



Food Waste Reduction Articles for Families

Below is a series of articles from the **King County Green Schools Program** about food waste and what families can do to reduce the amount of wasted food and increase the amount of food being consumed by their children. The articles can be placed in parent newsletters and on school and school district websites.

Article 1: [How to talk to your child about the food he/she may not be eating at lunch](#)

When packing lunches for their children, most parents and guardians strive to find a balance between nutritious, tasty and appealing to kids. When eating at home, you likely see what your child is eating and what foods they are avoiding, but do you really know what they are eating at school? Whether your family packs lunch from home, eats the school lunch or a combination, an open conversation with your children can result in lunches that are both healthy and appealing.

Food waste comprises an estimated 40 percent of garbage volume in school cafeterias. Wasted food equals wasted money and wasted nutrition for your child. It also takes up landfill space, wastes natural resources and emits methane, which is a potent greenhouse gas that is impacting climate change.

King County Green Schools Program recommends that students who bring lunches to school take home the food they do not eat each day. Many students are afraid of getting in trouble if they share with their parents or guardians what they are not eating. If you encourage your student to bring home the lunch items he/she does not eat, then together you can find ways to ensure they eat a healthy lunch and prevent waste.

Below are three questions to help you start this conversation.

1. What is a fruit/vegetable that we could pack instead that you would want to eat?
2. If you are not eating a _____ sandwich at school, what kind of sandwich would you eat? Turkey? Cheese? Peanut butter and jam? Other?
3. Can you make a list of your favorite drinks, wraps, salads, etc. that make up a good lunch and prevent waste?

Article 2: Why is food waste a problem? How common is food waste in schools? And what can your family do about it?

Did you know that 25 percent of edible food and drinks in the United States end up in a garbage can? The average American throws away over a half-pound of food per day, contributing to the 160 billion pounds of edible food thrown away every year in this country.

In the past 40 years food waste has increased by 50 percent. That food waste results in about \$1,600 lost per family each year. If we look at the data worldwide, that number skyrockets to \$750 billion in food waste. When we waste food, we also waste the water and energy used to grow, prepare, and transport that food.



Some schools have conducted lunchroom waste studies with help from King County Green Schools Program. Food waste comprises an estimated 40 percent of the total garbage volume in school cafeterias.

As students see the waste generated in their cafeterias, they are amazed at how much uneaten, edible food and drinks are being thrown away!

The good news is that your family can take small actions that have a big impact.

- 1) Learn how to pack a waste free lunch by visiting <http://www.wastefreelunches.org/parents.html>. In short, replace disposable baggies with reusable/refillable containers, paper napkins with cloth napkins, and plastic bottles or cans with reusable drink containers. See article on next page for more tips.

Ask your child to bring home uneaten items to be eaten later. Talk with your child about healthy eating with less waste.

- 2) Get your child involved in packing his/her own lunches. When kids plan and prepare their own lunches, they are more likely to eat the meal.

Article 3: How to pack a waste-free lunch

As a King County Green School, our school encourages waste reduction and recycling in classrooms and lunchroom.

Students sort their lunch “waste” into

- (1) Recyclable materials (empty milk cartons, juice boxes, plastic bottles, and aluminum cans);
- (2) Uneaten food scraps and paper napkins (*in schools that collect compostable materials*); and
- (3) Garbage.



Easy ways to make a waste-free lunch for your child

- **Pack only what your child can eat.** Have your child bring home everything they do not eat so you can see what they are able to eat in a lunch period. Only pack a half-sandwich if that's all your child can eat at lunch.
- **Use REUSABLE containers to pack the lunch.** Use any durable plastic containers instead of plastic baggies, or check out these options for purchase: www.laptoplunches.com, www.reusies.com.
- **Use a refillable or reusable drink bottle** instead of disposable or recyclable containers.
 - If a refillable bottle is not available, select drinks packaged in **recyclable** containers such as a plastic bottle, aluminum can, or milk carton that can be recycled at school.
- **Pack durable utensils**, if a fork or spoon is needed.
- **Ask your child to bring home the durable, reusable items along with any leftover food.**

Article 4: Encouraging less food waste in schools

It's not nutrition if it's not being eaten

Students, staff members and parent volunteers are often shocked to see the amount of edible food that is thrown away at school during each lunch period. King County Green Schools Program representatives working in schools hear Green Team students gasp when they see the quantities of unopened bags of baby carrots, the sandwiches with only one bite removed, the whole red apples, the unopened milk cartons, and more that are thrown away.

In previous articles, we shared ways to decrease waste and increase nutritious food consumed from lunches packed at home. But what about **lunches served by the school?**

It's important to remember that school cafeteria employees work hard to ensure each child receives a nutritious meal. We can work together as a school community to uphold their high standards while dramatically reducing the amount of waste.

Here are practical ways to address food waste in the school lunchroom.

1) ***Conduct an information campaign***

Inform students and staff members that wasted food equals wasted energy and water, and that large quantities of edible food are being wasted. Encourage students to “take what they will eat and eat what they take.”

2) ***Track which food items are frequently wasted***

A school Green Team or other volunteers can observe lunches to document which food items have the lowest and highest throw away rates. Team members observe which school-provided items are being thrown away the most. Is the entire portion being tossed? When apple slices are served, is there less waste than when whole apples are served? The survey works best if carried out over multiple weeks. At the end of the survey, a list of the most wasted food items – and the most popular items -- can be shared with district food services staff in a thoughtful, respectful manner. With this helpful data, districts may be able to reduce waste by altering menus while also maintaining federal nutrition standards.

3) ***Promote healthy food***

When students are not familiar with a food item, they often don't want to eat it. If an item served at school has never been seen or tasted by a student, she/he will be less likely to eat it. Schools around the country have found that making attractive posters of certain healthy food items increases their selection and consumption. Psychologists call this the [mere exposure effect](#). When students help plant, maintain, and harvest vegetables in a school garden, they are more likely to select and eat fresh vegetables. Similarly, nutrition and cooking classes that include whole grains and vegetables have resulted in students being more likely to eat those nutritious foods.



- 4) **Offer versus serve.** When students are offered food and beverage choices, as well as options for portion sizes, toppings, or dressings, they are more likely to eat the food they select. Professors at Cornell University showed that serving nutritious options in an attractive bowl or placing more nutritious options as the first and “easier to get to” choice results in healthier choices and less waste. Visit <http://smarterlunchrooms.org/>.

When students are asked to always take a milk carton, there are many unopened milk cartons at the end of each lunch period. However, there is less milk waste when students are offered a choice between milk and water because some students will select milk and others will select water -- and the students that selected the milk are more likely to open and drink the milk.

- 5) **Set up a Share Table in the school cafeteria if your school district and school grant permission.** Invite students to place unopened, packaged items and uneaten fruits with inedible skins from the school lunch program – not from lunches packed at home – on the share table. Students that want additional items may help themselves to foods and drinks on the share table.
- 6) **Donate foods and drinks (packaged, unopened items and uneaten fruits from the school lunch program) to a local nonprofit food agency if your school district and school grant permission.** At many schools, a local nonprofit food bank or meal program picks up unopened, packaged items once each week and distributes them to community members in need. If your district and school grant permission for your school to do this, the King County Green Schools Program can provide signs, collection crates, connections to local nonprofits that have approval from King County Public Health to collect from schools, assistance to set up a system, and help to educate students and staff members about the program. Ask for help!

Article 5: Reducing food waste at home

Did you know that it takes about 150 gallons of water to make a loaf of bread? When we throw away just one slice, we are wasting approximately ten gallons of water. In previous articles we have shared how to reduce food waste at school. It is likely that many of you have been inspired to not only help reduce food waste at school, but also to decrease the amount of food your family wastes at home.

Americans waste about 25 percent of all foods and drinks they buy. Sometimes it's forgotten leftovers in the back of the refrigerator or wilted lettuce in the produce drawer or moldy cheese that gets thrown away. Wasted foods and drinks are a potent climate change contributor and result in wasted water, energy, and fuel used to grow, produce, and transport them to our homes.

The good news is that each family can make a big difference [for their grocery budgets and the environment, including climate change](#), by wasting less food. King County [Food: Too Good to Waste](#) shows how you can have a large positive impact with a few small changes.



· **Week 1: Collect and measure wasted food.** Before you start making small changes to waste less, it is important to get a baseline for how much your household is wasting on average. Use this [worksheet](#) to create a storage container and track wasted food.

· **Week 2-4: Practice using Food: Too Good to Waste Tips and Tools.** Using [online resources](#), videos, and recipes, your family will shop smarter, prepare with less waste, and store food for maximum freshness.