



TEACHING SUSTAINABILITY

EMMA WILLARD SCHOOL SPOTLIGHT



At Emma Willard School, sustainability is part of the curriculum. The school, founded in 1841, welcomes 350 students to its campus in Troy, New York each year, and each year Emma Willard commences with sustainability front of mind.

Refillable water bottle stations and recycling bins are found throughout campus.



When Emma Willard first contacted CET in 2025, the school already had impactful waste reduction practices in play. The tableware in the dining room was reusable, there was a well-established kitchen food scraps collection system, compostable napkins were utilized, bulk condiment dispensers had been installed, and recyclables were collected and efficiently sorted. Outside of the cafeteria, refillable water stations were widely available across campus, batteries were collected and recycled, and a free campus thrift store was created for students. Regardless of established systems, there is always room to go further with sustainability, and at Emma Willard, that's where CET came in.

Even with robust practices in place, Emma Willard was generating over 57,000 pounds of food scraps annually—that's almost 50,000 meals worth! When CET Waste Reduction Consultant Renee Panetta met with Emma Willard staff, she noticed opportunities for the school to streamline and analyze its waste efforts.

CET suggested the school obtain metrics and data on its waste diversion in order to evaluate if its current system best served its needs. After processing this data, Emma Willard, with CET's assistance, put out a request for proposals (RFP) to local haulers for food scraps, recyclables, and waste collection.



Earth Day 2026 art project
made of repurposed jeans.



Campus composting bin.

Manon Sabatier, an Emma Willard EcoLeader advisor and passionate climate advocate, recalled this process: “Last December, we worked with CET to inventory and really look at our practices... Renee was very helpful in giving us recommendations, giving us information about areas that we did not know about. Then we put an RFP out and once we got the various estimates, we looked at the data.

“We were hoping we would be able to combine waste, recycling, and [food scraps collection] with one service provider, but we decided to keep it separate because the new provider brings the [food scraps] further away to an anaerobic processing company,” said Manon. “We felt that both the carbon footprint of our [food scraps] as well as the anaerobic [digestion] process wasn’t quite what we were hoping to do for our community with our food [scraps].”

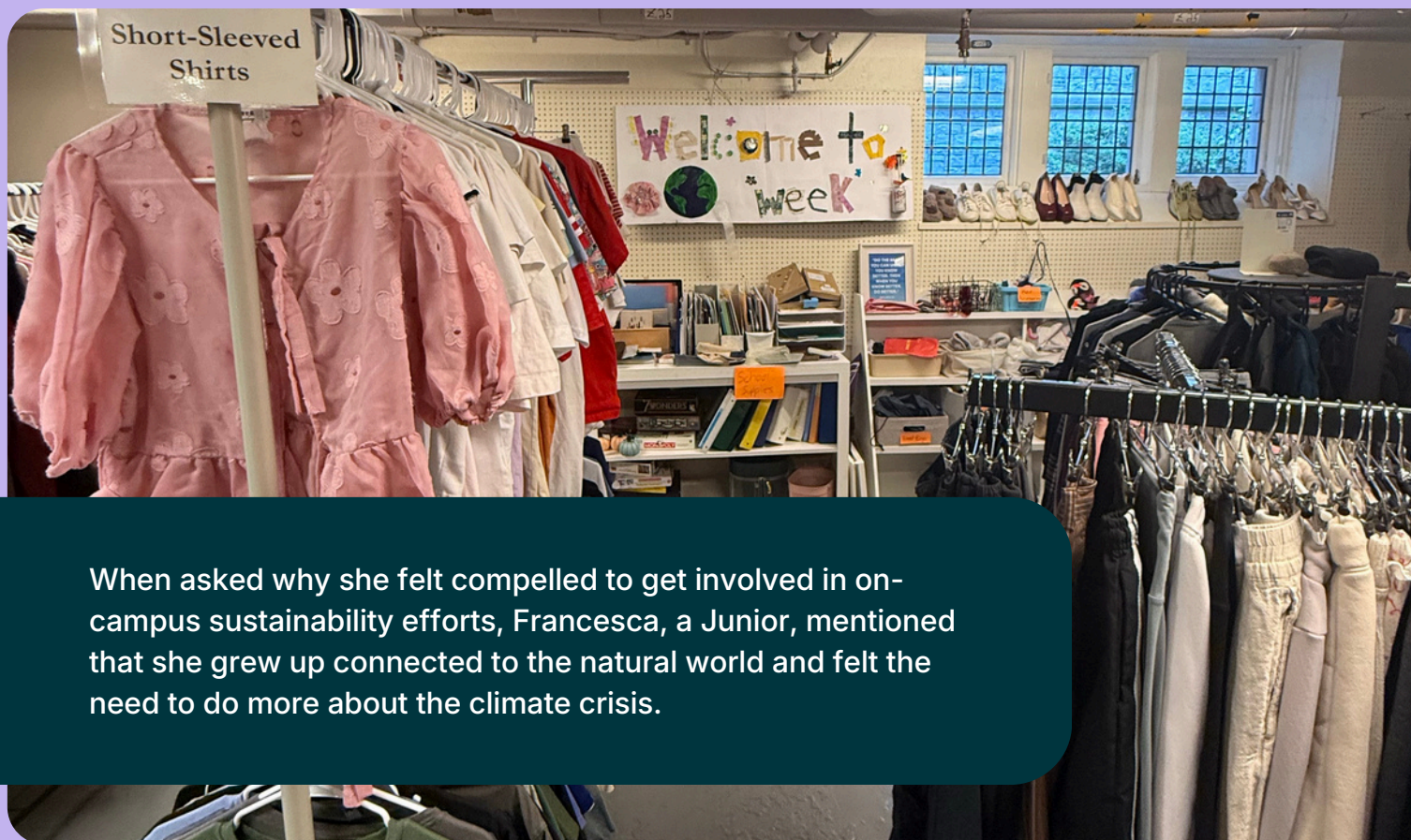
CET also suggested that the school explore food donation to keep with the sentiment of positively impacting the local community. Cohesive signage and training for students and staff were also suggested to organize the school’s waste efforts further.

EMPOWERED STUDENTS

At Emma Willard, waste reduction efforts do not just fall to the staff. Students are encouraged to engage with sustainability through the curriculum, campus, and clubs. While the school has several different clubs and councils that students can join to further the campus's environmental efforts, such as Emma Green and the EcoLeaders program, there is widespread collaboration and overlap between the efforts of these groups.

Students across these groups organize sustainability events (EcoLeaders are planning inaugural, on-campus Sustainability Day for October 2026), attend regional climate events (in Fall 2025 and 2026, students presented at the Adirondack Youth Climate summit, which was attended by 150 students in the Adirondack region), and maintain the campus's "thrift store," Willard's Wardrobe.

Created from the need to reduce waste and provide affordable items to students, Willard's Wardrobe functions as a free thrift store where students can both donate items and source anything from clothing to bedding, books, furniture, and more. Student-run, the store has also created a venue for further campus engagement in Emma Willard's sustainability efforts.



When asked why she felt compelled to get involved in on-campus sustainability efforts, Francesca, a Junior, mentioned that she grew up connected to the natural world and felt the need to do more about the climate crisis.

COMMUNITY IMPACT

Core to Emma Willard's sustainability efforts is imparting the community impact of the school's efforts on its students. The school's curriculum specifically seeks to impart on students that the impact of their sustainability work extends beyond the borders of campus.

For example, starting in the 2026-27 school year, environmental science will be a graduating requirement. "As a high school institution with students coming from all over the world," explained Manon, "it's undeniable that they need to be really literate in what's happening in the climate crisis and how can they be empowered to be actors in it and not passively feel anxious about what's going on."



Emma Willard strives to teach its students that positive environmental impacts are important not just on a global level, but also on a local one. As Manon put it, "Students leave campus and go to all corners of the world, so it may look different for them once they get back to their home countries but they will have had that sense of 'Here are some of the things that we can do and here are the pieces for us to understand what is going on.'"

From participating in community cleanup efforts to presenting at regional sustainability events, Emma Willard is determined to create a positive and lasting impact in its local community and the world at large.

"I think that because Emma Willard is such an engaged community in the world and [we] come from so many different places, we all have a stake in climate change and I think that it's really important that we do something about it."

-Esme, Senior



If your New York-based school or institution is interested in reducing waste but is not sure how to get started, contact CET for no-cost waste assistance today.

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