

Edible Food Finds: School Food Recovery

By Steve Holt, Winter 2020 issue of *Edible Boston*

According to U.S. Department of Agriculture requirements, every school lunch tray must contain a protein, a fruit or vegetable, a grain and milk. But when a student doesn't want the milk, cheese stick or apple that's put on their tray, what happens to that food? More likely than not, uneaten items—even the unopened ones—end up in the trash.

Schools have no choice. By law, most food served in the cafeteria must be consumed in the cafeteria, meaning that clementine or packet of crackers cannot go home in a student's backpack.

A North Shore nonprofit has created a system that collects such uneaten items from local schools and distributes them to people experiencing food insecurity, thereby fighting hunger while at the same time diverting waste from landfills that would otherwise emit climate-warming greenhouse gases. Each Thursday or Friday, volunteers from Nourishing the North Shore—based in Newburyport—collect crates of unopened milks, juices and packaged snacks, sealed yogurts and cheese sticks and even apples, oranges and other fresh produce from five area schools: Rupert A. Nock Middle School, Edward G. Molin Upper Elementary School, Francis T. Bresnahan Elementary School and Newburyport High School, all in Newburyport, and Newbury Elementary School in Newbury. Volunteers log the refrigerator temperature at each of the locations and the total weight of the food they're collecting and deliver the haul to the First Parish Church Newbury Community Food Pantry, where economically disadvantaged neighbors fill their bags with food to use throughout the week. Most Fridays, all the food is gone within two hours.

"They absolutely love it, especially people with children," says Emilee Herrick, program manager of School Food Recovery. "Having a smaller portion—the smaller milks, the snacks they can use over the weekend—it's very, very sought-after."

The program's benefits hardly stop at putting food in hungry bellies. It's also helping the environment. One-third of food produced for human consumption is never consumed, according to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, and that waste accounts for about 4.4 billion metric tons of greenhouse gas emissions per year—slightly less than road transportation emissions. For some perspective on that figure, the entire United States emitted 6.5 gigatons of greenhouse gases in 2017. While landfill emissions are

still relatively low compared to emissions from food discarded in fields and supermarkets, any effort to divert uneaten food from landfills reduces human impact on the climate crisis. Herrick says informative posters and enthusiastic staff help students understand why food waste is a problem and how setting aside unwanted items at lunch helps people and the planet. A few students are “almost too excited” about participating in the program, Herrick adds.

“We have some kids who want to give their whole sandwich because they’re excited to give to their neighbors who need a little extra help,” she says.

Funded through grants and individual and corporate donations—including Harvard Pilgrim Healthcare’s Healthy Food Fund—School Food Recovery has increased both the number of neighbors it serves and the amount of food it rescues every school year. What began in 2015 in a single school providing food for around 20 people weekly has grown to five schools in two towns serving more than 150 each week. Last school year, the program helped divert 4,330 pounds of school food from landfills. Herrick expects those numbers to grow.

Other districts are taking notice. School Food Recovery leaders consulted with Essex County nonprofit Our Neighbors’ Table as it formed a similar recovery program at Amesbury Elementary School, and Amesbury High School has reached out for information on how it can do the same. Officials hope this is only the start of a regional movement to feed people and reduce waste—one cheese stick or apple at a time.

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