

Litterless Lunches

Fourth in a series of articles about waste reduction in the Vanderhoof area, by Kathy Russell & Alan Dudley.

The Nechako Waste Reduction Initiative (NWRI), along with the Nechako Valley Food Network (NVFN), is part of the Nechako Healthy Community Alliance. Funding is provided by the Regional District of Bulkley-Nechako (RDBN), which is responsible for handling waste in our area.

Last week was National Waste Reduction Week in Canada. As mentioned, all of us need to look for alternatives that will promote waste reduction and help to protect our environment. This includes parents and children and begins right at home when making and packaging our children's lunches. According to wastefreelunches.org, the average American school-age child who brings daily a disposable lunch will generate over 30 kg of waste annually! If most children in a given school are bringing a disposable lunch, that's a huge amount of unnecessary waste.

And, there is a cost to the convenience of disposable lunches – an average cost of \$4.02/day for disposable lunches compared to \$2.65/day on average for a litterless lunch – resulting in a difference of \$1.37 per school day or \$246 per year.

In a recent Globe & Mail article, Jean Folger of Investopedia.com, provided a compelling financial reasoning for buying food and beverages in bulk and sending them in reusable containers. She calculates that making small changes such as buying and preparing: cheese & crackers, yogurt, sandwiches, fruit, and juices from bulk can result in savings of up to \$1,000 annually! And, she says, that money could instead be invested in a child's RESP with its corresponding multiplier effect through the 20% government grant and accruing interest.

Encouraging parents to prepare and send litterless lunches often starts with school programs. The litterless lunches at Vanderhoof-area schools are short campaigns when the school or a particular classroom challenges the students to bring a litterless lunch. It is usually done in conjunction with something like Pitch-In Week, or especially Earth Day. At the elementary schools, classrooms have challenges to see who produces the least amount of garbage—they decide by weighing their garbage at the end of lunchtime, and they often have vermicomposting in their classrooms.

At NVSS, periodically, a litterless lunch campaign is announced. Students and their staff mentors check in the

small auditorium or hallways for students using recyclable containers and give those students tickets to enter a draw. The most recent campaign was in conjunction with Waste Reduction Week. Prizes this year included two \$5 certificates for The Bean, and a movie pass at the Grand Reo Theatre. The campaign is to promote awareness about a simple way to reduce waste, and just to give students something to consider about the environment.

School litterless lunch campaigns can also be district-wide. For example, in Whitehorse, YT, there is a city-wide contest taking place from October 15th to November 2nd. Any school class is eligible to participate to bring the least amount of litter. Categories include: garbage-free lunch for 15 points (nothing leftover except compost and empty reusable containers), recyclable lunch for 10 points (only sorted recyclables left), and landfill lunch for 0 points (leftovers include plastics, single-use wrappers, wax paper that are garbage). The class with the most points, pro-rated per class size, is declared the winner. Last year, experiential prizes were awarded: a day canoe trip, a visit to a chocolate factory, a visit to a bakery to understand how bread is made, and a tour of the local airport's fire-fighting facilities.

Even businesses have been started to promote and sell litterless lunch products. For instance, a green-minded mother of two in Oakville, ON started www.litterlesslunch.ca. She provides a range of “gunk free, litter free” products related to children's lunches. Closer to home, www.lavishandlime.com, offering a boutique of green-focused products, including their “waste-free lunch essentials,” was started by eco-minded parents of two in West Vancouver. Tupperware representatives are selling popular litterless lunch kits. And, look for innovative, locally-made, litterless lunch kits at this season's Christmas craft fairs.

To learn more about the growing social phenomenon of litterless or waste free lunches, particularly as it relates to our children's lunches, go to www.wastefreelunches.org. The site offers everything from lunch kits, guidance, flyers & pamphlets, links to related sites, and success stories.