

SUSTAINABILITY IN ACTION: FOOD WASTE LESSONS FROM THE CAFETERIA

BY DYLAN LYNCH

Taken from a *School Food for Thought* podcast conversation and featuring insights from Diane Grodek (Executive Chef, Austin Independent School District, Texas) and Katie Cossette (Director of Nutrition, St. Vrain Valley School District, Colo.), these school nutrition professionals share candid advice, real-world strategies and lessons learned on balancing sustainability goals with the realities of foodservice in schools.




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chool cafeterias are on the front lines of having to both nourish students and steward certain resources. In a *School Food for Thought* podcast conversation with two industry professionals—Executive Chef Diane Grodek of Austin Independent School District and Katie Cossette, director of nutrition for St. Vrain Valley School District—we’re highlighting practical, replicable strategies for reducing food waste, engaging students and building a sustainability mindset across kitchens. Their programs range from harnessing “no-cost” changes like self-serve condiments and salad bars to more ambitious student-run agriculture activities like gardening and hydroponics. Throughout the episode, they emphasized that culture change begins with simple habits and giving students a voice.

WHERE TO START?

For Grodek, a clear starting point was eliminating the cascade of single-use packaging that lingered after pandemic operations in 2023. “The focus of this past year has been to cut down on single-use containers. We’ve been putting the food directly on the tray, instead of on a container that goes on the tray,” she exclaimed. “We’ve saved a lot of money, a lot of labor hours and then ultimately, we’ve saved a ton of trash,” she continued. The shift required some set-up—moving to squeeze bottles and labeling for health inspections. But according to Grodek, the payoff was immediate. “Even in buying those single-use containers, we still came out on top,” she added. Cossette’s

lens widens sustainability beyond the cafeteria line to the land itself. “We started working with our Future Farmer of America students,” she explained, tying program goals to community context in a district that spans rural and suburban areas. The result was a closed loop of learning and menu impact: “We actually have a duck, hog and lamb that is raised by our students every year. Then our culinary students work with master butchers to process it further, and that stuff is used on our menus.” In one year alone, the district featured about 400 pounds of German and Italian sausage that students raised and processed. That’s a lot of meat!

Produce gets the same treatment. Cossette described the use of a tech-



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forward farm box, which she said is like a “giant shipping container that can grow about 12,000 pounds of lettuce a year hydroponically.” As a bonus, it is operated and learned by students and energized through solar power. The benefits layer up—STEM learning, fresher food and instilling an appreciation for what it takes to bring ingredients to the plate. As she put it, understanding origin builds a level of respect. “If they understand where their food comes from, they might be more respectful when it comes to waste,” Cossette explained. That respect spreads through peer teaching, too. High school students often pass along what they’ve learned to younger peers, mentoring and teaching elementary students within the district.

BUILDING EARLY HABITS

Grodek’s team starts small and starts early, literally in pre-K. “We compost and recycle in front of house and back of house. So, it starts in pre-K, just getting kids used to the process and showing them we’re separating waste out,” she said. They also have share tables that serve as a daily lesson in resourcefulness. If a student has an apple they don’t want, they can place it on the share table. If they take a milk but change their mind, there’s a small tray with ice to keep it chilled. These simple systems help teach children from an early age about food waste and the importance of separating trash.

Clarity matters in busy cafeterias and Grodek’s solution is visual. “We came up with some really good signage that inclu-

des pictures of all of our actual items on there, so there’s not very much confusion. We teach them in the beginning of the year,” she added. The result? Students can follow a waste reduction system completely on their own.

SELF-SERVE WITH A PURPOSE

Both leaders have found that self-serve stations, done thoughtfully, reduce waste by aligning portions with appetite and preference. Grodek offers a concrete example, saying, “We used to do hamburger toppings like lettuce, tomato and pickles stacked together and you would take the whole thing. We then separated them out into self-serve options. If you just want pickles, that’s saving us lettuce and tomato. It’s less food waste and it’s a win-win.” Condiments are approached with a strategy that is realistic and that has made a difference.

Cossette’s salad bars reflect the same principle. “If a student can at least pick something off of the salad bar or pick their fruit or vegetable, they’re more likely to eat it.” Moving away from pre-plating/half-cup servings decreased waste and increased satisfaction: “By doing that, we’ve seen a lot less waste, and kids are more excited because they get to make a choice.” She tackles another subtle driver of waste, which is the fear of not getting enough. “What we’ve done if you’re still hungry, you can come back to the salad bar even if you don’t have funds on your account.” Allowing seconds on produce uncouples fullness from hoarding too much on a plate: “They know they don’t have to try and get four halves of kiwis. Kids who maybe did want another half or two can come back and get the extra pieces of fruit.” Grodek sees the same behavioral quirks, especially with younger students eager to fill their trays. “Kids got excited to see cherry tomatoes and they load up their tray, but they’re six and that’s a lot of food,” she said. Offering choice and gentle guardrails helps balance enthusiasm with a realistic intake.

TRAINING AND THE “WHY”

Culture change in school kitchens succeeds when staff understand the purpose. Cossette’s advice is to lead with listening. “Staff also must have buy-in. If you can get a few of them and have those conver-



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sations of what the value would be, your program is going to be more successful,” she exclaimed.

Grodek institutionalizes sustainability alongside food safety: “Last year, I wrote a sustainability training that’s done the same time HACCP training is done. Right before we go for Thanksgiving break, it’s about making sure that the lights are off, your seals are good.” She also brings the reality home with field trips: “We took everyone to our waste disposal vendor... we walked into the building that has manual labor separating all the cans, all the plastic and we saw the heap of compost that comes directly from our schools. It was really hands on and seeing the work in progress was really important.” The goal, she noted, is not just compliance but cultivating a culture of responsibility—helping understand why sustainability matters and how their daily actions make a difference.

Cossette’s district taps external expertise and student leadership. “We have green star schools. We work with the environmental municipality, who comes in and does all the training with the students. They get the trash cans out and see all the different sorting and certify them,” she explained. Cossette sees this as a generational shift, saying, “This next generation knows the why, they just need the pathway in order to be successful with it.”

START SMALL, PARTNER WIDELY

Both leaders urge newcomers to take the first, simplest step—then build. Grodek’s on-ramp is the self-serve model for condiments and sides: “It costs you nothing. You’re actually going to save money. You’re going to save labor. Let them know that it’s going to be a savings financially on all those containers.” Cossette stresses scope discipline and coalition building, saying, “Start small and something that is manageable, and then build upon that. Also look at your partners within your district. We worked with different education programs, so that nutrition services didn’t feel like we’re the ones having to run everything. And then also look outside of the district. What other sort of community partners can you join forces with that will help you drive your mission home?”

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LISTENING TO STUDENTS

Grodek gets unvarnished feedback at her own dinner table: “My kids who buy the lunch every day are quick to tell me what goes in the trash. They see that waste and they definitely report back to me what’s working and not working.” That feedback at school loop is crucial when regulations require certain components. “There’s a lot of food waste. No matter what you do, we have to serve that half cup, but the transition to self-service helped us,” she said. Cossette has found that choice and autonomy can flip resistance into curiosity. She sees the salad bar as an engagement engine that reduces refusals and waste. “At least for the fresh fruits and vegetables components, we’ve seen a lot less waste, and kids are more excited because they get to make a choice,” she explained.

PERSONAL MOTIVATION AND COMMUNITY CONTEXT

Grodek’s sustainability mindset is lifelong, and Austin’s culture amplifies it: “I’ve been a recycle and a re-user my whole life,” she exclaimed. Arriving in Texas, she was startled by the absence of recycling in some places and saw immediate opportunities in schools. Community alignment accelerates impact: “We’re super lucky because Austin is really progressive in these areas anyway... that was the City of Austin sustainability grant that we applied for. So, we’re fortunate.” Cossette’s “why” links food systems, health and the planet: “I wanted to impact our food systems and change the way we eat. My footprint is massive in school nutrition and change takes time. But if you’re persistent and you stick with it, we’ll see it happen.”

ADVICE FOR NEWCOMERS

Acknowledging the job can be hard, neither leader necessarily romanticizes the work. Their guidance, though, is energizing because it is so actionable. “Listen to people who have done it before. You don’t have to reinvent a wheel and even though we’re all

following the same National School Lunch Program rules, everyone is taking those same rules and doing completely different things in their district,” Grodek explained. “You can do a lot within your own district based on your own goals.” Along those same lines, Cossette returns to patience and purpose: “Change takes time. It took 10 years for kids to start accepting whole grains, but we’re persistent, and you just keep educating and keep evolving,” she said.

A PRACTICAL PLAYBOOK

Across their districts, Grodek and Cossette show that sustainable school nutrition is built on a mosaic of certain practices:

- > Eliminate single-use packaging where possible and shift to self-serve condiments and toppings. It can save money, labor and trash.
- > Use visual signage and annual re-teaching so things like share tables and sorting systems are second nature to even the youngest students.
- > Give students choice—salad bars, separated toppings and customizable components—to align selection with preference and reduce plate waste.
- > Allow produce seconds to counteract scarcity behaviors without increasing waste, as a salad bar model demonstrates.
- > Invest in staff buy-in with clear “why,” peer champions and sustainability training integrated with standard kitchen procedures.
- > Partner across campus and community. From agriculture classes and culinary programs to municipal environmental teams, it’s a way to share ownership and boost learning.
- > Center student production where feasible: FFA livestock, school gardens and hydroponic containers are opportunities for kids to experience the full food cycle and carry that respect to the tray.

None of these bullets require waiting for perfect conditions. As Grodek said, the first step can “cost you nothing,” and as Cossette added, “you don’t have to come out the gate with your pants on fire.” The main message is that you can start small, build momentum and let students help lead.

TEACHING LESS WASTE AND ADDING MORE VALUE

Food waste is seen as a problem, but it’s also a learning opportunity. When students can separate compost, return unopened milk to a chilled share bin or harvest lettuce they raised themselves, they’re practicing doing good for their community. When staff move from filling cups of ketchup to refining scratch recipes, they’re reclaiming culinary practices. And when cafeterias shift from pre-portioned mandates to student-chosen servings, they’re signaling trust and seeing more of what’s actually eaten among their students. As Cossette reminds us, “Change will happen if you’re persistent and you stick with it.” And Grodek makes is clear that in this field, you’re never alone: “There’s a lot that’s already been solved and you have a lot of power. Each

director can really do a lot within their district.”

Together, their experiences sketch a clearer path: embed sustainability into daily routines, invite students to grow and choose their food, align labor with cooking instead of packaging and keep the learning loop open. The result is a cafeteria that wastes less and models the kind of system-thinking today’s students will carry into the rest of their lives. This article draws from Episode 5, Season 2 of SNA’s podcast *School Food for Thought*. Be on the lookout—Season 4 is launching this fall! Visit schoolnutrition.org/podcast.



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