

[A student leads the way...](#)

By Deb Mercier
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Sometimes, a simple question can set the gears in motion to bring about an amazing outcome.

When her family's farm, Dorrich Dairy, won a national sustainability award last May for environmental stewardship, it got Minnewaska Area High School sophomore Anna Vold thinking. She simply asked, "What if our school did something?"



Anna turned that "something" into organic recycling. And now, with a one-week test run just completed, MAHS became the first of approximately 20 schools in the Runestone Area Education District to take on an organics recycling program.

Organics recycling involves separating liquids, food, paper products and trash in the cafeteria. Instead of throwing away breakfast and lunch leftovers, food can be composted and transformed into rich soil. A typical organics recycling system involves three to four labeled bins in which students place the indicated items. The organic waste is collected and moved to a farm to be composted.

In Minnewaska's case, the drop-off site is Dorrich Dairy, where the material will be composted and spread on the farm's fields as fertilizer.

But the program involves much more than setting out a few different bins and making sure the right stuff goes in the right bin. Planning has been underway for months.

Last summer, Anna said her parents mentioned her idea to Nathan Reinbold, Pope/Douglas Solid Waste Management environmental coordinator, and from there, Nathan contacted her to get the ball rolling. "Since fall we've been in the planning stages," said Anna. Together, they've been crunching the numbers, rallying support and getting ready for the big rollout.

Weighing the dollars

"One of the challenges was to make it [organics recycling] work on a smaller scale," said Anna, figuring out how much waste would have to be collected to make the trip financially worthwhile.

At MAHS, about 425 lunches are served each day. On average, a student will throw away .12 pounds of food each day—that would equal about 50 pounds of food waste per day. The test run's real numbers showed a much different average—more than double that number. For example, on Tuesday, March 29, junior high students tossed out 66.1 pounds of food, followed by senior high students with 41.4 pounds of food. Adding in an average of 10 pounds thrown out at breakfast, Tuesday's total organic waste weighed in at 117.5 pounds. Wednesday's and Thursday's numbers shook out much the same way at 122.7 pounds and 112.1 pounds, respectively.

Recycling organics makes financial sense, said Nathan. "You pay a lot more money to get rid of garbage than recycling," he said. Elaborating with some numbers, Nathan said the state rate for getting rid of waste is \$77 per ton; with a 17 percent tax added, about \$92 per ton. Recycling organics is about \$40 per ton and is tax exempt.

"With organics making up the heaviest part of waste in general, you have a significant opportunity for savings," said Nathan.

Rallying the troops

With the numbers side of the equation in line, Anna and Nathan worked on the people portion of the program. Nathan said they met with MAHS Principal Pat Falk several times before the trial run, as well as PDSW representatives and Jeff Bertram, the waste hauler. "We also have a lot of buy-in [from administration and faculty]," he said. He

mentioned teachers Mike Troen and Linda Hoffmann as being very receptive and helpful in getting the program started. “Mr. Falk has been great getting the word out to students,” said Nathan.

Anna rallied MAHS Student Council members and a group of friends to help the program have as smooth a start as possible. They’ve been getting the word out and volunteering in shifts over lunch times to answer questions and make sure students and staff are using the right containers.

Student Council members and friends helping with the project include Hannah Hoffmann, Greta Reichmann, Jared Strickler, Bailey Schoen, Annika Stensrud, Ashley McParland, Ali Femrite, Drew Nelson, Ethan Feigum, Mason Stewart, Tori Anderson, Paige Ingersoll, Aiden Riley, Dennis Vandyke, Alex Larson, Julia Hoffmann, Rachel Erickson, Madelynn Reichmann, Grant Hitchcock, Courtney Erickson, Bailey Stewart, Calvin Hoffmann, Peyton Kolstoe, Sam Peters, Naomi Leedahl, Shayla Hollenbeck, Christina Talberg, Meghan Cerney and Cammy Mithun.

Anna said, “It’s always a rocky start when you introduce something new, but it’s gotten better throughout the week.” Watching on Friday as students quickly moved through the line and sorted their lunch tray leftovers, she smiled. “Today is good!”

The student body as a whole has helped in the first week’s success, too. “It’s a pretty easy thing to do,” said Anna. “I was surprised—99 percent of students have been cooperating and helpful with the project.”

Visiting Minnewaska for the first time this week, Nathan said Anna’s poise and leadership skills really stood out. “I’m very impressed with how seamless it’s gone.”

And the fact that most students were all-in with cooperation was impressive to Nathan, too. “It really says something about the kids in general.”

Looking to the future

Anna said they started the organics recycling program at the high school building because of the kids’ ages. “Kids in grades 5-12, they’re going to grasp the concept easier,” she said. “Hopefully we’ll expand in the future to the elementary.”

For Nathan’s part, he said he’s working on getting a grant through the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency to provide permanent sorting tables and bins as well as professional signage.

Anna’s family is continuing their mission of stewardship as well. Anna said the Volds are considering acquiring a DariTech in-vessel composter, the BeddingMaster, which would handle all the farm’s manure as well as food waste, allowing them to serve as a larger composting hub for the area.

It’s been nearly a year since Anna asked, “What if our school did something?” Thanks to that one question, MAHS can look forward to a more sustainable school, lower garbage costs, smaller dumpsters, more student awareness about to role of agriculture, education about food waste and the creation of nutrient-rich soil.

“We have the chance to breathe fresh air into school recycling programs—I’m very excited about that,” said Nathan.
Photos by Deb Mercier