

Cambridge school aims to be greenest in Boston area

By Katrina Ballard/correspondent - **Wicked Local Cambridge** - Posted Apr 01, 2009 @ 08:09 AM



Rose Benson-Smith, 5, a kindergartner at King Open in East Cambridge helps compost leftovers and recycle after lunch break. Wicked Local photo by Zara Tzanev

Cambridge —

Cafeteria lunches are getting greener at the King Open School with a new composting program that grew out of the hard work of a few young students.

The school kicked off "Food to Flowers" early in March with a school-wide assembly, educating students about composting, said Randi Mail, recycling director of the Cambridge Department of Public Works. The DPW worked closely with the school to set up the program.

So far, the lunch staff and students have been composting successfully, remembering to separate food, liquid and trash, said Lena James, family liaison for King Open. The lunch staff oversees the program to make corrections when students forget.

"Everybody came on board, sustaining it to keep that momentum going," said James. "It has been going very, very good."

The school composted 200 pounds of waste the first three days, and it is projected to compost about six tons for the year, Mail said. The weight kept out of the trash cuts down on collection costs, which may offset any costs of the program itself.

Composting is one way to reduce greenhouse gas emissions because decomposing food waste in landfills are a significant generator of methane gasses, which have 20 times the effects of carbon dioxide on the atmosphere, Mail said.

King Open is the first school in greater Boston to begin a composting program, said Ann McGovern, a coordinator for the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection. The DEP provides the King Open School with educational materials, explaining the process and importance of composting.

The resources available in Cambridge, such as a Save That Stuff hauler route already established for private businesses, made it possible for such a small generator of food waste to create a program, McGovern said.

A group of seven students from the King Open School took the initiative two years ago in asking the school board to replace Styrofoam lunch trays with biodegradable trays, said Eliza Klein, now a sixth-grader at the school.

The students, called Sprouts of Hope, collected 200 signatures petitioning the school to change the trays and spoke in front of the school board twice, pressuring them to take action, Klein said. A school committee researched biodegradable trays and finally decided to introduce composting instead, because environmentally friendly trays are too expensive.

"At first, the adults didn't really listen. They weren't that helpful, but when we kept trying, it worked," Klein said. "It feels really good."

If the program continues its success at King Open, composting may begin at the other schools in the Cambridge district, she said. After the program reaches all the schools, the school board will revisit the Styrofoam tray issue, which is still the Sprouts of Hope's ultimate focus.

"Be really into it, and don't give up because they'll think kids will do something not for any reason. They'll sort of pretend to listen," said Klein, giving advice to other students who may start a similar program. "Show adults you can actually make a difference."

Klein said she and her friends decided they wanted to take action at their school because they wanted to see change in their own community and make personal connections. Students outside the Sprouts of Hope, science teachers, custodians and the lunch staff have all put in effort to support the program, she said.

"Seeing other kids appreciate what you've done is really cool," said Klein. "It's the ripple effect."



Elijah McKinney, a first grader at King Open in East Cambridge, helps kindergartner Dutch Robinson compost leftovers and recycle after lunch break.

Wicked Local photo by Zara Tzanev