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U.S. students seek greener lunch

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The used lunch trays Emily Fox took home about four years ago from the loading dock outside her elementary school were gross, some still plastered with ketchup.

Emily stacked the trays in piles of 10. She wanted to know just how many polystyrene lunch trays Piney Branch Elementary School students went through in a day. "Three hundred and twenty-five," said Emily, now 12. "And they all go into the incinerator and get burned and it's very unenvironmental."

For more than four years, Emily and other members of the Young Activist Club in Montgomery County, Md., have been asking the board of education for a dishwasher at Piney Branch. They want to phase out foam for something greener, but their lobbying and fundraising, which has netted more than \$10,000, have yielded little success.

From Maryland to Illinois to California, environmentally minded students are pushing to remove polystyrene trays from cafeterias and replace them with compostable, reusable or recyclable alternatives. But change has been slow. School districts say that they want to go foam-free but that tight education budgets, infrastructure limitations and the relatively high prices of Earth-friendly materials are often insurmountable hurdles in difficult economic times.

'Very resistant to change'

For decades, environmentalists have shunned polystyrene because it is slow to biodegrade and litters oceans and landfills.

Corporations and municipalities have taken note. McDonald's stopped using foam burger boxes about 20 years ago. Jamba Juice plans to replace foam cups with paper ones in its stores nationwide by the end of 2013. And hundreds of cities and towns have passed laws banning polystyrene food containers. But reform has been spotty for the nation's school systems.

"We tend to be very resistant to change," said David Binkle, director of food services for the Los Angeles Unified School District. "We're very rigid."

Los Angeles Unified, the second-largest public school district in the nation, switched to compostable paper trays in August.

This month, the Hermosa Beach City School District in Southern California started replacing foam trays with recycled paper trays once a week, thanks in part to the advocacy of Max Riley, a fourth-grader, and his second-grader sister, Reece. "No Foam Friday" will run through the end of the school year, and the siblings say they're pushing for permanent change.

Max said he worries about the health repercussions of littering the Earth with foam.

Across the country, student activists have rallied to get foam lunch trays out of schools because "our young people care about the planet they're going to have to inhabit," said Dawn Undurraga, a nutritionist with the Environmental Working Group. "You have 31.8 million children in the school lunch program each day, and multiply that by 180 school days and that comes out to quite a bit of trays if they're all disposable."

But even young Max knows that there are economic realities to consider. "Foam is very popular because it's really cheap,"



Side salads in styrofoam dishes await the students of Eastside Elementary School in Clinton, Miss.

Rogelio V. Solis, Associated Press

Max said. "And 3 cents extra per tray doesn't sound like much, but in the big scheme, it is thousands of dollars, which I don't really mind but a lot of people do."

Grades of Green, a nonprofit, seeks to empower students such as Max to make environmental changes, and it has helped more than 150 schools in 25 states implement policies that make campuses greener.

Said Kim Martin, the group's founder: "It's definitely a dollars-and-cents issue for a lot of schools, so it's important to look at what makes sense for schools not just from an environmental benefit, but also from a cost standpoint."

'The students do care'

Montgomery County school officials estimate that converting to non-polystyrene products would add \$1 million to the cost of the more than 5 million trays students use annually.

But making the switch doesn't always cost more. In 2010, the New York City Department of Education implemented "Trayless Tuesdays." Officials estimated that the move diverted 2.4 million polystyrene trays from landfills each month and was cost-neutral.

Binkle said the Los Angeles district negotiated with suppliers when it moved away from foam, saving at least \$1 million on the 120 million lunch trays students use annually.

Montgomery officials have estimated that it could cost more than \$70,000 to install and operate a dishwasher at Piney Branch, far more than the \$10,000 students have raised. The Young Activist Club, however, has estimated a one-year pilot program could cost as little as \$11,000.

Emily Fox, who counted the discarded trays at Piney Branch, said the Young Activist Club aren't going to quit lobbying for a dishwasher. "The students do care," she said. "They should care, because we're going to be the next generation, and we're going to change things."

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