

STUDENT-LED GARBAGE RESEARCH AT WATERLOO ELEMENTARY

BY: TAMMY TURNER, AREA 3

Thanks in part to five 4th graders and their Expanded Learning Program (ELP) teacher, the Waterloo Community School District has a better idea of what ends up in elementary school dumpsters each week!

In November of 2021 Tammy Turner, Resource Specialist with Iowa Waste Exchange (Area 3) was invited to Orange Elementary School in Waterloo to talk to 4th grade ELP students about composting and discuss the food waste that students were seeing in the cafeteria trash bins each day. When the idea of conducting a 3-day waste sort to get a baseline of cafeteria waste was mentioned, to say the students ran with the idea of garbage research was an understatement! ELP Teacher Stacey Snyder got the clearance from school administration and the students created a video about the waste sort that was shared to the elementary prior to the sort.

On December 1st, 2nd, and 3rd the ELP students & volunteers helped each lunch period of students go through a sort line. The ELP students helped Turner to weigh & record the categories of cafeteria waste each day, becoming experts with the shipping scale. With an average of 368 students eating lunch each day, the students & Turner concluded that once they averaged the 3 days of waste and then extrapolated it for the 180 days of instruction, Orange Elementary was creating these yearly amounts: 8,000 pounds of milk waste, 15,000 pounds of food scraped off student trays, 7,000 pounds of pre & post kitchen waste, 3,000 pounds of trash, and nearly 15,000 pounds of unopened food & unopened milk. Ms. Snyder shared “Students were astonished when they saw the total numbers! It has been great to watch their minds determine ways to make the numbers authentic for the younger students. It is also gratifying that there are some fifth grade students wanting to step forward and help with future projects.”



Orange Elementary 4th grade students helped weigh categories of waste at the end of each day's waste sort.



Tammy Turner, IWE Resource Specialist with the 4th grade ELP Waste Sort Team at Orange Elementary School.



Unopened food & unopened milks were weighed after each lunch period.



Elementary students walking down the waste sort line and sorting their lunch.

The ELP students shared the data with their school and are exploring ideas such as composting/vermicomposting, as well as establishing a sharing table. Fourth grade students have since started to collect the daily disposable Styrofoam trays for recycling in nearby Cedar Falls which has a Styrofoam densifier. We are excited to hear which projects these elementary students continue to pursue to help minimize the tonnage of waste at their school. Many thanks to school administration, teachers & paras, cafeteria & custodial staff, as well as all the students who participated in the waste sort!

For more information about the Iowa Waste Exchange, visit the program website [here](#).