

Neighborhood Conversations

Susie O'Donnell Interview – No Trash Day Lunch – Echo Lake Elementary

How did you come up with the idea for the “No Trash Lunch Day”?

I was traveling in Virginia, and heard about a school there that had organized one. It sounded like such a great idea, I thought I would try and organize a similar event at my kids' elementary school.

What was your role in this event?

I was the main organizer for the event, and worked closely with both co-principals, teachers, and the student council. This was one of the first events organized by the Environmental Committee of our PTA.

How much time did it take to plan, and what did you need to do to get the students, parents, and staff ready for a successful event?

We started planning in February for an April event. I worked very closely with the student council and the two teachers who advised the council. The event was scheduled for April 22nd – Earth Day. Everybody had a role to play. The student council made posters, the teachers helped coordinate the kick-off assembly where we showed all the kids how much garbage was produced in one day at lunchtime; the custodian helped keep the trash separated by the different lunch periods so we could weigh each of the three periods separately as a baseline, and then again on the day-of the event.

We were in constant communication with the principals, who were both very supportive of the event. In the end, the event inspired the school to make a decision about adding recycling containers to the lunchroom.

What materials did you use to prepare students for the event?

We shared information out about the event in the PTA newsletter, the school newsletter, and in an email to all of the teachers. “No Trash Lunch Day” flyers were sent home to the parents and gave helpful hints on how to help their kids participate. Teachers were given discussion questions to use in the classroom.

Where there any obstacles before or during the event that you were surprised by?

There were no recycling or food waste containers at that time in the lunchroom. To eliminate waste, the kids had to focus on bringing home or eating all of the food they brought or bought, use reusable containers for the lunch items they brought in, and drink as much of their milk as possible. (All kids on the free and reduced lunch program get free milk.) The kids were quite successful and able to reduce the weight of their lunchtime garbage by using lunch boxes instead of paper bags, and pouring out unused milk into a bucket we provided.

The event happened to be schedule on the same day as “Pizza Day”, which creates a lot more waste than other types of themed lunch days because a higher proportion of students buy rather than bring lunch. There is no control over portions, and so the kids who eat less will have no choice but to waste the extra food.

The cafeteria shares space with the gym, which is separated by a divider, and there is a short time period for kitchen staff to prep and clean-up between the three lunch periods. This means there is very little opportunity for the kids to take small portions, with the option to go back for seconds - kids have to take what they think they will eat. Also, the kitchen and custodial staff are stretched to the limits, and would not be able to assist the kids with recycling or food waste separation questions or monitoring. Any assistance would have to be organized by student monitors or parent volunteers.

What are you planning on doing differently for this year?

We hope to have more parents involved, and have time during the event to interview students. The student council is discussing having more than one “No Trash Lunch Day” per year.

Also, we are hoping to collect food scraps separately and use them as the launch of a composting pilot project. I am presenting information about the event to the PTA Council, and will be talking to other schools to get ideas on how they have organized their own “Waste Free” and “No Trash” lunch days.

What advice would you give to others who would like to do an event like this?

The key for us was to work together with everyone involved. This event did not take a lot of time to organize, and will be easy to replicate. There are many success stories out there from schools who are doing this. A great resource is Washington Green Schools: www.wagreenschools.org.