

The case for reusable dishware at MVWSD



MVWSD Board of Trustees Regular meeting, June 12th 2025

We urge MVWSD to transition from single-use to reusable dishware for school meals.

This switch offers significant environmental, educational, health, and financial benefits, positioning our district as a leader in sustainability and student well-being.

Reuse beats single-use!

Where are we right now?

The district serves 2,700 lunches each day on average, close to **50,000 lunches a year**.

School meals are served in **single-use items** and are disposed of every day.

Most dishware items currently used in our district are **compostable**: paper boats and trays, degradable wraps, bamboo utensils.

Other single-use items include milk cartons, individual condiment packets, packed baby carrots; as well as clamshells for take-outs on minimum days.



Why switch from single-use to reusable dishware?

- **Less waste, less impact on the environment** - Single-use items need to be replaced every day and generate a lot of waste. They require a lot of energy and water to produce and transport. [1] [2]
- **Educational value** - Teach sustainable habits and shifting away from the single-use 'throwaway' lifestyle.
- **Children health benefits** - Disposable foodware can leach PFAs ('forever chemicals') and other toxins into students' food.
- **Food can be more appealing** - Kids are encouraged to eat, leading to better nutrition and a reduction in food waste. (feedback from Berkeley Unified students [3])
- **Long-term cost savings** - No more recurring, ever-increasing cost of single-use items, lower trash collection fees and reduced janitorial time. Case studies show these savings more than offset the initial investment in dishware and commercial dishwashers, plus ongoing operational costs for staffing and maintenance. [2] Grants can help with the initial investment.

[1] The average US public school generates 14,500 tons of solid waste *each day*, 40% from school food services.
<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9101714/>

[2] Conscious Cafeteria Report <https://upstreamolutions.org/blog/the-conscious-cafeteria-report>

[3] <https://cleanwater.org/case-study/berkeley-unified-school-district-phase-one>

Why compostables and bioplastics are not the answer [1]

- **High environmental impact** - Compostable dishware use a lot of resources to produce, ship, pick up and compost - including water to grow, and fuel to transport. They need to be replaced every day, which adds to a high environmental impact even when composted properly. [1]
- **Potential toxicity** - Many compostables are made with toxic chemicals like PFAs to make them waterproof, leading to adverse effects for children. [2]
- **Cost** - Compostable items are expensive!
(feedback from the nutrition team)



[1] <https://upstreamolutions.org/why-compostables-and-bioplastics-arent-the-answer>

[2] The Conscious Cafeteria Report - <https://upstreamolutions.org/blog/the-conscious-cafeteria-report>

Why compostables and bioplastics are not the answer [2]

- **Sorting is hard!** Kids need to sort properly into the composting bin, which requires supervision. Despite everyone's best effort some compostable items end up in the trash, and non-compostable items end up in the compost bin, causing **contamination**.

Waste haulers increasingly push back against accepting compostable foodware. [3]



Switching to reusable dishware supports our district's goals

- In line with the district's commitment to sustainability, as set by the current board policy on [green school operations \(BP 3510\)](#).

Conserve natural resources, reduce the impact of district operations on the environment; consider long-term potential cost savings, health impacts, and potential educational value; use products that are durable, long-lasting and reduce waste.

- The district won the California Green Ribbon School District Sustainability award for the second year in a row! A swap could help the district win federal recognition.
 - [2025 California Green Ribbon School District Sustainability Honoree, Gold level](#)



Other districts are doing this... ... and so can we!

Palo Alto Unified - Replaced 7 types of single-use items across all elementary schools, hired a dishwasher and van driver, and saw cost savings of \$25,000 per year.

Berkeley Unified - Switched to reusables in 3 schools, resulting in \$13,000 annual savings. Phase 2 will expand to all schools. Students feedback highlight how nice the stainless steel trays and cups are!

Fremont Unified School District - Launched at ten K-5 schools in 2024, using an off-site dishwashing service. Used grants from the City of Fremont and environmental non-profits.

And many more !

<https://upstreamsolutions.org/blog/school-case-studies>





At Bay Farm Elementary School in Alameda, students with their reusable lunch trays serve themselves from the salad bar.



Instead of individually wrapped packets, pilot schools opt for self-serve pumps for ketchup and other condiments.



At schools where dirty dishes are washed off-site, students place trays and utensils into wash baskets,



Blacow Elementary School in Fremont launched their transition to reusable foodware with a school assembly.

Proposal

1 - Direct staff to conduct a feasibility study for adoption of reusable foodware at MVWSD

- Identify grants available from local government agencies and nonprofits (Santa Clara County, City of Mountain View etc.)
- Rely on expertise from the nonprofit Center for Environmental Health, whose team advised many local districts on financials and logistics

2 - Pilot project at Landels

- Principal Mr. Dolmans, 5th grade teacher and district sustainability lead Mr. Gorman, PTA parents are in favor and supportive

3 - Develop a long-term plan for 100% safe, reusable foodware across the district

Resources and Contacts

Conscious Cafeteria Report - A national pilot study on reusable foodware for healthier, more sustainable schools, by Upstream, 2024

<https://upstreamsolutions.org/blog/the-conscious-cafeteria-report>

12 Steps to Transform your Cafeteria, Center for Environmental Health

<https://ceh.org/ditching-disposables-toolkit/planning-guide-how-to-transform-your-cafeteria-ditching-disposables-toolkit/>

Greenhouse Gas Impacts of Disposable vs Reusable Foodservice Products - Literature review & inventory, by Clean Water Fund, 2017

https://www.cleanwateraction.org/sites/default/files/CA_ReTh_LitRvw_GHG_FINAL_0.pdf

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