



# School Composting Case Study: Montpelier Public Schools

While the details vary somewhat, all three schools' programs share common elements: strong support by the principal; clear signage and infrastructure for collecting food scraps; a system to collect, move, and deposit food scraps into plastic rolling carts located outside the schools; and regular training for students, faculty, and staff. The Central Vermont Solid Waste Management District (CVSWMD) collects the food scraps weekly and takes them to a commercial composter for processing.

**Startup challenges:** The biggest challenges came at the beginning: getting full buy-in from the school community, and arranging for food scrap removal. The composting and recycling programs began under the initiative of interested students and adults, but they initially struggled to engage and gain support from administrators, faculty, and staff. In particular, advocates had to work closely with kitchen staff to help them understand the importance of composting and to demonstrate that the program was easy to incorporate into everyday cafeteria operations. Even once school leaders and staff were on board, they encountered difficulty finding a hauler willing to collect food scraps. When no private hauler would offer the service, CVSWMD stepped in to haul the food scraps. In addition to hauling, CVSWMD was critical to the development of the Montpelier school programs, providing training and technical assistance to each school, and funding startup expenditures such as wagons and buckets for collecting and transporting food waste and hiring monitors to oversee separation stations in the cafeterias.

## Montpelier Public Schools

Number of students	
Union Elementary School	506
Main Street Middle School	196
Montpelier High School	313
Program start date	
Union Elementary School	April 2004
Main Street Middle School	Nov. 2004
Montpelier High School	April 2004
Tons of food waste diverted	
Union Elementary School	13,120 lbs.
Main Street Middle School	6,900 lbs.
Montpelier High School	11,200 lbs.
Cost of compost collection	
All schools	\$8/tote

**Settling in to a routine:** After a while, composting becomes routine for students and staff. In the Montpelier schools, separating food scraps and recycling is now simply the way everyone operates. Care and maintenance are staff responsibilities. At the elementary school, kitchen staff also sometimes help students properly sort their waste, while maintenance staff unload compost buckets into rolling carts outside. Older students at the middle and high schools require less oversight at the sort station and are more actively involved in program operations, including emptying compost buckets, but facilities staff maintain responsibility.

**It only gets better:** Schools implementing composting programs where the food scraps are handled off-site will soon find getting a food scrap hauler to be less of a problem. As more schools, businesses, and

residents begin separating their food scraps from their trash, demand is growing for food scraps hauling; by the July 1, 2017 deadline for haulers to offer food scrap collection services under Vermont's Universal Recycling law (Act 148), there will be more and better options for contracting food scrap hauling services. Today, all three schools have reduced the amount of trash they produce and their trash hauling costs as a result of their compost program.



**Students are key:** Getting kids involved was critical for all three schools' programs. While the Montpelier schools benefitted from the financial support from CVSWMD, the need for some of these costs could have been avoided by getting students (and parents!) involved in creating the necessary infrastructure, and using students or other volunteers to conduct trainings. Having students create signs and help design and build separation stations involves them in the process and builds their sense of pride and ownership.

*Union Elementary School students separating recycling, food scraps, and trash. Note the kid-friendly height of the separation table.  
Photo: Central Vermont Solid Waste Management District*

“Kids are the ones who will change their habits the fastest, get excited about the program, have the power to keep the program going, and help guide other students and staff in composting and recycling sorting.”

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