

WEIGH THE WASTE

In this activity, kids will complete an inventory of the waste thrown away in their school cafeteria for 1 to 5 days to better understand the amount and types of materials discarded. They will also be charged with devising a plan for more efficiently using the human and natural resources involved in food production, with a goal of becoming better stewards of our environment.

WHAT YOU'LL NEED:

- ☐ Large scale
- ☐ Clipboards and paper
- ☐ Grownups to help students sort their waste

TIME: 1 to 5 days

INTRODUCTION:

One of the best ways to really understand local waste issues is to take a close inventory of the waste being thrown away in your school's cafeteria each day. Alternatively, this activity could be adapted to explore waste at home if needed.

Begin your exploration by talking to your school's food service staff, explaining that your class is studying ways to reduce the amount of waste being thrown away at the school each day. Ask if they would be willing to partner with you to conduct an inventory of your cafeteria's waste.

If they agree, arrange for a time for students to interview cafeteria staff to learn more about the process they go through each day to prepare meals (breakfast and/or lunch). Make sure they explain all of the components included – both edible and non-edible (utensils, packaging, etc.). If possible, arrange a tour of the kitchen to better understand the scope of their work.

Make a list of all the materials and products involved in preparing and delivering school meals. Research which of the listed components are recyclable locally (even if

they are not currently recycled by your school or community), what types of food waste could be composted, and what components of waste must go to the landfill. You may need to contact local waste management personnel to confirm your findings.

Here is a chart of common recyclable items put together by Keep America Beautiful:

 Aluminum	 Plastic Bags & Film	 Plastic Containers	 Foam
 Paper	 Household Waste (i.e. light bulbs, paints, batteries)		 Automotive
 Glass			 Cartons
 Steel	 Yard Debris	 Electronics	 Food Scraps

Follow the Nature Activity instructions on next sheet.



INSTRUCTIONS:

STEP 1

Obtain at least 3 large trash cans and a scale large enough to weigh them (check to see if you may be able to borrow a shipping or luggage scale). During the inventory you will designate one to collect recyclables (plastic, cartons, etc.), one to collect compostable food scraps, and one to collect waste that cannot be recycled. Clearly label each can with pictures or words.

STEP 2

Plan one or more days to conduct your inventory. Since some meals may produce different amounts of waste than others, conducting your inventory over multiple days helps you get closer to an average amount of waste your school generates per day. However, even if you only have time to inventory one day, your data will still be valuable. Promote your event to teachers and students ahead of time so they know what to expect and how to participate.

STEP 3

On the day of the inventory, recruit student and adult volunteers to help with sorting. If you are not currently sorting your waste, this step may be confusing. If you know what is being served ahead of time each day, you can make your trash can labels with the specific pictures and names of the material that goes in each bin.

STEP 4

Weigh your trash cans as they fill up and dispose as usual. Let students help keep track of the measurements.

STEP 5

At the end of your collection days, don't forget to thank the students, volunteers, and food service staff for their help.

STEP 6

Compile your data

ASK KIDS:

- How much trash are we generating each day? Based on this information, how much trash would we generate over one school year?
- What are we currently recycling or composting?
- Is there any additional waste that we could divert from the landfill? What kind of resources would we need to accomplish this?

STEP 7

As a class, in groups or individually, ask kids to create an action plan and then propose their plan at a special meeting that includes other students, teachers, administrators, food service staff, and custodians. Make sure your forum provides opportunities for all interested groups to voice their opinions about what they think is feasible. Together, craft a final waste management policy to implement.

STEP 8

Promote your new plan to other students and build excitement around the new steps your school is taking to become more environmentally responsible. Also share your plan with families and the community and give them ideas about how they can become more involved at home, too.

