Waste not, want not

Schools waste $5 million a day in uneaten food. Here's how Oakland is reinventing the cafeteria

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The red plum's presence confounds the third grader. She didn't want the fruit in the first place, yet there it is. She doesn't want to eat it, but she knows that tossing it into the garbage at Oakland's Hoover Elementary School is wrong. Standing before containers for trash, recyclables, compostables, and unopened entrees, milk cartons, and whole fruit, the girl's decision-making matches her Disney-movie hijab — *Frozen*.

Fortunately, Nancy Deming, the school district's sustainability manager for custodial and nutritional services, is supervising the sorting line today. "If you've started eating your fruit, it goes in the compost," she reminds the girl with a smile. "If you haven't taken a bite, it goes to Food Share." The girl glances at the plum, then carefully places it in the clear bin, from which students can take whatever unopened or unbitten foods they please. Anything left will either be offered the next day or donated to a local hunger-relief organization.

For decades, students here and there have made use of designated tables in school lunch rooms to leave or pick up unwanted whole fruit, packaged foods, or other meal items. Although rare in most school districts, Deming has standardized the practice and made it mandatory for schools serving some 37,000 students in Oakland. As the only school employee in the country whose sole responsibility is fighting food waste, Deming has transformed the Oakland Unified School District — and somewhat reluctantly herself — into a national leader. With her help, the district has arguably done more than any other in the country to minimize excess food, redistribute edible leftovers to people in need, and compost the inevitable inedibles.

No one condones trashing edible food, especially when 12 percent of U.S. households don't know where their next meal is coming from. And it has serious environmental consequences: Agriculture generates a third of U.S. greenhouse gas emissions, and roughly a fifth of the nation's pesticide, water, and fertilizer usage goes into growing food that will nourish no one. It's also a waste of money. Researchers estimate that 40 percent of the American food supply isn't eaten, a shopping cart worth $218 billion.

Schools are a big part of the problem. The USDA's National School Lunch Program serves 30 million kids every school day, a point of justifiable pride. But the program also wastes about $5 million worth of edible food every school day. That's $1.2 billion in losses per school year. The price tag is bad enough, but tacitly teaching children that it's

OK to throw out untouched portions of cheese ravioli and chicken tenders may be even worse.

Why do schools waste so much? The quality of food can be questionable, given the lack of on-site cooking facilities and minimal USDA funding. And many students end up with food that they don't want, thanks to a USDA reimbursement requirement that students take lunch items from at least three out of five categories — vegetable, fruit, protein, grains, and milk. At least one of those choices must be a fruit or vegetable. In theory, having food choices reduces waste, but students aren't allowed to take just one or two items they know they'll eat. Aiming for the federal government to cover a "reimbursable meal," staff often push students to take more.

Since Deming can't alter these requirements, she's ensured that every school in her district has a food-waste safety net: the Food Share table, with signs in five languages. When the process — which the USDA now endorses — works well, it's elegant. During a breakfast service at Piedmont Avenue Elementary, students can choose between a muffin and cheese stick combination and an Eggo mini-pancake package. When a boy interested only in a muffin drops his cheese stick on the sharing table, an attentive girl snags it within seconds.

Deming has also established a "Take It & Go" initiative that allows students to bring unfinished fruit and packaged vegetables back to their classrooms — forbidden in many schools — and she's working on a program that allows schools to share excess food with families in the school community. On Deming's watch, share tables have expanded from a few schools to all 80 of Oakland Unified's K-12 schools, and composting has more than tripled to serve two-thirds of them. Deming has become a sought-after speaker at food conferences, including this summer's U.S. Food Waste Summit at Harvard University. Intent on helping other districts, she recently published a K-12 School Food Recovery Roadmap that guides school employees and volunteers through the often-convoluted waste-reduction process, including tips on fundraising, waste tracking, and engaging with staff.

Deming, who grew up in San Diego, has always had a feel for the environment. She embraced composting while working at American Soil Products, based in the Bay Area, then ran her own sustainable gardening and edible landscaping company. When her daughter, who's now 17, started at Sequoia Elementary in Oakland, Deming got involved with a playground renovation, then noted the school's lack of composting and recycling and its ever-burning lights. After volunteering to work on school sustainability for a school year, she won a grant to tackle food-scrap composting. She worked as an independent contractor for four years, earning the trust of both the nutrition and custodial departments, before the school district named her its first-ever sustainability manager.

The title matters. Deming says schools often waste food for the simple reason that fixing the problem is nobody's priority. Hiring a sustainability manager requires resources, and Oakland Unified is especially strapped (this June, the district cut an afterschool dinner program that fed as many as 3,000 low-income students). That reality explains

why Deming's position is part-time, why she's become an adept grant-writer, and why most of her salary comes from the district's waste hauler, Waste Management.

Even when schools are committed to waste reduction, they face bureaucratic and logistical challenges. When Deming first proposed share tables, the district's Environmental Health Department raised food safety concerns. Deming quelled some with compromise. For example, she agreed to quit re-serving fruit with edible peels — apples, pears, plums — if a virus broke out. She created Food Share guidelines that spell out how to arrange food share bins; segregate hot and cool items; teach kids share-table rules; and clean up and re-serve or donate share items. To maintain food bound for redistribution, Deming recently won a CalRecycle Food Waste Prevention and Rescue Grant, which will pay for a refrigerated truck and additional refrigerators and freezers in the schools.

Milk is another bête noire in Deming's world. Contravening urban myth, the government has not, since 1982, required students receiving lunch to take cartons of milk. Yet some staff continue to push the cartons on students. In response, Deming posted signs that read "Only take it if you want to drink it." When she reminded cafeteria staff that the USDA encourages schools to wipe down and re-serve unopened milk cartons, they balked, unhappy to take back food handled by "germy, messy kids," Deming says. "Well, you have to wash it and make sure it's in good shape. But think of food at the grocery store. How many sets of hands have touched that food?"

She recalls other ripples of resistance. Like any manager, Deming needs numbers: how many items aren't served, how many milks and apples are left on the share table? But the schools' underpaid staff, working fixed hours, were hesitant to take on the extra task. To change their minds, Deming demonstrated and timed the task with a Nutrition staffer. After discovering it took a single minute, the staffers were converted.

The school district's success in reducing waste can't be separated from its economic context. Despite a resurgent downtown, poverty has literally pitched a tent in Oakland, with hundreds of homeless encampments. That harsh reality makes tackling food waste an easier ask for cafeteria staff, custodians, and decision makers "because nobody questions the idea," Deming says. "It's like, 'Oh yes, let's figure that out.'"

One out of five residents of Oakland's Alameda County seeks help from the county's community food bank, according to StopWaste, an agency that helps schools perform waste audits, increase their composting, and implement food sharing. Some two-thirds of those in need are children and seniors. Fully three-quarters of the district's students receive free or reduced-price lunch.

Knowing that some kids don't get enough to eat motivates Tanya Davis to promote the share table. Universally known as "Miss T," Davis has spent 27 years in Oakland Unified, the last two as a custodian at Edna Brewer Middle School, where she set up a Food Share table last year. She beams as she tells me her simple message: "'Don't waste it,

because some kids don't eat enough at home.' Those kids will sit near the share table and they keep an eye on it. And when something they want is put on it, the food's gone in a flash."

Several Hoover fifth graders I speak with know that their school is one of the six Oakland Unified schools donating meals to a shelter or center for the elderly. When I ask Vanaja Evans, a 10-year-old, to tell me about the Share Table, she says, "It goes to the homeless people. It makes me feel good inside because I know that some people can't afford food. It's easy to leave our food in the share bin."

"At this school, we don't waste things," says Aamyah Legorreta, another 10-year-old fifth grader at Hoover. "There's a sign that says, 'If you don't want me, don't take me.' And then the Food Share — someone comes to pick it up and give it to the homeless center. I think it's nice and helpful to give it to the homeless, because they don't have enough food or a home. If we just waste it, it's not really fair."

That someone collecting the food is John Holloway, who takes it to a homeless center called Berkeley Drop In, where Holloway works as a drug and alcohol counselor. Most days, Holloway drives his 2007 Pontiac Grand Prix sedan to Hoover and one other school to collect unserved wrapped entrees or those left on the share table. He also collects surplus school milk and fruit for the South Berkeley day shelter. Were it not for these fresh, varied, and nutrient-dense foods, the men would be stuck with a buffet of packaged bagels and muffins.

On a recent Monday, Holloway collected 81 meals from Hoover. "That was a big day because the kids really don't like that ravioli. But the men here like it," Holloway says. "The most popular is chicken trays with rice and, oh, turkey with mashed potatoes and gravy. They love that."

Across the country, school trash cans full of edible food are the norm. Fewer than 5 percent of K-12 schools send food out to be composted. Only around 500 out of about 98,000 public schools have share tables — that's half of 1 percent. And fewer still have active food donation programs, aided by national nonprofits like Food Rescue and Food Bus. What's stopping the rest from donating? Inertia, mostly, and an unfounded fear of liability. The USDA reminded school food directors in 2012 that schools donating food are protected from liability under the Bill Emerson Good Samaritan Act. The response has been slow, as most districts lack a Deming.

Back in Oakland, Deming is finding more ways to fight food waste. She's encouraging schools to use their surplus food to help feed students' families by relaunching a program called Food for Families. And she continues pushing schools to hold recess before lunch — a simple shift that improves appetites and keeps kids focused on eating.

Still, Deming's most potent weapon against waste may be her focus and pragmatism. After ensuring that the Hoover Elementary third grader's plum would eventually be

eaten by other students, Deming learns that Holloway is having car trouble, a bit of hard luck that would send much of that day's surplus to be composted rather than donated. She pauses and sighs audibly, then quickly shifts her attention to the children approaching with leftover snacks to share and waste to sort.