Park school, officials spent about \$17,000 from a grant and donations to install a high-tech earth tub, which will help compost large volumes of food waste, including meat and dairy products. Next, they hope to replace paper towel dispensers in the bathrooms with hand dryers.

The environmental lessons are trickling home.

"It's working," said Jennifer Quinlan, 42, a lunchroom volunteer who has a first-grader and third-grader at Hatch. "They bring all this knowledge home, and they hold us accountable."

--Noreen S. Ahmed-Ullah