

River Trails Middle School

2023 Project Report

The Project:

River Trails Middle School desired to green up their cafeteria space by reducing waste through purchasing choices, composting, recycling, and share programs for food recovery. A large, high impact wall houses a DIRT Breathe living wall. To draw attention to the other green efforts in this space, River Trails hopes that the living wall's plants will highlight and visually mark the cafeteria as actively working towards a path to zero waste. The wall is relatively low maintenance, but has proven to require some grow lights, especially in the winter months. Students planned, researched, and coordinated the installation of grow lights in this space to maintain the plants.

Project Focus: Indoor Environmental Quality, Waste Reduction

Staff Involved: 15

Location: Mount Prospect, IL

Students: 70



By reducing waste, we created a space that contributes less to landfill waste. The biggest impact, however, was the visual of the plants on the living wall.



The Process:

To begin greening up the cafeteria space, the Director of Food Services identified all-in-one cutlery kits and styrofoam trays as the top purchases of the department. By working with sales reps, she was able to source single-dispense cutlery, napkins and eliminated straws as well as setting up tray composting at all four schools instead of just the middle school. Individual condiments were switched to bulk dispensers. The next step was to contact the DIRT company that produced the living wall for consultation. Then plants were sourced and installed. The Director of Food Services tried to establish a green team, but pivoted to working with the existing STEAM classes, 8th graders, to explore recycling in the cafeteria. They did research and learned about recycling in the 2nd trimester. The 3rd trimester classes worked to implement recycling in the cafeteria. Menu changes happened three times throughout the school year. This was the opportunity to work toward Meatless Mondays.

The Outcomes:

Although the single-dispensing cutlery is more expensive, it reduced waste of unnecessary items, completely removing styrofoam trays. Condiments not only eliminated packaging, it made it easier for our students and lunch monitors to use. The living wall created a nice esthetic to the cafeteria. The grow lights allowed for better maintenance of the plants and less need for replacing dead plants. With the improvement in growth, future possibilities to plant edible plants to utilize in the cafeteria increased. The recycling program in the cafeteria increased 8th grade students' knowledge and awareness of recycling. And reduced the landfill waste.

