

Get Food Smart: Educating and Influencing Students

Rhode Island Schol Recycling project – Get Food Smart, RI

Background

In 2019, the Rhode Island School Recycling Project (RISRP) received a grant from the Rhode Island (RI) Attorney General's office to quantify food waste in Rhode Island's public schools. The food waste audit revealed that Rhode Island public schools waste approximately 2,500 tons of food every school year, with 388 tons of that food perfectly good and unopened: milk, yogurt, cheese sticks, and whole fruit.

Program Structure and Components

Get Food Smart entails an 18-month engagement with each school. In the first year, RISRP facilitators and coordinators involve all key stakeholders in setting up sorting stations in school lunchrooms with a focus on recovering untouched food and diverting food waste for composting. In the second year, the focus turns to food waste prevention to reduce the amount of food scraps being produced. To date, engaging over 29,000 students across participating schools, the program has diverted 827 tons of food waste, recovered over 92 tons of perfectly good food to be redistributed to hungry students and families, and has reduced food waste per student by 31%. RISRP's goal is to reach all 305 RI public schools by 2030 and to reduce food waste per student by 50% from the 2019 baseline, in support of EPA, USDA, and UN goals.

How Materials are Managed

Food scraps are composted off site and finished compost is returned to school gardens in the Spring, and recovered foods are made available to students in a share fridge provided to the school by RISRP. Schools are responsible for distributing surplus food and often do so throughout the day, to afterschool programs, in student backpacks, or to local food pantries. Recyclables are sent to the state Materials Recycling Facility, and liquids are poured down the drain by lunchroom staff.

Lessons Learned

K-12 schools have a unique opportunity to shape the way children think about food and the environment. Like classrooms, cafeterias should be places for learning about the value of food and natural resources by reducing food waste through prevention, recovery, and composting. Addressing school food waste can provide a focal point for authentic place-based learning, including many hands-on educational activities.