School Composting + Cafeteria Waste Separation

FOR: School district facilities & nutrition services • PARTNERS: city sustainability office, local haulers, garden programs • SDGs: 12 • 2 • 13

One-sentence summary. Launch cafeteria waste separation and on/off-site composting at priority schools, pairing student-led audits with contracts for organics collection—cutting methane from landfilled food scraps and creating compost for school gardens.

Why it matters

UNEP and implementation guides identify composting as a top option for organic waste: it reduces methane from landfills and returns nutrients to soils. School cafeterias generate predictable streams of organics that can be separated with simple stations (liquids, recycling, trash, food scraps). Paired with education and reliable hauling, diversion rates increase and contamination drops.

Evidence (key points)

• UNEP (with IGES) highlights composting as one of the best options for organic waste, with soil and climate benefits.

• Cutting methane from organic waste is a near-term climate lever; global efforts focus on diverting organics from landfills.

• K-12 best practices: student food-waste audits, share tables, and clear sorting stations improve diversion and reduce waste.

• Local partners (collection/education) make programs durable—service + curriculum beats bins alone.

Options considered

Option	What it looks like	Pros	Cons
Status quo (landfill/incinerate)	No sorting; organics mixed with trash	No setup	Methane from landfills; lost soil value; missed education
Cafeteria separation + off-site compost	4-bin stations; staff/peer monitors; weekly pickup by hauler	Fast launch; measurable diversion; low capital	Hauler fees; needs contamination control
On-site compost (selected schools)	3-bin system or in-vessel unit; garden program uses compost	Hands-on learning; compost for gardens; lower hauling	Needs space, training, and maintenance

Alt text: Table compares status quo, off-site composting with sorting stations, and on-site composting.

Recommendations

1) Run student-led waste audits at 3–5 pilot schools. Owner: Nutrition Services + Facilities. Steps: use EPA/USDA audit toolkit; identify streams; set up 4-bin stations; recruit “Green Team” monitors.

2) Contract organics hauling for pilot sites. Owner: Procurement. Steps: RFP for school-compatible compost service; specify carts, pickup days, education materials; phase to more schools after 90-day review.

3) Integrate curriculum + gardens. Owner: Teachers/Garden leads. Steps: pair sorting with lessons; use finished compost from partner or on-site system to build soils in raised beds.

Local data & resources: Philadelphia

- City of Philadelphia — Community Compost Network (FarmPhilly)
- School District of Philadelphia — GreenFutures (sustainability hub)
- Circle Compost — school composting education & hauling
- Bennett Compost — local organics collection
- City — Green Schools Program mini-grants for projects (e.g., composting)

What to do next (60–90 days)

Month 1: audits + sorting stations; staff/volunteer training. Month 2: hauling contract starts; contamination feedback loop. Month 3: publish diversion data; consider on-site compost at one school garden.

How we’ll measure success

- Diversion rate: organics as % of cafeteria waste (target 40–60% at pilot sites)
- Contamination rate: ≤5% by weight after week 4
- Food shared via share table: count/week; donations tracked
- Garden soil built with compost: cubic yards used/semester

Credits & sources (clickable)

- UNEP — How composting can reduce our impact (with IGES guidance)
- UNEP — Regional programme to reduce methane from organic waste (2025)
- EPA/USDA — Student Food Waste Audit Guide
- NRDC — K–12 Food Waste Best Practices (PDF)