

NVUSD Continues Making Sustainability Strides in Food Service

By Chris Benz

This year, in celebration of Earth Day (April 22nd), the Napa Valley Unified School District (NVUSD) is quadrupling the number of plastic-free lunch days throughout the district, from one day to every Wednesday in April, thanks to NVUSD Director of Child Nutrition, Dustin Walker.

“We serve 6,200 breakfasts a day and 7,600 lunches, so single-use packaging can really add up,” Walker said.

The decision to expand the plastic-free lunch schedule came in response to a written request from Napa Climate NOW!. The request pointed out that NVUSD is “a key player in educating students and families about the importance, and the how-tos, of reducing plastic. By showing how easy it is to avoid plastic in meals served at school or brought from home, Plastic Free Lunch Day is a statement of our district’s commitment to protecting the health of our students and our planet.”

In response to the request, Walker and NVUSD Nutritionist, Megan Hupp, looked at menu opportunities in April and realized they could tweak the Wednesday menus to achieve plastic-free service.

“We are thrilled to see NVUSD putting even more effort into reducing single-use plastic waste,” said Chris McClure, team leader for Napa Climate NOW!’s Waste Reduction in the Schools program. Her team works with Courtney Cayford, the Waste Prevention Specialist for the City of Napa, including visits to local elementary schools to give fun hands-on lessons in sorting waste for composting, recycling, and landfill.

A Plastic-Free Lunch Menu

Plastic-free menus eliminate the need for plastic utensils by serving foods that can be eaten by hand, such as hot dogs, burritos, hamburgers, and veggie burgers. Sides include potato wedges and a salad bar with carrot, celery, and jicama sticks, and apple and orange wedges. Cooked foods are served from large trays onto individual compostable meal trays, and compostable napkins are available.

In addition, parents receive a notice from the schools about plastic-free Wednesday lunches and are encouraged to make home-made plastic-free lunches. The notice states, “This initiative will help reduce over 20,000 pieces of single-use plastic items from going into the landfill!”

A Culture of Sustainability

NVUSD’s Central Kitchen’s efforts to reduce single-use packaging for school breakfasts and lunches extend well beyond Earth Day.

“We’ve eliminated individual packaging for lunch items and installed salad bars that allow bulk serving of fruits and vegetables,” explained Walker. “Condiments, such as mustard, catsup, and salad dressing, are served in bulk containers, and we’re working on installing bulk milk dispensers at schools to eliminate the waste from individual milk cartons.”

Another way that school lunches can be prepared more sustainably is with the use of “scratch” cooking, which uses whole ingredients as the base rather than premade.

Before coming to NVUSD, Walker worked with the District in his job at the Chef Ann Foundation. The Foundation is dedicated to promoting whole-ingredient, scratch cooking in schools because “scratch cooking enables schools to serve the healthiest, tastiest meals so that kids are well-nourished and ready to learn.”

Walker is expanding the number of menu items prepared by scratch as well as sourcing local, sustainably produced ingredients to use in the preparation.

“We’re working on scratch muffin recipes for school breakfasts,” he said. “Currently, breakfast items are individually wrapped, but we can replace those with scratch muffins served from a tray with tongs. And we can use flour from Central Milling in Petaluma and fruit from local growers.”

“At NVUSD, we are doing more than the processed school food people are used to seeing.

We want the food to be fun, exciting, and full of flavor. Students aren’t afraid to try new flavors and new dishes,” he said.

In March, in recognition of the Central Kitchen’s waste reduction efforts, Walker and his department received the 2025 JD Fullner Recycling Leadership award from the City of Napa and Napa Recycling.

Congratulations to NVUSD’s Central Kitchen!

Related Upcoming Events

- April 18, 11 am-4 pm, Napa’s Earth Day Festival at Oxbow Commons. Visit the Napa Climate NOW! booth.

Chris Benz is a retired winemaker and co-founder of Napa Climate NOW!

Napa Climate NOW! is a local nonprofit citizens’ group advocating for smart climate solutions based on the latest climate science, part of 350 Bay Area.

Info, napa.350bayareorg

Photo credit: Chris Benz

Photo caption: Courtney Cayford with the NVUSD winners Dustin Walker, Juan Ponce, Gloria Aguiar, and Kate Linneman.

