

Organics Management Guide Submission

Name: James Corwin

Title: Co-Director

Organization: Rhode Island School Recycling Project - Get Food Smart, RI

Email Address: jcorwin@schoolrecyclingproject.org

Website: rischoolrecyclingproject.org

Select the Primary Entity Type Please identify the category that best represents your project: Nonprofit or Non-Governmental Organization

Questions:

- 1. Background: Provide context for the program, project, or policy — why it was developed, when it began, and the problem or opportunity it addresses.**

In 2019 the RI School Recycling Project (RISRP) received a grant from their Attorney General's office to quantify food waste in Rhode Island's public schools. The state legislature was considering requiring schools to divert food waste away from the state's fast filling landfill, and the assessment proved helpful in passing the law which became effective January 2023. In the meantime (2021/2022) RISRP secured a "Healthy Communities" grant from the EPA to pilot a food waste reduction program in four schools. The program, titled Get Food Smart RI, included school-wide presentations about the "Problems of Food Waste" and engaged student "rangers" who directed other students at lunchroom sorting stations. With additional funding from the EPA, USDA and now private foundations, RISRP is now in 75 schools with funding to reach 150 schools by the end of the 2026/2027 school year.

- 2. Summary: Briefly describe the initiative, including its goals, location, and primary outcomes.**

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 reducing food waste – preventing it from happening. To date, our schools have 545 Tons of food waste, recovered 127,046 lbs. of perfectly good food which gets redistributed to hungry students and families and we have reduced food waste per student by 25%. Our goal is to reach all 303 public schools and reduce food waste by 50% by 2030, in support of EPA, USDA and UN goals.

3. Percent of Overall Diverted Material: If available, include data or estimates on the portion of the community or organization’s total diverted material no longer associated with the waste stream that this program or policy addresses.

By pouring off liquids, rescuing surplus food and segregating food waste, Get Food Smart reduces the amount of waste coming out of school lunchrooms by an average of 90%. When considering the entire waste stream of schools, our diversion averages 69%.

4. Key Program Elements or Policy Provisions: Describe the structure and main components of your program or policy. Explain the investments origins (who, how much). Please include as many of the following elements as applicable: What types of materials are being managed? (e.g., surplus recoverable foods, food scraps, wasted food. How are these materials managed? Who is responsible for managing them? (Organizations, agencies, businesses, or other entities) What products are generated, and how are they utilized or managed? (e.g., compost, animal feed, energy products) Who funds the management of these materials? (Funding sources, grants, partnerships) Who generates these materials? (Identify the origin: households, institutions, businesses, etc.)

What types of materials are being managed? Food scraps, surplus recoverable foods, liquids & recyclables.

How are these materials managed? Food scraps are composted (and compost is returned to school gardens in the Spring), surplus recoverable foods are made available to students (we provide a share fridge for each school), after school programs, sent home in backpacks to food insecure families (in RI 38% of families are food insecure) and donated to food pantries, recyclables are sent to the state MRF and liquids are poured down the drain.

Who is responsible for managing them? Student “Rangers” oversee the lunchroom sorting stations to eliminate contamination, an adult school “champion” ensures that safe food handling guidelines are followed for recovered food, the lunchroom custodian places organics, recycling and landfill waste in the appropriate totes and a composting hauler picks up the organics weekly.

What products are generated? Compost is returned to schools in the Spring for gardens. A small portion of the organic waste is sent to the state’s anaerobic digester to produce electricity for RI homes. Who funds the management of these materials? Funding has come from federal, state and private foundations. The EPA, USDA, RI Department of Environmental Management, 11th Hour Racing, the RI Foundation. Who generates these materials? We work exclusively in K-12 schools.

5. Regulatory Impact: Describe how laws, policies, regulations, and/or code have affected your program or project. This may include positive, negative, or neutral

impacts. Consider noting which regulations apply, how they influenced implementation or operations, any challenges or barriers encountered, and how compliance requirements shaped program decisions.

After RISRP's initial Assessment of Food Waste in RI Schools, the RI General Assembly passed the RI State School Waste and Refuse Disposal Law 23-18.9-17 which requires most school districts to divert organic waste away from the landfill and to recover and donate perfectly good surplus food. The law is an unfunded mandate with no penalty for non-compliance which enables schools to ignore it due to budgetary constraints.. While many schools have been slow to sign on, there is reputational cost for prompts reticent schools to get onboard. By recognizing schools, publishing and promoting an online dashboard that measures every school's progress for all to see, students, teachers and parents say, "why aren't we doing this?" Schools feel nudged to follow suit and adoption quickly follows.

6. Measurable Increase in Supply Include data or qualitative outcomes showing growth in collection, diversion, or reuse volumes if available.

Since RISRP piloted Get Food Smart in the Fall of 2021, we estimate that collectively our schools have accomplished the following:

- Diverted 545 tons of food waste away from the landfill for composting and anaerobic digestion.
- Recovered 127,046 lbs. of perfectly good food on "share tables" and in "share fridges."
- Reduced food waste per student by an average of 25% with the goal of 50% by 2030.
- Reduced Pleasant View's carbon footprint by 882.8 MTC02.

7. Behavior Change: Describe whether the initiative resulted in measurable behavior change and explain how you determined this. If behavior change occurred, outline the strategies that proved most effective. Please include any available data or evidence that supports your findings.

Changing behaviors is significantly more difficult for adults than it is for children and the value of changing a young person's behavior is far greater! Habits are formed early in life. Most students aren't taught that wasting food has consequences beyond a parent worried they aren't getting the nutrients they need.

K-12 schools have a unique opportunity to shape the way children think about food. Today's students are tomorrow's food decision makers. Like classrooms, cafeterias are places of learning. We can teach the next generation about the value of food and natural resources by reducing food waste through diversion, composting, recovery, and prevention. Addressing school food waste can provide a focal point for authentic place-

based learning, including many hands-on educational activities. And as demonstrated by a 25% reduction in food waste at food smart schools, young people can change behaviors.

RISRP established food waste per student baselines in the 2019 Assessment of Food Waste in RI Public Schools. With a minimum of 3 food waste audits per school year at each school, which involves students, we can measure changes in food waste per student. Additionally, once each year RISRP presents the environmental benefits resulting from reducing, diverting and recovering wasted food to students. After the presentation we pass out “post it” notes to students and ask them to write down one thing they learned.

- “I didn’t know how much ICS is helping the earth.”
- “It’s not good to waste food.”
- “We are going to save the world if we pull this off.”
- “Our school is helping the world.”
- “I learned that greenhouse gas heats up the world like a greenhouse.”

We turn these comments into word art posters and return them to the school lunchrooms.

8. Benefits and Impacts (Economic, Environmental, and Social): Describe the economic, environmental, and social sustainability impacts of the program, policy, or initiative. This may include both positive and negative outcomes. You may address impacts such as costs or savings, job creation, waste reduction, emissions, resource conservation, community engagement, equity, or public health. Please include data or qualitative observations where available and note any trade-offs or challenges.

Economic impact – Realizing that the greatest threat to sustaining Get Food Smart in schools is cost. Therefore, our focus is to make the program cost-neutral for schools. We do this by auditing landfill dumpsters and showing school districts how the program has reduced landfill waste to the point where dumpsters will never be more than half full. This makes it possible to reduce frequency of pick-up or dumpster capacity and applying the savings to organics hauling fees.

Environmental Impact – a reduction in GHG’s of 882.8 MTC02 Social – Educating thousands of young people on sustainability, circularity and the value of food. Students take this new knowledge home and adopt more sustainable behaviors at home.

9. How Stakeholder Buy-In Was Achieved Explain how the program gained support from key stakeholders (e.g., government agencies, businesses, residents, nonprofits).

We require 110% commitment from school principals who introduce us to teachers, custodians, lunchroom staff and food service providers. We involve them in locating and setting up sorting stations. We present to PTO's, Faculty, Wellness Committees and the entire school about the Problems of Food Waste. And most importantly, we involve students in the process – monitoring sorting stations, conducting food waste audits and Zero Waste Days, Food Smart Awards and Field Trips to the state landfill and MRF.

10. Stakeholders' Perspectives and Dynamics at Play Highlight collaboration dynamics, challenges, or differing stakeholder interests and how they were addressed.

Lunchroom custodians are usually skeptical that the program will work. This changes once they see the results. Before the program they would carry 10 full dripping black plastic bags to the landfill dumpster. After, they carry one light bag filled with straws, chip bags, wrappers and small plastic bags.

Lunch ladies learn that the USDA no longer requires that they serve every child all five components of the NSLP and students begin to refuse items that they don't intend to eat.

11. Lessons Learned Share what worked well, what didn't, and recommendations for others seeking to replicate your approach.

Cafeterias as Classrooms: 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.

Student participation - In elementary schools, the students participate enthusiastically. In middle schools, not as much. We have yet to work with a High School. We will need to develop appropriately modified programs for middle and high schools. Checking in Several times each year... If RISRP were to leave schools after implementing the program it is likely that over time with changes in leadership it would fall apart at many schools. Our expansion plan focuses on the five-year goal to reduce food waste coming out of RI schools by 50% by 2030. By conducting regular audits and ongoing experiential learning opportunities we will prevent schools from discontinuing.

Schools... Don't Try this on Your Own... To effectively put in place a sustainable food waste reduction program, schools need help from the outside. RI public school teachers, administrators and staff do not have the time or bandwidth to build a multi-department

process to reduce food waste at their school. Our schools are successful because we own the initial project management.

New Roles in the Lunchroom - There should be an evolution in the job descriptions of Custodians, Cafeteria Staff and Food Service Providers to accommodate the program.

- Custodians can take on the role of coach.
- Lunchroom Monitors should adopt the mission to nourish young people and evolve away from a disciplinary role “Stop talking!”
- Food Service Providers should help prevent food waste by reclaiming untouched food, improving the taste, and not overserving.

Change - Young people have a greater capacity to change behavior than adults.