

CASE STUDY:

Middletown Public School District



BUSINESS PROFILE

Name:

Middletown Public School District

Location:

Middletown, CT

Cafeteria dining: Yes**Take-out:** No**Warewashing:**

Commercial Dishwashers

The Middletown Public School System consists of ten schools; eight elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school, and enrolls around 4,500 students. Since 2022, the amount of trash generated in CT has exceeded in-state disposal capacity, and about 40% of municipal waste has been shipped out of state, which is costly and merely sends pollution elsewhere. So, there is motivation to find zero waste solutions. In Middletown, the Director of Food, Nutrition, and Wellness Services for Middletown Public Schools has for many years eagerly taken on sustainability initiatives in the cafeterias: Programs such as the separation of kitchen food scraps for composting with Blue Earth Compost, purchasing reusable cloth bags for the breakfast program, and implementing hard reusable plastic cafeteria trays.

ReThink Disposable joined the schools' efforts to fight single-use disposable waste and plastic pollution by phasing out all disposable diningware in school cafeterias district-wide. All schools have an operating commercial dishwasher, giving them the ability to wash reusables in-house. The reusable foodware was purchased with funding from a CT Equipment Assistance grant, individual donors through a Sustainable CT campaign, and a utensil donation from Plastic Free Restaurants. The school is unique in its approach to reusable foodware. All disposables are being replaced with a reusable alternative, a one-to-one swap for each item. The transition is happening in several phases with the first phase of reusable plates and bowls rolled out in the fall of 2024.

Changes to serviceware for less waste and more savings:

Single-use 5 Compartment Fiber Blend School Lunch Tray	→	Durable Preserve Plastic Plate
Single-use 5 Compartment Fiber Blend School Lunch Tray	→	Durable Preserve Plastic Bowl
#200 Food Tray Red Plaid	→	Eliminated
#300 Food Tray Red Plaid	→	G.E.T. EC-08-1-CL Eco-Takeouts Clear Single Entree Container
#500 Food Tray Red Plaid	→	G.E.T. EC-11-1-CL-EC Half Size Take-Out Food Container, 9" x 6.5"
Single-use Plastic Utensil, Straw & Napkin kit wrapped in plastic	→	Stainless Steel Spoon, Fork & Spork
Single-use plastic 5.5 oz Portion Container	→	G.E.T. EC-20-CL Sauce Cup 6.75 oz
Single-use plastic 5.5 oz Portion Container	→	G.E.T. Eco-Takeouts 3 oz Jade Green Customizable Sauce Container
Clear Portion 5 oz/5.5 oz lid	→	Eliminated
Ziplock Sandwich Bag	→	Eliminated

THE BOTTOM LINE

- \$91,175 total annual net cost savings when factoring in the additional cost of \$30,000 in labor each year
- Over 3.76 million disposable items reduced per year
- 15.5 tons of annual waste reduction
- 3.8 month payback period including yearly cost for dishwashing labor
- The district can see an additional \$41,866.50 in savings reducing waste-hauling pick-ups by eliminating one pick up per week for each school

Middletown Public Schools are setting an example in Connecticut. Switching to reusables saves money and protects our land and water from single-use foodware pollution.



“Connecticut, and all of New England, is facing a trash crisis. Disposal capacity is dwindling, forcing more waste to be shipped further away, increasing both financial and environmental costs. Communities are trying to implement strategies to minimize the amount of trash going to landfills and incinerators. This partnership with ReThink Disposable has helped Middletown take steps to reduce waste from our schools, reduce costs and create more sustainable systems in our school cafeterias.”

Kim O’Rourke, Middletown Recycling & Sustainability Coordinator

“Here in Middletown Public Schools, one of our goals in switching to reusable utensils and servingware is to utilize the funds that would have gone to disposable items and instead reinvest them into the quality of our food. It was estimated that in this switch we will be saving around \$100,000 per school year; with this savings we will focus on buying locally grown foods from small farmers and growers throughout the state of Connecticut with a specific focus in supporting farmers and growers of color. These funds will greatly improve our quality of food and bring more variety to our students during mealtimes.”

Randall Mel, Jr., Director of Food, Nutrition and Wellness Services for Middletown Public Schools

RESULTS

		PACKAGING IMPACTS			COST IMPACTS	
Disposable Product Replaced or Minimized	Recommendation Implemented	Percent Disposable Reduction	Annual Quantity of Disposable Product Reduced	Annual Waste Reduction (lbs.)	Payback Period (months)	Annual NET* Cost Savings After Payback Period (\$)
5 Compartment Fiber Blend School Lunch Tray	Replace with Preserve Every Day Plate Midnight Blue	100%	27,000	2,392	10.2	2,392
5 Compartment Fiber Blend School Lunch Tray	Replace with Preserve Every Day Bowl Midnight Blue					
#200 Food Tray Red Plaid	Eliminated	100%	162,000	2,684	0	2,684
#300 Food Tray Red Plaid	G.E.T. Eco-Takeouts Clear Single Entree Container	100%	81,000	1,991	7.6	1,991
#500 Food Tray Red Plaid	G.E.T. Half Size Take-Out Food Container, 9" x 6.5"	100%	333,000	10,596	2.0	10,596
Utensil Straw 8x10 Napkin Kit	Replace with Stainless Steel Spoon, Fork and Spork	100%	2,016,000**	6,303	2.8	6,303
5.5 oz Portion Container	Replace with G.E.T. Sauce Cup 6.75 oz	100%	450,000	4,640	4.3	4,640
5.5 oz Portion Container	Replace with G.E.T. Eco-Takeouts 3 oz Jade Green Sauce Container					
Clear Portion 5 oz/5.5 oz lid	Eliminated	100%	450,000	1,753	0	1,753
Ziplock Sandwich Bag	Eliminated	100%	207,000	1,250	0	1,250
		TOTALS:	3,726,000 pieces	31,609 lbs.	3.8 months	\$121,175

*Net Cost Savings considers any upfront and ongoing costs associated with the purchase and care of reusable items and capital improvements needed to carry out ReThink Disposable's recommendations. Net cost savings are based on avoided disposable foodware purchases.

**Counting the straw, utensil, and plastic wrap

ReThink Disposable is a program of Clean Water Action and Clean Water Fund conducted in partnership with local organizations, businesses, and government agencies. Generous support is provided by a changing list of public and private funders. To learn more about the program, its partners, and funders, visit: www.rethinkdisposable.org



COMMUNITY
FOUNDATION
of Middlesex County

