

Kealakekua school works toward a zero waste cafeteria | West Hawaii Today, Kailua-Kona, Hawaii

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Eighth-grader Kamaka Ching dumps paper waste into a giant worm bin. The paper products will be turned into compost for use by Ke Kula o Ehunuikaimalino. (Brad Ballesteros/Special to West Hawaii Today)

After Ke Kula o Ehunuikaimalino students have eaten lunch, Puanani Lawrence guides students in sorting their waste for recycling. (Brad Ballesteros/Special to West Hawaii Today)

Almost everything used in Ke Kula o Ehunuikaimalino's cafeteria is washable, reusable, recyclable or compostable, said Clare Loprinzi, the school's garden coordinator.

Daily, more than 170 students in kindergarten through 12th grade toss their leftover food, paper trays, utensils and milk cartons in separate bins. Scraps are given to pig farmers. Trays, as well as other paper goods and organic waste, are taken to a giant worm bin in the school's garden, where the garbage is transformed into compost — a dark, crumbly humus used for the school's landscaping. Plastic utensils are washed and reused. Milk cartons become seed containers or art projects, Loprinzi said.

For awhile, the school has been working creatively to achieve a zero waste cafeteria. It wants to have metal utensils instead of plastic ware by next year, Loprinzi said. She is also planning to spearhead an effort to switch to recyclable brown paper trays or reusable ones, something that needs approval from the state Department of Education.

"We keep upping the bar. We're always rethinking, reducing and reusing," Loprinzi said.

Ke Kula o Ehunuikaimalino was one of the Big Island schools that participated Thursday in the Zero Waste Cafeteria Day, a Recycle Hawaii project that highlighted the amount of materials that can be saved from going into the landfill by practicing simple and responsible environmental practices.

This ongoing practice at Ke Kula o Ehunuikaimalino is more than a defining characteristic or an opportunity to be a part of a movement, said Principal Ann Paulino. "It's part of the core of our school, the essence of who we are and the driving force behind what we do," she added.

The Kealakekua school strives to create highly skilled learners who are college and career ready, proficient in the Hawaiian and English languages, as well as grounded in cultural perpetuation and environmental sustainability. Zero waste is not a new concept, but an ancient one that Native Hawaiians embraced and lived, Paulino said.

Ke Kula o Ehunikaimalino strives to improve school food, teach nutrition, support sustainable food systems, reduce waste and create a program that focuses on understanding of relationships between food, culture, health and the environment. Besides rethinking the disposal methods inside its cafeteria, a key component is its garden, which is part of physical education curriculum and all students are actively involved in, Paulino said.

The garden offers endless ways that nurture the student's mind, body and their spiritual state of being. Students learn skills, service, sustainability, personal responsibility, and how good, mindful choices can lead to better consequences that benefit not just each other, but all living things, Paulino said.

The school has about an acre of planted areas scattered throughout its campus. It is part of

the Kona Field System in the gardens of Lono, the god of agriculture. The school grew more than 3,000 pounds of food last year. Foods were used for the school's annual Makahiki and Earth Day celebrations, Loprinzi said.

Eighth-grader Haena Keawekane, 13, is proud of the sustainability efforts at Ke Kula o Ehunikaimalino. Keawekane cares about doing right not only at her school, home and in the community, but also by the planet. She said learning and passing on the knowledge of how to live in a sustainable future is important.

First-grader Loheau Boshard, 6, takes tremendous pride in helping the environment when separating his scraps and other lunch items. He said the hardest part is sometimes remembering to do the recycling program and telling others to do the same, but he's not going to give up.

Why? "It helps make the pigs happy, and it helps the Earth," Boshard said. "If the Earth is junk, we will not have much and there will be nothing to save."

Asked what's the best way to get others to cut down on waste, he said, "By example."