

The Washington Post

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It's not easy to replace foam lunch trays with greener options, school officials say

By Lynh Bui, Published: December 8

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 a middle school student. “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 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. ¶ Even in Portland, Ore., known as one of the greenest cities in America, some schools still serve lunches on styrene-based, disposable trays.

“I hate serving on Styrofoam, but when push comes to shove, you have to decide where you’re going to spend the money,” said Gitta Grether-Sweeney, director of nutrition services for [Portland Public Schools](#).

For decades, environmentalists have shunned polystyrene (better known by the name of Dow Chemical’s trademarked Styrofoam) 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. The change got national attention after [middle school activists](#) strung up a 30-foot tower of foam trays in a tree to spotlight the waste.

On Friday, 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 at Hermosa Valley School, and his sister Reece, a second-grader.

“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 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,” Undurraga said.

But even young Max knows that there are economic realities to consider.

“Foam is very popular because it’s really cheap,” 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 group, seeks to empower students such as Max to make positive 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 Portland school system spends about 7 cents each for paper trays, compared with 3 cents for foam trays.

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 the school system at least \$1 million on the 120 million lunch trays students use annually.

Trays made from recyclable materials can end up in landfills if composting facilities are not available on site, as is

the case at some Portland and Los Angeles schools. And students have to be trained to clean trays, which can't be recycled if contaminated with bits of food or grease.

That's why the Young Activist Club at Piney Branch doesn't want anything but reusable trays and a dishwasher.

"It's pointless to have composted paper trays if you can't compost them," 11-year-old Anna Brookes said.

There are few, if any, facilities to compost paper trays at Montgomery schools.

In the Washington region, [Loudoun County Public Schools](#) and [D.C. Public Schools](#) use compostable or reusable trays. The D.C. school system also has dishwashers for reusable, plastic trays in 12 schools, and D.C. city contracting policies prohibit the use of foam.

Montgomery schools spokesman Dana Tofig said the county system has several other environmentally minded initiatives. But allowing Piney Branch to buy a dishwasher is a complicated decision in a system that has nearly 150,000 students.

"You can't do something at one school without a plan to expand it," Tofig said. "It becomes a fairness argument."

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.

The Montgomery Board of Education heard Piney Branch students' pleas again this summer, but members didn't vote to authorize a pilot program. Instead, the board adopted a resolution aimed at reducing the school system's overall carbon footprint.

"Board members felt very strongly if the system is going to do something like this, it needs to be replicated across the district," said member Patricia O'Neill (Bethesda-Chevy Chase).

Fairfax County, like Montgomery, sends polystyrene trash from public schools to an incinerator whose heat is used to generate electricity. Fairfax officials estimate the electricity powers 96,000 homes. Fairfax schools quit using dishwashers in the 1980s, saving millions of gallons of water annually, according to county officials.

"The issue with dishwashers is the waste water that is lost and the chemicals that go into the waste process are very harmful because you're talking about sanitizers and detergents," Binkle said.

Grether-Sweeney also said dishwashers, which require maintenance, may not always be practical. There are labor costs involved in operating the dishwashers, and schools built decades ago aren't always equipped to handle the electrical demands of running a machine that will heat water enough to kill germs.

Nadine Bloch, one of the parent advisers to the Young Activist Club, said students often tell her that those answers aren't good enough.

"There are some adults that get really stuck in the wrong place," Bloch said she tells the students. "That's why it's good there are youthful activists who can tell people that things have changed and there's a necessity for moving on and looking forward."

Emily Fox, who counted the discarded trays at Piney Branch, said she, Anna Brookes and the rest of the Young Activist Club aren't going to quit lobbying for a dishwasher.

"The students do care," Emily said. "They should care, because we're going to be the next generation, and we're going to change things."

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