Starting a System for Composting or Vermicomposting School Lunch Food Scraps

SAMPLE FROM DAVIS RISE

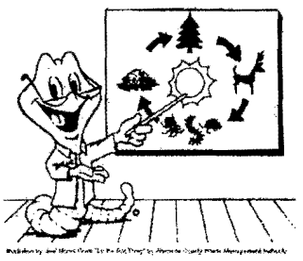
Composting & vermicomposting systems provide students with incredible learning opportunities in multiple subjects including math, science and language arts. They demonstrate one of life's most important lessons: nutrient cycling. Composting reduces the food waste portion of the waste stream, while producing an extremely valuable product for the garden: compost. As the students participate, they learn a sense of environmental stewardship and experience tremendous satisfaction in contributing to a solution to an environmental problem.

Starting a composting project requires a fair amount of planning and time. It is critical that any school food scrap diversion program be integrated into the curriculum, to minimize additional work for staff and teachers and maximize its relevancy to students. The general methodology for starting a composting project includes the following steps:

- Identify a team from each site. The team should include a recycling coordinator, certificated and non-certificated personnel, parents and students. Assign roles for each team member and develop plan for coordinating the project. Securing funding to pay the site coordinator is an important step towards ensuring the success of the project, though it can be done on a volunteer basis.

- Train the recycling coordinator and other team members on composting, vermicomposting and conducting waste audits. In Davis, the School Garden Project at the UC Davis Plant Science Teaching Center and Student Farm offers training for teachers on composting at school.

- Develop a workplan, general system specifications and timeline. The specific system specifications will be determined after the audit in the next step. In this manner the composting system will best meet the needs of each school and its priorities. In addition to composting food scraps, each site should also consider food rescue efforts. Removing edible, unopened food is an excellent way to begin reducing the food waste from the lunch stream. Go the California Integrated Waste Management Board's website (www.ciwmb.ca.gov) for information on the Good Samaritan Act, a law that protects you in these efforts.



- Conduct an audit of the lunch waste at each site to determine what is thrown away and in what proportions. The audit is a wonderful learning opportunity for students as there is lots of math involved. You can contact Cynthia Havstad, project manager for the DJUSD Food Scrap Diversion Project for a step-by-step description of how to conduct a lunch waste audit.

- Based on the results of the waste audit, define site goals, fine-tune and finalize system requirements for each site. The three pilot schools in the DJUSD Food Scrap Diversion Project determined that a significant portion of the lunch waste stream, on a per volume basis, was due to the styrofoam trays on which lunch was served. If you can include a means of stacking those trays, or switch to recycled paper trays, you will be able to make the most significant reduction in lunch waste.

- Train other teachers and students in the lunch waste collection system, composting and vermicomposting, as well as how to integrate these systems into the curriculum. Making available curriculum based on composting is an important component. Examples include "Worms Eat Our Garbage" by Mary Appelhof and "Closing the Loop" by the California Integrated Waste Management Authority. Closing the Loop is available free of charge when a workshop to demonstrate its use is held at the school. Also, the City of Davis provides a free "Pack a Good Lunch" assembly that you may want to schedule for your students.

- Reach out to the parents, if you have not done so already. Creating and sending a flyer home with each child is a good way of announcing the program. If you did not enlist the help of parent volunteers in the first step of identifying a site team, you may want to send a request for help. Be as specific as possible when asking for help.

- Develop and implement incentives for student and teacher participation.

- Build composting systems and food collection stations. Install any additional equipment. Create and install signage. Involving students in this step (such as creating signs) is also a great way to ensure their participation.

- Start collecting and composting lunch food waste!

- Collect data in order to evaluate effectiveness, participation and barriers. Older students can be very effective in collection, recording and reporting data.

- Let the school population, parents and community members know how it is going. Celebrate your success!

Cynthia Havstad, March 19, 2001