

CASE STUDY:

Arlington Public Schools



PROFILE

Name:

Arlington Public Schools:
Gibbs, Dallin, Peirce,
Stratton

Location:

Arlington, MA

On-site Dining:

Yes

Take-out:

No

Warewashing:

Commercial Dishwashers

Employees:

3-4 kitchen
staff per cafeteria, 1-2
waste monitors daily
(staff/students)

The Arlington Public Schools, located in Arlington, Massachusetts, enrolls 6,019 K-12 students. In 2022, a high-school student group, Slash the Trash, began advocating for reusable foodware in the high school. Due to logistical limitations in the high school, the food services identified Arlington's smaller sixth-grade school as a feasible location for a pilot. In the fall of 2022, the sixth-grade Gibbs School became the first school in the district to transition from single-use plastic to reusable stainless-steel cutlery. Dallin Elementary School followed in 2024 due to the successful advocacy of 4th-grade Climate Club students. In the spring of 2026, with support from the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection's Reduce, Reuse, Repair Micro-Grant, Gibbs School became the first in the district to transition from compostable to stainless-steel Ahimsa trays. Peirce and Stratton Elementary Schools used the grant funds to transition to reusable cutlery. To further reduce single-use cafeteria items, these schools are in the process of switching from single-use condiment packets to bulk condiment dispensers. Each of the 4 schools enrolls between 325 and 500 students with dishwashing infrastructure already in place.

Changes to serviceware for less waste and more savings:

Single-use BPI-certified 5-compartment compostable tray	➔	Stainless-steel 5-compartment Ahimsa tray
Single-use plastic fork	➔	Stainless-steel fork
Single-use plastic spoon	➔	Stainless-steel spoon
Single-use plastic knife	➔	Stainless-steel knife
Single-use ketchup packets	➔	Bulk ketchup dispensers



BEFORE and AFTER

Four K-12 schools have transitioned from condiment packets to bulk dispensers, and from plastic to stainless-steel cutlery. One school has also incorporated stainless-steel trays, replacing their compostable ones.

*These figures are based on meals served for both breakfast and lunch, assuming that one utensil is used for breakfast and one tray and one utensil are used per school-provided lunch.

THE BOTTOM LINE

- \$12,929 total annual net cost savings
- 315,436 disposable items reduced per year
- 3.6 tons (over 7,000 lbs) of annual waste reduction
- \$2,500 savings at Gibbs Elementary in compost-hauling savings
- 7.4-month payback period on reusable foodware and bulk condiment purchases



RESULTS

			PACKAGING IMPACTS			COST IMPACTS	
School	Disposable Product Replaced or Minimized	Recommendation Implemented	Percent Disposable Reduction	Annual Quantity of Disposable Product Reduced	Annual Waste Reduction (lbs.)	Payback Period (months) <i>School Year is 9 months</i>	Annual NET* Cost Savings After Payback Period (\$)
Gibbs	World Centric 5-Compartment Tray	Ahimsa Stainless-Steel 5-Compartment Tray	100%	50,142	3,008	7.7	\$3,510
Gibbs, Dallin, Peirce, Stratton	Plastic Fork, Spoon, & Knife	Stainless-Steel Fork, Spoon, & Knife	100%	215,294	1,184	12.5	\$2,153
Gibbs, Dallin, Peirce, Stratton	Single-Use Ketchup Dip Cup	Bulk Ketchup Dispenser	100%	50,000	2,970	1.9	\$7,266
			TOTALS:	315,436 pieces	7,162 lbs.	7.4 months	\$12,929

*Net Cost Impact considers any upfront and ongoing costs associated with the purchase and care of reusable items and capital improvements needed to carry out ReThink Disposable's recommendations. Net cost savings are based on avoided disposable foodware purchases.

“Our district’s transition to reusables is a result of students consistently advocating for waste reduction, a strong partnership between our sustainability and food services staff, and invaluable town and state support. This is the next exciting step in the Arlington Public Schools’ commitment to reducing our environmental impact.”

Rachel Oliveri, Sustainability Project Manager,
Arlington Public Schools

“I was initially anxious to implement the change, but once again, the students have shown me that change is often harder for adults than the students! The transition has been very smooth, and we have received a great deal of positive feedback.”

Denise Boucher, Food Service Director,
Arlington Public Schools

“This started when our students wanted to do something locally to help the environment. Ms. Oliveri helped us set up the compost recycling stations, trained our students, and over time, grew into getting rid of plastic utensils and switching to reusable metal ones. The kids feel proud knowing they’re making a difference and it often leads to conversations about what else we can improve in the cafeteria. Once the systems were in place, it was easy to keep going.”

Samantha Karustis, Assistant Principal,
Dallin Elementary School

“I thought it was a great idea because everyday we would waste hundreds of plastic utensils but now we reuse the metal utensils instead of throwing them out making the world healthier.”

Charlie, 5th Grade Student

“Every day at Dallin metal utensils save 300+ plastic ones from being wasted.”

Pip, 5th Grade Student

ReThink Disposable is a program of Clean Water Action and Clean Water Fund conducted in partnership with local organizations, businesses, and government agencies. Generous support is provided by a changing list of public and private funders. To learn more about the program, its partners, and funders, visit: www.rethinkdisposable.org



Arlington Public Schools
Education That Empowers

