



West Tisbury Implements Farm-to-School Program with Polar King Walk-In Unit

Located on Martha's Vineyard in Massachusetts, West Tisbury School is part of the Up-Island Regional School District and offers a K-8 curriculum to its diverse student body of approximately 365 children.



In the early 1990s, West Tisbury School underwent remodeling, but as a cost-saving measure, the school's kitchen was built without the capability to produce food. As a result, for decades, students had to rely on transported hot meals from the high school cafeteria. In an effort to increase efficiency, improve food quality and offer more nutritious options to students, the school set out to implement a farm-to-school program and provide home-cooked meals to its students.

Over the course of several years, the school administration collaborated with local businesses, tradespeople, and community resources to plan, remodel, and refurbish the non-functional kitchen into a fully equipped workspace. This extensive effort culminated in 2013, when West Tisbury School launched its independent lunch program, marking a significant milestone for the school. In addition to providing healthy, home-cooked meals to its students, the school also extended its services to the Chilmark School, which has approximately 60 students and is part of the same Up-Island Regional School District.

According to West Tisbury School's assistant principal, Mary Boyd, the school's farm-to-school program centers around incorporating locally sourced food into every meal. The school achieves this by partnering with local farms on the island, as well as in Cape Cod and the surrounding region, to source meat for its meals. Moreover, the school showcases locally grown vegetables year-round by using a process of gleaning and storing produce. In addition to sourcing local meat and produce, the school has also partnered with local fisheries to offer weekly Fish Fridays.



The seamless exterior of Polar King walk-ins keep a consistent internal temperature in any weather.

Because the elementary school's kitchen lacked the capacity to produce food, West Tisbury School required external storage space to launch its farm-to-school food program. To kickstart the program, the school invested in a traditional panel-box cold storage unit to stock its meats, fruits, and vegetables. However, as head custodian Jamie Labbe noted, the unit quickly encountered problems.

According to Labbe, the school initially purchased a galvanized metal box with individual panels that were screwed together using an Allen wrench. Unfortunately, the compressor was unable to accommodate extreme climates. "On warm days, the unit would overheat due to the build-up of heat, and during freezing weather, it would fail, causing hundreds, if not thousands, of dollars' worth of food to be lost due to spoilage." Labbe adds that the unit was generally unreliable and costly to maintain, prompting the school to look for alternative solutions.

Boyd said the problems from the unit also carried over when West Tisbury School tried contacting its vendor about troubleshooting.

"Soon after installation of the original panel unit, we started having issues with the walk-in and trying

to get it functional," the assistant principal says. "Instead of providing a resolution, the response was constant finger-pointing between the vendor and the installer."

With spoilage – and headaches – piling up before food could even make it to students' plates at lunchtime, the West Tisbury School contacted Polar King to discuss its cooler and freezer walk-in units.

The seamless exterior of Polar King walk-ins assured that units remain at a consistent temperature internally, regardless of external factors. This was vital for West Tisbury, which withstands hot summers and cold New England winters.

Issues with the traditional metal panel box were compounded due to the school's location on an island in the Atlantic Ocean. Saltwater is a serious challenge for operations, leading to rust, denting, and corroding – all problems avoided with a fiberglass walk-in unit.

With this in mind, West Tisbury School invested in a Polar King combo unit, which combines a separate cooler and freezer. Labbe says he could immediately tell this unit was a major upgrade from the school's original panel box unit.

“The Polar King combination cooler-freezer works fantastic,” Labbe says. “I can’t say enough about it. The unit is incredibly user-friendly, and it gives us so much more storage space than we had before.”

Polar King customized the combo unit internally to meet West Tisbury School’s exact specifications. Most importantly, once the new unit was installed, spoiled food became a thing of the past.

Ultimately, the Polar King walk-in unit allowed West Tisbury School to seamlessly implement its farm-to-school program. Now students enjoy hot meals served in the cafeteria with locally sourced food.

“We don’t give effusive praise easily, but we like to make sure we give it when it’s deserved,” Boyd says. “Polar King certainly deserves it. We’ve been very impressed.”

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~Jamie Labbe, Head Custodian



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For more information, visit polarking.com or contact Polar King at (866) 349-7190.

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