

**MARBLEHEAD REPORTER**

## **Marblehead schools make history by abandoning styrofoam**

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The beginning of a new school year is always an exciting time, and this year was no exception. Students, parents, teachers and administrators celebrated the return of in-classroom learning. As a community, we proudly applauded the opening of the new Lucretia and Joseph Brown Elementary School. Adding to these milestones was another significant development in our schools—one that impacts our entire community. As of the beginning of the current school year, the Marblehead Public Schools' lunch program is no longer using polystyrene trays and other products to feed our children!

Sustainable Marblehead celebrates this news because of the detrimental environmental impacts of polystyrene, known by its brand name, Styrofoam. Styrofoam is made from petrochemicals and is commonly used in food packaging and serving. It does not biodegrade, so once it is buried in a landfill it will remain there for centuries. When Styrofoam litter blows into the ocean, it breaks down into microplastics, which are impossible to remove. Microplastics are then consumed by marine life, making their way into our food supply.

At Town Meeting in 2014, the citizens of Marblehead voted to ban the use of Styrofoam food and beverage containers at local businesses. The warrant article stated that the elimination of expanded polystyrene food and beverage containers “is in the best interest of the health and welfare of the inhabitants of the Town of Marblehead.” At the time, an exemption was given to our schools to give them time to budget for the additional costs of transitioning to more environmentally friendly products. This summer, Marblehead's Board of Health reached out to Marblehead Superintendent Dr. John Buckey and the School Committee to ask them to discontinue the use of Styrofoam trays. They agreed to this request, making a formal amendment to the by-law unnecessary.

Styrofoam trays, bowls, plates, platters, coffee cups and food containers previously used in school cafeterias have been replaced with products that are biodegradable or recyclable. As a

result of this transition, the high school's cafeteria has reduced its daily trash from 12 bags to one with two daily bags of compostable materials.

The Brown School opened with reusable trays and silverware, as it was designed to include dishwashers for this purpose. The Village School will transition to using reusable trays when they are able to add the necessary additional staff. However, the Glover, Veterans and High Schools are not able to wash reusable trays because they were not designed to include the necessary dishwashers. To add them now would require substantial investments. As a result, these schools will continue to use biodegradable or recyclable products.

While long overdue, this transition has resulted in some increased costs for the schools. According to School Department Food Service Director Richard Kelleher, "The replacement, with environmentally friendly alternatives, of items used in the service of school meals is certainly in line with the community goals of sustainability. The costs are substantial. With all meals being free, we cannot adjust our pricing per meal to reflect these increased costs. The costs, and any deficit that results from their use, will need to be made up from the general fund. While it should not be seen as a deterrent, that must be considered going forward." (Kelleher's mention of free meals refers to passage of the federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act, also known as the CARES Act, which is funding all school meals through the end of this school year.)

The elimination of polystyrene waste has an enormous environmental impact on our community and an educational impact on our students. The best way to teach our children about the importance of reducing landfill waste and phasing out the use of products that cannot easily be recycled is to model the behaviors we hope will become automatic to them. We would like to express our deep appreciation to Marblehead Public Health Director Andrew Petty, the Marblehead Board of Health and School Superintendent Dr. John Buckey for their leadership on this important issue.

*Lynn Bryant is a Sustainable Marblehead Board Member*