

Creating a plastic free school canteen

Bondi Public School are on a journey to rid their school canteen of plastics.



At Bondi Public Schools the canteen provides between 200 to 450 lunch orders a day. They focus on fresh nutritious food and support the ethos behind the school's Stephanie Alexandria food garden. Canteen Manager Kai Tando says when she started working at Bondi Public, she was shocked to the amount of waste generated each day. Kai tells us more about their journey to eliminate plastic waste from the canteen.

What motivated the school to eliminate plastic waste from the canteen?

When I started working at the canteen in 2021, I was shocked to see how much rubbish we create each day! I grew up in Japan where all public schools have an onsite commercial kitchen and a nutritionist to provide a monthly seasonal menu to the students. The students would take turns to collect the lunch for the class from the kitchen and then serve a hot meal on reusable plates and bowls in their classroom. So, there is no disposable packaging, disposable containers or cutlery. Since day one at Bondi Public, I set a goal to reduce single use plastics and packaging from the canteen as much as possible.

What were the first steps you took to reduce plastic?

First, we switched all our plastic and bio plastic (PLA) cups over to home compostable and non-tree paper cups and lids, supplied by I Am Not Paper. A small number of these cups get composted at school by the Planeteers, student green team, who cut them into smaller pieces before composting. To dispose of the remainder, we use the Simply Cups program, supported by 7/11. We have a collection point at school that can accept all non-reusable cups and a teacher drops them to the Kensington collection point once a month. We use compostable cups for drinks, homemade ice blocks, fruits salad, yogurt.

We also swapped the disposable plates for compostable sugarcane containers. These are used for the popular snack box of boiled egg, corn chips, veggie sticks, fruit and cheese. These go into our compost bins or into the general waste bin.

Next, we stopped providing any type of disposable cutlery and straws and instead asked students and staff to bring in their own cutlery. For students who forget, we have set up a cutlery library, where they can come and sign out cutlery and return it to the canteen. All the cutlery is donated by families and Bondi locals. The students are generally good at bringing the borrowed cutlery back and we love seeing how proud they are to remember to bring in their own or return used cutlery to the canteen.

We have also reduced the different types of containers we need in the canteen. It has been simplified so we now only need cups, bowls, snack boxes and paper bags. By eliminating disposable cutlery and simplifying the packaging, we are not only reducing the plastic waste we also save money.

What other initiatives help you reduce plastic waste?

We contacted all suppliers and asked for minimal packaging. We chose a small family run fruits and vegetable supplier, so we can communicate our philosophy easily. The fruit and veg come unwrapped whenever possible.

We swap baking paper for silicon baking mats whenever we can and use silicon food covers or lids instead of cling films.

The school is part of the Wonder Bread Recycling earn and Play Program. Wonder Bread collect our used bread bags and send them to their partner APR Composites, located in South Australia, who recycle the soft plastic and saw dust from a timber mill, to make into a 'wood plastic composite' which acts as alternative to timber. Products include boardwalks, sidewalks and signage.

What are your next steps to eliminate plastic waste?

We will soon be getting a commercial dishwasher and eventually want to purchase reusable plates, bowls and cups, (dishwashers need to heat water to 70 degrees and have dry function for this).

A challenge will be finding the right reusable cups - inexpensive, non-plastic, a lid for easy transport, streamline and stackable to minimise storage space and easy for the kids small hands.

We are on the hunt for plastic free sushi packaging. We have around 300 sushi orders each week which come on a plastic tray and individually wrapped. I have spoken to our suppliers, but currently the alternatives are too expensive.

Printed sticky labels from the online ordering system are plastic backed so looking for an alternative option for this is also in our sites.

What advice would you give to other school canteens who want to reduce plastic?

You can do the same! None of the changes we made are radical and save they money too! Start by switching, or removing, just one item, then build from that. High impact options to start with are:

- Switch from individual sauces to a sauce station in large bottles on the counter
- Stop selling bottled water – have reusable bottles people can borrow if they forget their water bottle.
- Asking the supplier to provide the sushi unwrapped / plastic free, place in a paper bag if necessary.

Even the small changes can have a large impact, such as using seasonal flowers and herbs from the school garden instead of balloons and plastic decoration for birthday treats.

Developing a good partnership with the school is crucial to making any changes, as without their support, it will be very hard to implement your ideas. As we are part of the education system it's important that as well as providing nutritious food, we help set up healthy and sustainable habits. A school canteen is ideally placed to influence these habits across the community.