



15 January, 2025

A Tale of Ten Schools

How Middletown Public Schools are Switching to Reuse in the Cafeteria



<https://cleanwater.org/campaign/rethink-disposable>

Introduction



Overview:

ReThink Disposable is a program of Clean Water that works with schools, government agencies, restaurants, event spaces, non-profits, and emergency food providers to eliminate a large source of ocean pollution and street litter: single-use disposable food ware

Objective:

Transition the Middletown Public School System to reusable cafeteria food ware, reduce costs and waste, and create student behavior change to support reuse and sustainability long-term

Importance:

Since 2022, the amount of trash generated in CT has exceeded in-state disposal capacity, and about 40% of municipal waste has been shipped out of state, totaling a cost to the state in the tens of millions of tax-payer dollars

The Change Makers



RANDALL MEL JR.

Director of Food, Nutrition and Wellness Services

Randall was Connecticut's youngest school food service director. He launched Hamden's first summer meals program. In transitioning to MPS, he has continued his passion for bringing nutritious and sustainable meals to students



KIM O'ROURKE

Middletown Recycling Coordinator

Kim has an extensive background in waste reduction in CT. Currently, in her role as the Middletown Recycling Coordinator, she has promoted reduce/reuse strategies and reduction of waste city-wide.



AMBER SCHMIDT

Clean Water: ReThink Disposable Zero Waste Organizer

Amber grew up in CT working on plastics reduction, including being a policy advocate for the first single-use bag ban east of the Mississippi in Westport, CT in 2008. In her role with ReThink Disposable, she is taking those approaches to work with entities directly

Project Scope



The project covers the implementation of reusable foodware, cost-saving for the nutrition department, and waste reduction. The savings will be used on labor, nutrition and waste education, and farm-to-school operations with a focus on sourcing food from minority-owned CT farms,

Deliverables

- Move to 100% reusable cafeteria food ware
- Create a cost-saving/waste-reduction model to fund sustainable nutritional programs
- Develop a scalable study for replication
- Reduce waste hauling costs on the city/school

Timeline

- Audit Phase: June 2023
- Fundraising Stage: July 2023
- First Phase of Implementation: 2024/2025 School Year

Problem & Solution



Background

With the closure of the Hartford MIRA incinerator, waste reduction is a priority for Middletown. The 10 public schools represent a portion of the municipal waste. The reduction of waste can financially benefit the city.

Findings

By switching to reusable cafeteria food ware, we can lessen the burden on the city's municipal disposal and create savings for the nutrition department.

Analysis

There is a potential \$100,000 in savings, with additional savings from reduced waste hauling. Student behavior change will result in a better understanding of waste contributing to waste reduction practices outside of the school cafeteria



Project Plan

Cost- Saving and Waste Reduction Audit

ReThink Disposable conducted an audit of the current disposable foodware used in cafeteria dining for all 10 schools.

Funding

Using the results from the audit, the nutrition department applied for a CT Equipment Assistance Grant
We ran a Sustainable CT crowd-funding campaign, and Plastic Free Restaurants donated stainless-steel forks and spoons

Steps to Implementation

- Phase one: Bowls and Plates
- Phase two: Utensils and Supplemental Containers
- Phase three: Full one-to-one switch of disposables to reusables for all cafeteria foodware



Implementation



Process

Start small - it's better to get a pilot with realistic expectations and make it successful. The numbers are impressive and conducting audits of current practices can reveal how much money is being spent and how much waste the schools generate. Having a phase-in process for implementation can make the transition smooth and manageable for kitchen and custodian staff

Challenges

- Decision-maker buy-in: School administration and town facility departments
- Labor: Additional costs to wash reusables
- Infrastructure: Dishwashers needed

Progress

Set a timeline and analyze progress
Compare results to city and state goals for waste reduction
Develop next steps for future sustainability programs

Results & Outcomes



Results:

91K in savings for reusable food ware with 30k accounted for additional labor. Added savings for waste-hauling is 40k per school year.

Outcomes:

The Middletown Public School District is reducing 15.5 tons of waste per year and eliminating 3.7 million pieces of single-use disposables from entering the waste stream.

Evaluation:

- Determine loss rates
- Quantify the benefits of student education
- Monitor trash dumpsters
- Reduce waste hauling pick-ups

Lessons Learned



Key Takeaways:

Each school has an operating commercial dishwasher and the infrastructure to transition to reusable foodware. Having a sorting station is the best method to prevent loss and student education is essential to cooperation and proper use

Improvements:

If we were to repeat this project, we would consider moving the elementary schools to reusable 5-compartment trays while keeping the one-to-one swap for the middle and high schools.

Future Steps:

Implement composting in the cafeterias and create a comprehensive sorting station to increase student engagement and food waste education. ReThink Disposable created a case study that can be used to show other school districts the benefits of switching to reusable cafeteria foodware.



Thank You!

Amber Schmidt

New England Zero Waste Organizer

Clean Water Fund: ReThink Disposable

aschmidt@cleanwater.org



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