

Practicing Sustainability through Lunch Sorting Lines at Schools

More than 80% of a School's Waste Stream is Recyclable or Compostable!

What is a Lunch Sorting Line?

A lunch sorting line consists of a series of bins or stations set-up for students to separate the various materials that make up their meal time "waste." Recyclable water bottles, milk cartons, food scraps, lunch trays, and everything else, can all be sorted into different bins to facilitate recycling, composting and food recovery programs.

New regulations are mandating requirements for schools to separate recyclables and compostables from the trash. Lunch sorting lines help ease the process both for staff and students.

Sorting Line Stations

Donate Edible Food - Share tables can be set-up for students to donate unopened, untouched food, snack packages and whole fruits and beverages, like milk, water or juice.

The food is then freely available for any other student to take. Anything left over after meals can be stored and donated to charity, or even donated to after-school programs.



New rules are making share tables easier than ever.

Pour it on! Students pour their milk and other unconsumed liquids into a designated bucket or bin and the containers are recycled. A strainer can be used to keep straws out.



The liquids can be added to the compost pile, or poured down the drain (usually a mop sink) to the sanitary sewer.

Keeping liquids out of the trash results in less weight to deal with and less mess!

Recycle - Empty bottles and cans, juice and milk cartons, and drink boxes are recyclable at most schools. Schools can have a designated bin just for bottles and cans if they collect the redemption money for themselves. Otherwise, all recyclables can go into the same recycling bin. Additional recyclables include plastic containers and trays, food boxes, yogurt cups, and clean paper food trays.

Compost - Food scraps can be composted at the onsite garden or designated composting area. Some schools save certain scraps for farm animals kept at school, or for staff to take to feed their own at home.

Food scrap collection bins can be set-up and customized for the school's program. Food is heavy, so collection bins should be no larger than a 5-gallon bucket. Paper towels and napkins can go in the food bin too. They are compostable!



Unfortunate Leftovers Ⓜ Students might have small items remaining such as straws, plastic forks or sporks, plastic baggies, snack wrappers, condiment packs, etc., that don't fit into any other category.



These items should be discarded into the trash and efforts made to minimize or eliminate their use entirely.

Trade-in Trays – Consider switching to reusable trays. These are the most environmentally-friendly option and may even save you money.

Unfortunately, most schools are still using Styrofoam or paper trays. Clean paper trays can be stacked and placed in the recycling bin but Styrofoam trays belong in the trash.



Tips for Lunch Sorting Lines

Color-code the stations for easy sorting using different colored bins for different materials. For example:

- Silver or black milk crates or trays for the share table
- Yellow buckets for liquids (remember, liquids get heavy, so buckets allow easy transport)
- Blue bins for recycling
- Green buckets for food scraps (remember, food is heavy too)
- Black bins for landfill items



Illustrate! Labels, stickers and laminated posters are essential to remind students what goes where and will help reinforce the message.

The County has free materials available for schools in unincorporated areas.

Oversee and Train- Any new program takes time. If staff is limited, student ambassadors or clubs can be assigned to help their fellow students sort materials into the proper bins. Students can also use social media and develop images and videos to share with their peers for bulletin board and intercom announcements.