

School composting is growing 'dramatically'

SARAH LEMAGIE, Star Tribune, January 19, 2008

It's been five years since students in the Rosemount-Apple Valley-Eagan School District started scraping their plates in the cafeteria, separating uneaten food from plastic forks and other garbage in an effort to compost organic waste.

But it's been a long time since most lunchroom trash actually made it to the compost heap.

Last week, District 196 rolled out a new composting program designed to keep food waste from mixing with other trash in garbage trucks -- a problem that sank students' previous attempts to turn leftover French fries into garden mulch. And the enthusiasm has been building: At Rosemount High School, students made signs for the cafeteria about how composting works and volunteered to be lunchroom monitors.

"I didn't have to sell this," said Veda Kanitz, a ninth-grade earth sciences teacher who helped get the program off the ground at Rosemount. "They know that we need to do something, that this planet is in trouble."

Composting is taking off at schools throughout the metro area: It's good for the environment, gives students an easy way to be green and can help reduce a school's garbage costs because organic waste comes with lower tipping fees and taxes.

"The interest is growing just dramatically," said John Jaimez, an organics and recycling specialist who has helped launched similar programs at eight Hennepin County school districts in the last five years.

As much as 80 percent of a school's trash comes from its cafeteria and kitchen, and about three quarters of that is organic, he said.

Participating schools collect food, napkins and other nonrecyclable paper in biodegradable bags that are picked up by different trucks than those that haul regular garbage. The organic waste is inspected to make sure it's at least 90 percent pure, then taken to a waste processing facility near Rosemount that sells the resulting compost for landscaping to buyers that include school districts such as District 196.

District 196 initially tried to compost by hauling loose food trash in trucks that also carried plastic bags with regular garbage, then separating the trash at the waste processing plant. But the bags often broke in the trucks, mixing organic waste with foam plates and other trash and making the compostable material unusable.

The program was supposed to save the district as much as \$30,000 a year and compost up to 20 percent of its trash, said Mike Schwanke, the district's facilities manager. But the organic material was so contaminated that the waste processing facility eventually stopped composting it, instead bundling it off to the incinerator with the rest of the trash.

"We were discouraged there for a while," he said.

For the new program, each school has been issued five compost bins -- one for every day of the week -- along with biodegradable bags that are sealed after lunch to keep rodents out. A separate truck will pick them up once a week.

Similar programs have worked well in Hennepin County schools, where more than 95 percent of loads pass inspections, Jaimez said.

'Becoming leaders'

Rosemount High School has already requested an extra seven bins, Schwanke said. Students in Kanitz's science class helped prep the school for the new system, with students creating public service announcements and a PowerPoint presentation that was broadcast in classroom monitors during morning announcements. Others volunteered as lunchroom monitors last week.

Veteran school compost coordinators say it can be tough to get older kids to separate their trash, but that young students dive right in. At Schumann Elementary School in Orono, where the district started composting this fall, student monitors help their peers dispose of trash properly at lunch.

"We bought grabbers for them, and they love fishing in there," said Kris Diller, the district's child nutrition supervisor. "If somebody accidentally drops a fork" in the wrong trash can, she added, "Boy, they don't give up until that fork has been retrieved."

But a middle school cafeteria can be "pretty much this side of bedlam," said Kim Craven, administrative assistant to District 196's superintendent. "I personally think it's going to pick up at the high school level," she added, noting that the composting program starts just as the district has taken on several environmental projects, including a wind turbine at the School of Environmental Studies in Apple Valley.

The new composting program won't save the district money, but costs of about \$4,000 a month will be funded with savings from a new program that has doubled the percentage of trash the district recycles.

Other schools that compost have been able to cut down dramatically on garbage hauling. In Orono, two schools that used to have three pickups a week are now down to one, Diller said.

All told, the 45 or so schools that Jaimez works with compost between 10 and 15 tons a week, he estimated, including contributions from St. Louis Park, Minnetonka, Hopkins, Robbinsdale, Orono, Brooklyn Center, Edina and Wayzata. Statewide, schools account for about half of composted trash, said Ginny Black, organics and recycling coordinator with the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency.

Carleton College, Garlough Elementary in West St. Paul, the city of Wayzata, Ikea and Best Buy also compost organic trash at the plant in Rosemount, according to the waste processor, Resource Recovery Technologies.

Ann Sullivan, principal of Susan Lindgren Elementary School in St. Louis Park, takes pride in the fact that other groups and other businesses consult the school about its composting program, which has been underway for four years.

"Now schools are really becoming leaders," she said.

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