

**The Story of Lunchroom Waste:**  
**Lunch Buddies and Worms at Work**  
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For over the past three years I have been a volunteer *Lunch Buddy* at Lu Sutton, my son's elementary school in Novato, California. Once a week I come during lunchtime to encourage the children to develop better eating habits. I assist them in opening oranges and packages, I remind them to eat first and talk later, I have impromptu discussions about food and nutrition, and I work with kitchen staff to provide food samples to encourage students to try new foods. What I didn't expect to see was the amount of garbage produced at lunchtime. I was also appalled to see uneaten and partially eaten food going into the garbage.



**Lunch Buddy, Veronica Valero and Miguel Villarreal, Dir. of the school lunch program, are saddened to see 10.5 lbs of uneaten food.**

**THE AUDIT:** To bring awareness of the problem, I arranged to pilot the *Waste Audit* at the school. The *Waste Audit* is a Conservation Corps North Bay program using AmeriCorps volunteers ([www.conservationcorpsnorthbay.org](http://www.conservationcorpsnorthbay.org)). Through



our *Lunch Buddies* program, I knew other schools also had a food waste problem. So, I invited parents and staff from other schools and district administrators to come and observe. On February 28, 2008, all the garbage for one day was collected and then sorted by volunteer students with the assistance of AmeriCorps volunteers. The results were frightening! In one day, a school of about 450 students produced 164 lbs of garbage. Of this, 66 lbs was recycled waste. Most disturbing was the food waste: 47 lbs for one day! Most shocking was the 10.5 lbs of uneaten food that was thrown away! Multiply this food waste by eight elementary schools in the Novato Unified School District and that's about 375 lbs. a day of food waste. Did you know food scraps and other organic material take up about half of all landfill space and produce methane gas which is 21 times more potent than carbon dioxide?

**5-R's AND WORMS:** I had to find solutions. One was the *Compost Club* ([www.CompostClub.org](http://www.CompostClub.org)) I learned about through our local paper. I arranged to bring the workshop to Novato in May 2008. After attending the workshop, I brought back two



worm compost bins to Lu Sutton and started teaching the children the **5-R's** of lunchroom recycling: **Rethink, Reduce, Reuse, Recycle, and Rot.** Now on Wednesdays when I volunteer, in addition to reminding the children to "Eat first, talk later!", I also encourage them to eat the main course and vegetables first, then fruits, and last the chips and treats. What they don't finish, they can take home and have as a snack. I also teach the children about



what worms eat, emphasizing that I want to feed children, NOT worms! I also encourage them to ask their parents to pack food items in reusable containers and I teach them how to recycle at lunchtime to reduce our non-food waste. Yet, we still have food waste—but less. So once a week I collect partially eaten vegetables and fruits—and sadly whole produce too—and then feed it to the worms. On the other four days I'm not there, the food is thrown away. As our program expands to involve the students and staff, I am confident that the waste will be reduced.

**DOES IT MATTER?:** Although, it takes time and commitment to bring a vermiculture (worm) system into a school, the investment has numerous benefits. By combining the *Compost Club* model with the *Lunch Buddies* program, parents, administrators, and school lunch staff would be able to monitor what is and isn't eaten, address challenges in the lunchroom, and seek solutions to reduce waste. Most importantly, it calls us to action to find ways to feed the children more effectively.



**HIDDEN BENEFITS:** Added benefits to the *Compost Club* model is that even when waste is produced, some of it can be fed to the worms to reduce school waste and its associated costs. In return, the school can harvest wonderful compost for the garden or sell it as a fundraiser, AND the children are taught to be more responsible while learning about nature and the ecological cycle by making friends with worms!



**To learn more about the *Lunch Buddies Program* visit: [www.NovatoLiveWell.org](http://www.NovatoLiveWell.org) or call 415-897-2302**