
COMPOSTABLE PLATE



From the earliest conversations, the Urban School Food Alliance members prioritized environmentally-sound purchasing as one of the pillars of their new organization. It's no surprise then that during the very first meeting, members acknowledged their concerns around the use of polystyrene trays in school cafeterias. At the time, a polystyrene tray cost four cents and a compostable tray was closer to twelve. Even for the smallest member district in the Alliance, the switch to a compostable tray could have cost millions of dollars a year. However, the potential impact was great – all Alliance districts moving away from polystyrene could keep more than half a billion trays from the landfills each year.

Alliance members realized this effort could be the first test of their new organization. However, in a market saturated by polystyrene, creating this product was no easy task. O'Brien recalls the heavy lift, "We had to develop specifications for the bid, conduct market research on what companies had the capabilities to make compostable products and at our scale, and work with our legal departments and procurement officers to ensure this could work." Adding, "New York City volunteered to take the lead on a joint procurement. We began working with local nonprofit partners like Cafeteria Culture and the Parsons New School in New York to determine what kind of compartments, innovations and specifications." The districts didn't just want a compostable tray, they wanted a plate to serve children. Food and nutrition directors in the Alliance specified the round shape to allow students to eat their food off plates shaped like the ones they do at home, replacing the institutional rectangular lunch tray.

Members also worked in partnership with the Natural Resources Defense Council to research materials used and ensure that sound environmental practices were being followed. Together they developed a bid, it went out on the street and closed on Nov 19, 2013. "We could not have done this without the Natural Resources Defense Council," explains Parham. "They were indispensable."

Ultimately, Huhtamaki, a Finnish company with a manufacturing facility in Waterville, Maine, won the bid. This was the first opportunity to prove that school districts could work together - across state lines, procurement departments, and school boards - and achieve results. "We had driven the price down and the quality up," reports O'Brien. The new product was available for about five cents each and now a viable option for school districts.



FINDING SOLUTIONS

Excited by the fact that they could afford a product, districts began purchasing, however, there were several challenges to overcome from the get-go. First, the switch to compostable plates does incur a cost, even if reduced from the original out-of-reach price tag. Alliance food service directors had to work with their stakeholders and school boards to build support for the switch and the added cost.

One Alliance district reported that the switch to compostable plates cost \$1.1 million dollars for the district and another reported that their cost doubled. Since this was a national bid, the product price and delivery price were bid on and tabulated separately. This meant that while all districts gained the benefit of the product price being dramatically reduced, there was still a delivery markup that varied widely depending on where the delivery needed to be made in relation to the factory. Regardless, both districts have identified cost and environmental savings by using fewer paper products overall. And both are committed to moving forward, no matter the cost, because the initiative is now so important to their districts, school communities and the environment.

Staff buy-in also proved to be an ongoing hurdle for implementation. In the initial roll out, staff found the plates difficult to separate. When serving hundreds of students in minutes, even an extra second or two to separate plates can drastically slow service times and leave kids with little or no time to eat their meal. While some Alliance members made the switch all at once, others reported initially using the plates in volunteer schools or those with a passion for sustainability, to work out the kinks.

Training tools were created to introduce the plate to front line staff. Flyers, videos and talking points were widely circulated for use by members. One district enlisted parent volunteers to come in ahead of lunch and separate plates for meal service. Engaging parents not only helped to solve the immediate problem; the school meal program cultivated some new loyal customers.

Another challenge was that not all menus are created the same. Some school districts pre-plate items and some portion items at the point of service. The implementation of the five-compartment round plate eliminated the need for some additional paper items, but not all districts were able to easily transition. Alliance members identified the need for smaller plates at breakfast and potentially a different plate for pizza days.

Now nearing the next round of bids for the compostable plate, Alliance members have worked with the manufacturing company to improve the ability to separate the plates and change the way the plates stack, greatly reducing the time required to separate the plates. Easy to separate plates was not a part of the specifications in the bid but will be in the future bids. Additionally, after seeing the demand, paper companies are now offering additional designs at reasonable price points that are allowing more school districts to make the switch. Making the change proved that a targeted procurement could be done among members and the plate garnered national attention since it was now available helped develop policies, such as polystyrene bans in several cities.