

A recent study by the World Wildlife Federation reports that US schools throw away approximately 530,000 tons of food waste every year. That equates to about 39 pounds of food waste per school per year.

(<https://www.educationdive.com/news/report-nations-school-food-waste-may-be-as-much-as-530k-tons-annually/568599/> Dec. 6, 2019) While there are many factors that contribute to food waste in schools, reduction is possible with the implementation of some “Low Waste Lunch” strategies. No matter what plan is being implemented as schools begin the process of reopening, low waste lunch strategies can be incorporated both at school and within students’ homes. Consider encouraging students and their families to try out one or more of the following practices. For older students, include tracking what type of an impact some of the strategies have on personal waste reduction.

Low waste lunch challenge:

How many of these ideas can you try? Track your progress—what do you notice after a week? A month? 3 months? 6 months?

1. Lunch box—choose to reuse! Whether you choose an insulated, soft side box, or a metal carrier, start your journey to low waste lunches by choosing a reuseable lunch box.
2. Storage containers—avoid those plastic baggies—invest in reuseable storage containers. Put your sandwich in one, snack items in another and you’re ready to eat anywhere!
3. Utensils-pack up your spoon and fork from the silverware drawer for those lunches that aren’t finger foods.
4. Beverage-Investing in a thermos will provide you with a lunch time beverage break that keeps your cold liquids cold and your hot liquids hot! Or choose to invest in a refillable water bottle to contribute to ongoing efforts to reduce use of single use plastic bottles.
5. Napkin-a reuseable cloth napkin will reduce paper waste from paper napkins or paper towels.

Now that the lunch box is assembled, it’s time to consider food options. The goal of a low waste lunch challenge is to reduce not only the solid waste generated from packaging, but also food waste. Consider trying some of the following ideas:

- Subdivide servings. Buy the larger container of yogurt or chips or apple sauce and subdivide into smaller single serving sizes packed in your collection of reuseable containers.
- Go natural. Try to include at least one item each lunch that is “wrapped” in its own packaging—oranges, apples, bananas for example.
- Pack only what you know you’ll eat. Keep a supply of a non-perishable food item as a reserve snack just in case you underestimate your hunger level on a certain day. Foods like almonds, beef jerky, granola or dried fruit are good to keep stashed for emergency hunger moments.

Activity-plastics scavenger hunt

Grade level-3-8

Teacher info.-A large amount of waste comes from packaging. Plastic packaging in particular is a challenge. Some plastics are not recyclable, and while their light weight makes them ideal for easy transport, it also makes plastic packaging susceptible to escape out into the environment. Plastic waste that ends up on land eventually makes its way into a water source, which frequently then ends up in the ocean—where it lingers and slowly degrades into microscopic pieces scientists refer to as microplastics. These microscopic bits of plastic are being found in a variety of sources and are entering food, water and air environments resulting in human consumption.

<https://www.consumerreports.org/health-wellness/how-to-eat-less-plastic-microplastics-in-food-water/> (April 30, 2020)

Challenge students to begin thinking about the amount of plastic they encounter on a daily basis by having them do a plastics scavenger hunt at home. Provide students with the data collection form below and give them a week to document their findings. On the designated due date, have students bring their form and do a data analysis appropriate to the grade level. Younger students may be encouraged to contribute findings to a whole class summary, while older

