



School Composting Case Study: Northfield Public Schools

Northfield Middle/High School (6-12) and Elementary (preK-5) School had a composting program developed and maintained by the Central Vermont Solid Waste District (CVSWMD), and a recycling program, but when the town changed waste management districts in 2010, the schools lost the compost collection services. A motivated parent and local farmer restarted the composting program in 2013.

Northfield Middle/High School	
# of students at schools	329
Program start date	December 2013
Tons of food waste diverted	0.56 tons per month
Cost savings on trash	\$0 (so far)
Cost of compost collection	Free

Building local capacity: The remaking of the composting program began when a mother of two children in the elementary school organized a meeting with school principals, facilities managers, and food service staff. Despite general interest in reinvigorating the composting program, people were unsure how to begin.

The previous system had heavily relied on the CVSWMD, which had provided the schools with compost buckets, separation posters, garden carts, and wheeled bins, as well as annual composting training, education, and support. Without that assistance, the Northfield schools had to build their own

infrastructure and training capacity. Parents and the Parent Teacher Organization obtained a \$2,000 grant from the [New England Grass Roots Environmental Fund \(NEGEF\)](#) to purchase these items as well as t-shirts for student cafeteria monitors. [The Highfields Center for Composting](#) (whose work has been taken on by the [Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund](#); good resources remain on the Highfields website) provided training and education for faculty and students.



Northfield Elementary School.
Photo: Trish Coppolino

Matchmaking: Since the schools were not in a position to manage food scraps on-site, they needed to find an off-site composter, and a means of transporting food scraps. With no funds available to pay for compost hauling, the Northfield schools were looking for something very specific: a hauler willing to collect and transport their food scraps at no cost.

After talking with a few local farmers, parents and the school found a local farmer who raises livestock and grows vegetables year-round in Northfield. The farmer now collects

food scraps weekly from the schools at no cost, either feeding them to his livestock or composting for later use on crops.

Stepping into roles: After the composting program was in place, school community members discussed the responsibilities of everyone involved. At a PTO meeting, a 5th grade teacher volunteered his students to work in the elementary school cafeteria to monitor the sorting station and ensure that trash and recyclables were kept separate from food scraps. The middle/high school student Green Team took on the role of monitoring the cafeteria sorting station. The maintenance supervisor offered his facility staff to put the compost buckets out every morning, empty them after school, and cover the food scraps with sawdust from the school's woodshop during warm months. Many different stakeholders at both schools committed to leadership roles, ensuring that the program will be sustained over the long-term. Critically, the head of cafeteria and maintenance crews for both schools are leaders.

Improvements: A composting program provides a great opportunity to examine the waste stream and identify opportunities for new efficiencies and cost-savings. The elementary school began using compostable fruit cups instead of plastic. The school had previously switched from durable silverware to disposable plastic utensils because students often accidentally threw silverware in the trash; now that students are sorting their trays more carefully, the school is considering going back to using silverware, which could save it money. Before composting, liquid food waste (such as leftover milk) was dumped in the trash in the middle/high school and down the sink at the elementary school. After discussing the issue with the farmer, he now separately collects liquid waste from both schools.

With the program in full swing, a local farmer capturing value out of the food waste, and daily stakeholder involvement, the compost program is on solid footing and is continuing to grow.

Kitchen and custodial staff found that the composting program makes their jobs easier! For the first time, students are clearing off their trays and stacking them, making it less laborious to clean them.

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