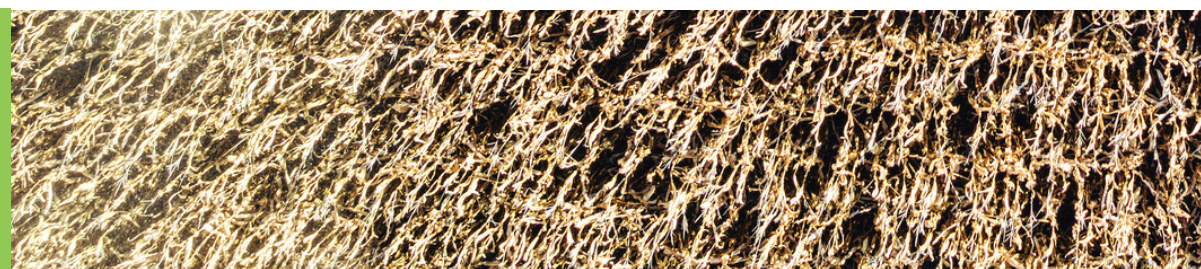




CET

Resilient climate solutions

PLANTING SEEDS: **A COMPOST PILOT FOR NEW HAVEN SCHOOLS**



New Haven Public Schools are transforming how students treat wasted food through sustainable, student-led composting and recycling programs.

Beginning in 2023, NHPS partnered with CET, Blue Earth Compost, Havens Harvest, and New Haven Office of Climate and Sustainability to create new waste diversion programs that develop students' environmental stewardship, implement recycling programs, and promote the circularity of wasted food. Through waste assessments, stakeholder engagement, and guided student-led education, the team supported schools in establishing customized composting programs that minimize wasted food and promote environmental responsibility in the next generation.

These efforts to address food waste align with advocacy by the New Haven Climate Movement and others who have pushed the New Haven Board of Education to expand composting in schools. Several individual schools had existing composting programs through one-off partnerships with services like Peels and Wheels, but the pilot was the first step toward creating a unified, district-wide composting program.

Connecticut recently updated its Commercial Organics Recycling Law to now require certain commercial entities, including some K-12 schools, to "source-separate and recycle organic materials." Through this pilot, NHPS is preparing to comply with the law when diversion requirements begin for schools on July 1, 2026.

Measurable Change, Meaningful Support

Staff from CET, the New Haven Office of Sustainability, and the NHPS system worked closely with four New Haven schools as part of the pilot. The results of this partnership speak for themselves, with over 36,000 pounds of food scraps diverted from landfills during the first year. Some of the schools also saw a reduction in the number of trash cans needed in their lunchrooms. 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. Schools are also now connected with Haven's Harvest, making it possible for dining staff to donate surplus prepared food or ingredients to feed their community.

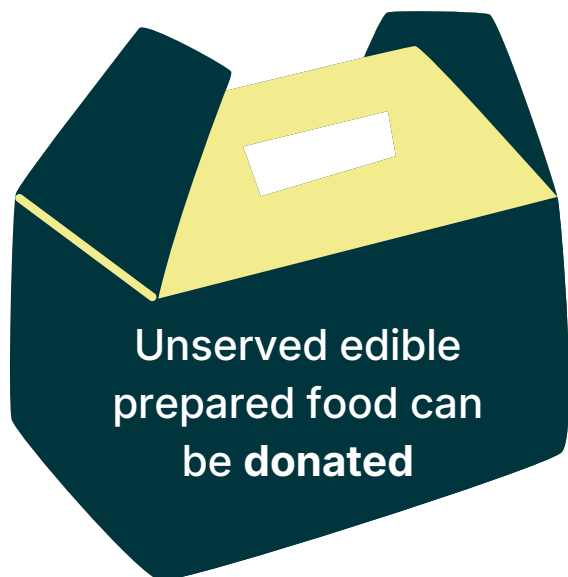
Each school has different priorities for the implementation of sustainability programs, with some starting by adapting share tables and others expanding their accepted recycling materials. What is universal across the program is the implementation of a composting program in the lunchroom, which gives opportunity for students to engage in peer-to-peer education and take responsibility for their food waste and its impact.

Pilot participants
diverted over

18.4 tons

of wasted food in the
first year.

Pathways to Wasted Food Diversion in Schools



Packaged or whole foods (i.e. unopened chip bags or uneaten oranges) can be **donated or redistributed via a share table**

Plate scrapings can be **composted**



Snapshot of Compost Pilot Schools

The Sound School

- ~338 students
- High School with multi-building campus
- Onsite cafeteria
- Started composting March 2025
- Now composting ~2.07 tons per year, equivalent to 1.16 tons annual carbon savings

A Sound School student had previously established a share table to redistribute leftover snacks. Once the compost program rolled out, staff reminded students about composting at each lunchwave, helping reinforce the behavior. Engaged administration, dining services staff, and teachers help keep the program going smoothly.

Worthington Hooker School

- ~300 students in 3rd-8th grade building
- K-8th grades
- Onsite cafeteria
- Started composting in April 2025
- Now composting ~5.37 tons per year, equivalent to 3.01 tons annual carbon savings

Custodial staff, students, and teachers work together to keep the compost program running smoothly. Each lunchwave, students from the environmental club monitor the waste bins, help staff wheel the bins outside, and bring in empty bins.

Metro Business Academy

- ~400 students
- 9th-12th grades - Magnet High School
- Onsite cafeteria
- Started composting March 2025
- Now composting ~2.45 tons per year, equivalent to 1.37 tons annual carbon savings

Students from the environmental club lead composting efforts with the support of engaged teachers; student volunteers even help bring compost bins out to the pickup area.

Truman School

- ~475 students
- K-8th grades
- Onsite cafeteria
- Began composting Spring 2025
- Now composting ~8.51 tons per year, equivalent to 4.77 tons annual carbon savings

Truman students were motivated to compost! 30 middle schoolers volunteered to help run the compost program when it launched. 7th and 8th graders made posters for the lunchroom with information on composting, and 5th graders helped educate younger students on composting and waste sorting, volunteering to monitor waste bins during lunch.

Wilbur Cross High School - Summer 2025

- 1,750 students
- 9th-12th grades
- Central cafeteria with two separate sides
- Began composting Summer 2025 (added to the pilot after the initial 4 schools)

At Wilbur Cross, students from the Environmental Club volunteered to help with roll-out, and teachers helped push for food donations to Haven's Harvest.



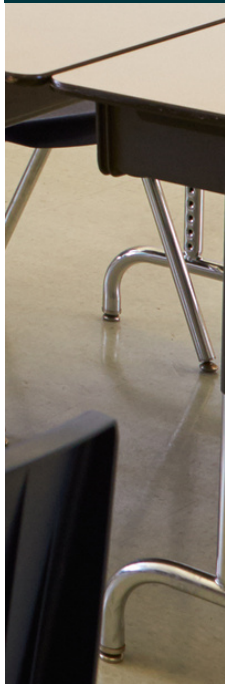
Opportunities for Every Student

At Truman School, students are showing how to be part of the solution. Older students are building 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.



Every School Starts Somewhere

CET and New Haven staff worked together to assess current practices, engage key stakeholders, and roll out new programs incrementally to keep things manageable. The compost pilot began with a review of current waste systems to ensure services were correctly sized and to find opportunities to shift potential savings in one service to help pay for another. The key to NHPS's successful food waste diversion program is the right mix of ingredients: thorough assessment of existing systems, stakeholder engagement across the school system, and implementation support to help reinforce and refine new programs.



The Right Ingredients

ASSESS

- CET conducted several **lunchroom observations** to identify key traffic patterns and select optimal sorting station locations. These observations also helped CET staff make connections with staff and students, enabling authentic engagement as the pilot moved forward.

ENGAGE

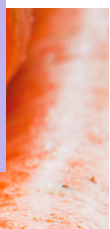
- The program team **engaged school administrators, food service staff, and custodians** from the start to garner support and inform system setup. Ongoing conversations with support staff helped address concerns about waste hygiene and helped develop a workflow that aligned with staff responsibilities.
- The pilot **incorporated student leadership** to monitor sorting stations, help develop creative signage, and educate their peers in the importance of waste diversion. The team held initial education sessions for students & staff to learn how the composting program works, equipping them to lead composting efforts in their school.
- The team **collaborated with dining staff** to identify share table and food donation opportunities. NHPS Food Service Director Baron Young issued a memo in support of food donation to help staff feel comfortable with setting up systems for sharing and donation.



REINFORCE & REFINE

- After each compost roll-out, the program team, staff, and student volunteers **monitored lunchwaves for 2 weeks** to ensure proper collection and disposal of food waste and help establish a new behavior pattern for students. Additional monitoring after the start of the new school year helped students get back into the composting groove after the summer break.
- Student volunteers provided additional informal education during lunchwaves. This helped students apply what they learned about composting to their own experience.

Ask students at a lunch table, "Can you tell me what's plastic on your tray? Which bin do those forks go in?"





NHPS demonstrates 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, committed funding, and motivated staff, students, and teachers.



If your school, institution, or business is interested in implementing waste reduction efforts, contact CET to get started!

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