

Transforming Food Scraps Into Opportunity: Spotlight on New Haven Schools

The Goal

New Haven Public Schools want to transform how students understand and handle wasted food by creating sustainable, student-led composting and recycling programs.

The Solution

Since late 2024, CET has worked closely with New Haven Public Schools to build impactful food waste diversion initiatives. Through waste assessments, stakeholder engagement, and guidance in student-led education, CET supported schools in establishing customized composting programs that minimize wasted food and promote environmental responsibility in the younger generation.



The Results

Over 15.1 tons of wasted food were diverted in the first year. Typically, as programs become more established, more material is diverted or prevented from going to waste.

There is a food fight underway in New Haven Public Schools (NHPS), but it's not what you would think. NHPS is taking a new approach to how students view food scraps and is laying the groundwork to reduce wasted food for future generations.

New Haven Schools are partnering with CET, Blue Earth Compost, Havens Harvest, and New Haven IKEA to create waste diversion programs that develop students' environmental stewardship, implement recycling programs, and promote the circularity of wasted food.



MEASURABLE CHANGE, MEANINGFUL SUPPORT

CET worked closely with four New Haven schools to implement wasted food diversion pilots. The results of this partnership speak for themselves, with over 51,000 pounds of food scraps diverted from landfills since March. Additionally, some of the schools saw a reduction in the number of trash cans needed in the lunchroom. These four schools alone are expected to divert 15.1 tons of wasted food each year going forward. NHPS also allowed schools to introduce share tables in their lunchrooms, so leftover foods, such as bagged chips or handouts of fruit, can be redistributed among students.

Nick Divito, CET's Waste Reduction Consultant, conducted onsite waste assessments, engaged with schools' stakeholders, generated a recommendations report based on his findings, and supported the schools through the logistics of creating a food scraps program. Nick's approach is that these programs run best when students are learning from their peers; he spends several lunchwaves at each school training student "compost champions" to help their classmates dispose of food waste properly.

A composting pilot with Blue Earth began in 2023, funded by a United States Department of Agriculture grant, and has since expanded to eight schools. In the winter of 2025, CET's on-site support began, and Haven's Harvest was brought in to set up food donation from several schools. Every school has different levels of implementation of sustainability programs, with some starting by adapting share tables and expanding their accepted recycling materials. What is universal across the program is the implementation of a composting program in the lunchroom, which gives opportunity for students to engage in peer-to-peer education and take responsibility for their food waste and its impact.

OPPORTUNITIES, FOR EVERY STUDENT

One of the latest schools to join the movement is Truman School. Older students have the opportunity to build leadership skills as they teach kindergartners to compost during shared lunch periods. They also help explain that these materials aren't trash, but valuable resources that can be returned to the earth to help grow more food. These student leaders, alongside some adult staff, guide their peers through what can and can't go in the compost bin. This hands-on, student-driven model is central to the program's success. Rather than limiting sustainability work to a custodial team or a small "environmental club," NHPS has cultivated broad student involvement across grades and groups.

The impact goes beyond numbers. NHPS has shown that with the right support, any school can successfully reduce wasted food. And for schools that already have waste compactors or are seeking new sustainability opportunities, New Haven's model proves that composting and recycling can be cleaner, simpler, and more manageable than the status quo.



EVERY SCHOOL CAN START SOMEWHERE. WHAT'S YOUR FIRST STEP?

NHPS is demonstrating that when students, staff, and administrators unite around a shared mission, schools can become powerful catalysts for environmental change. This transformation was possible with city-level and administrative support and committed funding to initiate a pilot. For any school, a review of current services can be done to ensure services are correctly sized and find opportunities to shift potential savings in one service to help pay for another. While this meaningful change was supported by financial resources to back them, similar efforts can be achieved through finding opportunities to reallocate existing costs to support waste diversion programs.

Your school likely already has the ingredients needed for a successful food waste diversion program! Your first steps could include:

- **Conducting lunchroom observations** to identify key traffic patterns and optimal sorting station locations
- **Engaging administrators, food service staff, and custodians** from the start to build in support and reduce extra labor
- **Incorporating student leadership** to monitor sorting stations and help develop creative signage
- **Collaborating with dining teams** to identify share table and food donation opportunities



**Want to learn more about how CET and CT DEEP can support
your school in tackling food waste?**

Connect with CET for expert support and practical resources:

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