



Fremont Unified



A significant number of K-12 schools across the United States had switched to serving food on disposable food service ware well before COVID-19. Growing concerns about single-use plastic, the enormous amount of waste generated, and the widespread use of toxic chemicals like PFAS and styrene in common disposable foodware have prompted schools to consider a return to reusables. And not just any reusables—schools are investing in reusables made of preferable materials and safer chemistry.

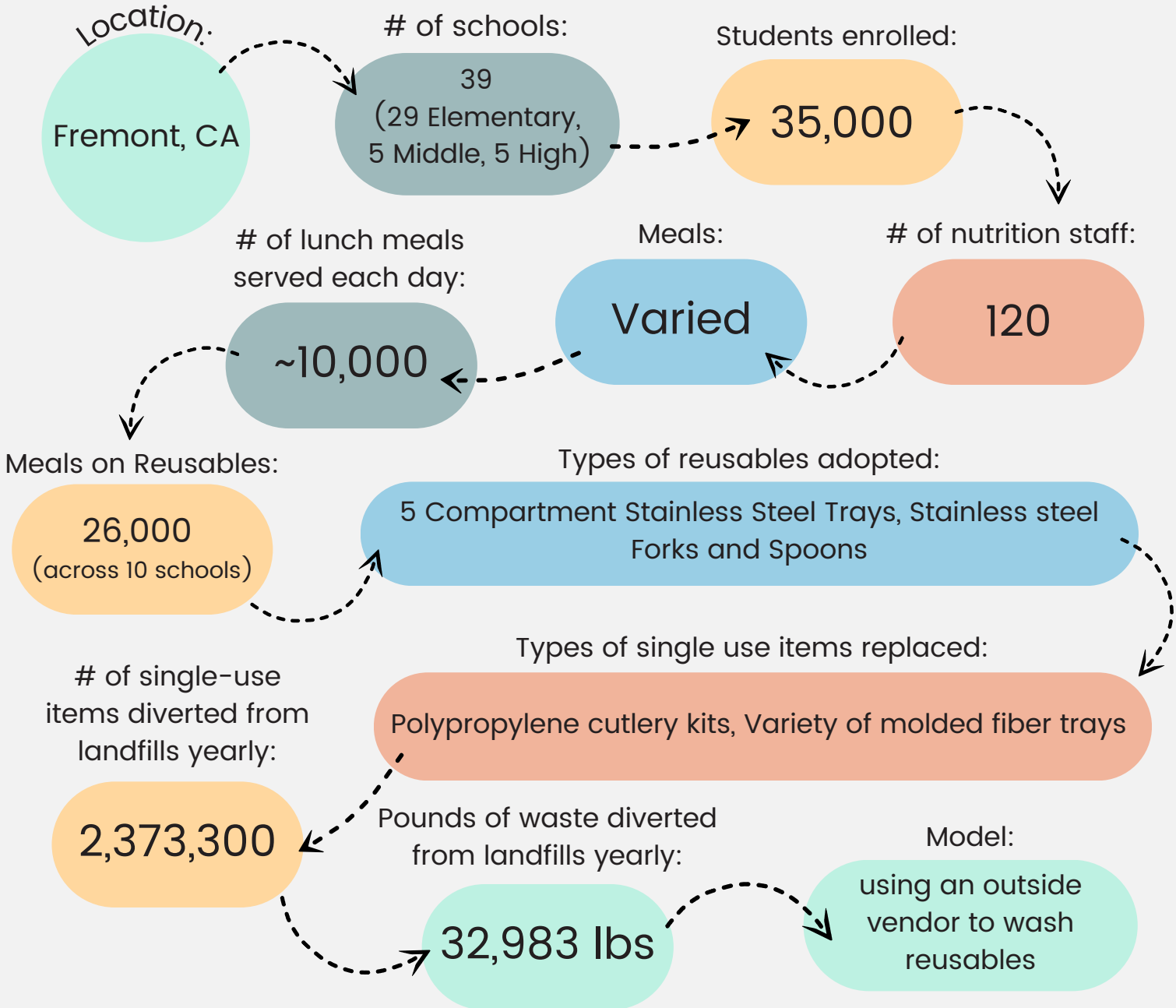
The District is Going Green

Intro

A large school district (35,000 students) is switching from single use disposables to reusables for serving lunch to their students using an offsite service for dishwashing.

- Long-term goal: to implement reusables at all 29 elementary school sites
- Currently: Launched at ten K-5 schools in 2023.

At a Glance



Fremont Unified School District (FUSD) is a large school district of over 35,000 students that had previously been using a 5-compartment fiber-based tray and a fiber-based plate that both tested high for fluorine (an indicator for likely use of harmful PFAS chemicals)*. Enthusiasm for products with safer chemistry began during an All Nutrition Service Staff meeting (2023) where CEH presented information on the potential harms of this type of food service ware. This was a turning moment in the project that brought the urgency of this issue close to home for key stakeholders.

The overarching goal of this project, spearheaded by Nutrition Director Johannes Van Der Pool, is to bring stainless steel reusables to all 29 of the K-5 schools in the district in the next 10 years with the hope that starting these behavioral changes early will lead students to continue sustainable practices as they graduate to middle and high school. Following CEH recommendations to start small, this district is piloting this project with five K-5 schools.

Another key component of this project has been partnerships. FUSD is partnered with a Joint Powers Authority called StopWaste, a local government agency in northern California that monitors the cities and school districts within Alameda county around waste reduction and management. StopWaste has been working with schools and teachers in FUSD for decades around waste sorting, food waste reduction, sheet mulching (with compost), and a host of other green initiatives. Fremont Unified hired a full time Recycling Coordinator, Stephanie Willits, in 2018 and she has been regularly partnering with Stopwaste to bring green initiatives to FUSD.

The Nutrition Department at FUSD applied for and was awarded a grant from StopWaste to cover the cost of washing reusables from five school sites through an external dishwashing service. FUSD purchased stainless steel trays through a combination of funds from Plastic Free Restaurants and the City of Fremont.



The University of Berkeley California's Nutrition Policy Institute (NPI) is conducting a plate waste study in conjunction with FUSD's reusables roll-out. NPI is researching food waste and food consumption at the K-12 level to determine if students eat more food off of reusable trays than disposable ones. While this extensive project will require 2 years to collect the data, it could add another positive incentive to move toward reusables.

Lastly, Fremont also moved away from individual condiment packets. These single-use plastic items have many issues—they create a lot of plastic waste, are tricky to open, are difficult to completely empty resulting in food waste and often get misplaced into the recycling and composting waste streams. These packets can also cost \$0.01-\$0.05 per packet, which can add up. For instance, if one student takes one packet (they usually take 3-5) 3 times per week at \$0.05 per packet, this would lead to \$8,000 a year for our five pilot schools. Work is ongoing to determine cost savings associated with condiment dispensers over individual packets.

Factors to consider

Several logistical factors of the school district and schools themselves were brought up as potential concerns for the project and would need extra considerations to find a solution. These factors included:

- Lack of onsite dish machine
- Large districts with many schools
- Large geographic area for the district
- Labor needed to wash dishes

One of the main solutions to addressing the concerns listed above was contracting dishwashing services through an outside entity, in this case a company called DishJoy. CEH worked with DishJoy to assess and allow access to school sites. Once this process was completed, DishJoy was able to operate independently, picking up dirty reusable dishes and dropping off clean food service ware. This happens like clockwork and allows for the staff to quickly adapt. Doing this drop off in the evening time when there are no students and little traffic is a best practice. If there is a problem with supplies, such as needing another rolling rack for an additional waste station, DishJoy is able to solve it. While it does cost a fee for the service (typically around \$0.40 a meal), it removes a lot of barriers which could potentially hold up the system.

Another way to lessen the barriers is to form more partnerships. With increased on-the-ground support for roll out activities such as promotional assemblies, lunchroom monitoring, and data collection, there is a greater ability to troubleshoot issues and help students and staff feel supported through these changes.

Sample Timeline from Forest Park Elementary School:

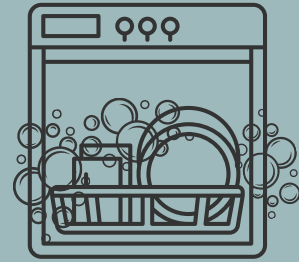
Kick-Off Meeting: 8/14/2023

When Reusable Items Were Ordered: 1/25/2023

When Reusable Items Were Delivered: 3/14/2023

When School Announcements Began: 4/10/2023
(Forest Park sent email a week before about it)

First Meal on Reusables: 4/17/2023 Forest Park Launch



Conclusions

Fremont is just getting started. Once the elementary schools are moved to reusables, lessons learned from this roll out can help make the middle and high school switch to reusables go even smoother. Additionally, once the current elementary students graduate, they will be used to these systems and tackling issues such as open campuses will be more manageable.

CEH looks forward to the findings from UC-Berkeley's plate waste study. CEH is hoping to see monetary savings for these schools and we are looking forward to seeing this district continue to promote sustainable and healthy practices for its students!

Next Steps

- Continue to launch reusables at five more schools in the 2024/2025 school year.
- Conduct a large scale waste audit and food waste study.
- Share the results of the plate waste study once it is completed
- Let other surrounding schools know about the project.

Lessons learned to date

- The more partners, the better. School staff already have a lot of responsibilities on their plate, so enlist many hands to make light work!
- Large school districts can have a dedicated employee to work on sustainability projects. There are many titles like recycling coordinator, or sustainability officer. These positions will often know who all the players in the district are and can be very effective launching and monitoring these projects.
- While using an external service to wash reusables is currently on the more expensive side, it can help schools that lack dishwashing infrastructure to pave the way towards a reusable system.
- There are many subsidies and grant opportunities out there to help with cost.
- Whole districts are capable of making the switch to reusable and thinking about multi year plans that can be implemented. Starting small is important, but once the district sees the success of moving to reusables at a single site, they will want to do it for all the schools they work with.