Organics Management Guide Submission

Name: Samuel King

Title: Senior Manager

Organization: Circular Services d.b.a Blue Earth Compost

Email Address: sam@blueearthcompost.com

Website: www.circularservices.com

Select the Primary Entity Type Please identify the category that best represents your project: Other

Other (please specify): Partnership between a Board of Ed and a hauler.

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.**

The setting is New Haven Connecticut, known for, among other things, education, culture, and of course, food. The story is about grassroots efforts to decrease food waste in schools, led by students aware of the climate change impacts of wasted food, small food waste haulers, and food recovery organizations. Their efforts started small and have grown substantially in scale and in impact. Student advocacy began around 2019, which included attendance at Board of Ed meetings. After much organizing and community building, an Emergency Climate Resolution, put forward by the student activists, was accepted unanimously in 2022. Since then many actions have been undertaken in the Elm City to advance and institutionalize the edicts of the Resolution. These have occurred formally in the schools and at the City level. In parallel, organic interest in composting has grown substantially with composting and food recovery organizations growing their work to include landlords, residents, restaurants, and other institutions. Seen together, New Haven stands out as a leader regionally in food waste reduction.

The players

New Haven School System – one of the largest in the state comprised of 44 schools serving over 20,000 students Blue Earth Compost – An organics hauler that was started in Hartford, CT with the goal of making composting accessible to homes, businesses, and

municipalities. In 2025, they sold to Circular Services. In 2023, they received a grant from ReFED to provide food reduction programming to public schools in CT. Four of the schools in their grant program were in the New Haven districts.

City of New Haven Office of Climate & Sustainability – The Office of Climate and Sustainability works with City departments, community organizations, and New Haven residents to advance and coordinate city-wide climate and environmental sustainability policies, practices, and initiatives. In 2024, they began implementing an EPA grant to greatly reduce food waste and expand composting and food recovery in the schools and for residents.

Peels on Wheels – A bicycle-powered compost hauler based out of New Haven. They partnered with a few schools in the district on composting programs before the grants from ReFED and the EPA.

Haven's Harvest – A food recovery agency serving the greater New Haven area. They play the vital role of logistics and storage for food that can be donated.

CET – CET helps people and communities take meaningful climate action—right where they live and work. We turn intention into impact with practical support, proven strategies, and deep local partnerships. They have provided technical assistance and outreach pursuant to the EPA and ReFED grants.

Student Activists – Engaged students that catalyzed the Board of Education and school administration to take steps to reduce food waste in order to address the effects it has on climate change.

ReFED - ReFED is a U.S.-based nonprofit working to catalyze the food system toward evidence-based action to stop wasting food. They provide funding through the Catalytic Grant to support organizations with innovative and replicable models for reducing food waste.

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

The goal set by the student activists and Board of Education is that all schools in the district will provide food waste composting and food recovery by the end of 2030. These efforts are working in parallel to efforts to reduce food waste residentially and instituionally, across the City. As of writing, around a dozen schools have formal programs.

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.**

Data isn't complete, but is estimated at close to 200,000 pounds of material recovered or composting in the past five years, with the vast majority occurring since 2024.

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.)**

We're managing recoverable foods, food scraps, and wasted food.

They are managed through food recovery, anaerobic digestion, and composting.

Circular Services is responsible for managing them after collection.

The products generated are electricity and compost.

The funding is currently from grants but will be institutionalized in City budgets.

The materials are generated in schools, but there are parallel activities inspired by this work for residents and businesses.

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.**

As of July 1, 2026, K-12 schools generating more than 1 ton of food waste that are within 20 miles of a commercial composting facility will be required to institute a reduction program through recovery, composting, or other methods, per an update to the Commercial

Organics Recycling Law. This development in the law has raised awareness of the issue, but when it goes into effect it will only apply to a very small number of schools, because of it's narrow focus. None of those schools are in New Haven. Additionally, all of the organizing demonstrated in this case study happened before the passage of this law.

Separate to that issue, barriers to food sharing and recovery slowed down their implementation within the schools. Reticence within the Food Services Department grew from a fear that these food reduction tactics could lead to issues with liability if donated food led to people getting ill or students with allergies eating shared food that wasn't fit for their diet. These real and important concerns were ultimately addressed and overcome via open dialogue with the district.

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

Noted in above answers.

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.**

School-based programs lay the foundation for lasting behavior change. The students that grow up with recycling and composting programs will expect to see them at university or in the workplace as they progress through their lives. If they don't see them, they'll ask "why?" and some will even go as far as to the catalyst for carrying on these practices to places that don't have them yet.

This initiative would not have been possible without hundreds of hours of technical assistance with students and staff at the schools. Organizations like Blue Earth Compost, CET, the Office of Climate & Sustainability, Haven's Harvest, Peels on Wheels, and others have all devoted time to making sure that the schools know the "how, what, and why" of food waste reduction.

Examples of assistance include consulting, cafeteria waste station monitoring, presentations, digital and physical assets, purchasing equipment such as containers and refrigeration, and tracking and displaying the results of the program.

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.**

The positive outcomes of these initiatives are plentiful. They include reduced waste, increased awareness and education, and the programs role as an inspiring model to subsequent activities within and outside of the City.

Economically it is important to note that grant funding was required to pay for infrastructure and for hauling services. Between the ReFED grant and the EPA grant, hundreds of thousands of dollars of start-up capital was required to get this off the ground. As the program scales and the cost of MSW increases, the hope is that the costs will be at break even to the City and the BoE when grant funding runs out.

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

As this was a grassroots initiative, community support was built organically. The infrastructure and services followed the demand from the community for a more sustainable solution for waste disposal. This can definitely be pointed to as a reason for success – the programming was not placed upon a community that didn't ask for it – it came in response of it.

To be certain, there are many stakeholders and harmony among them is key to achieving outcomes. In schools especially, waste disposal is not the main priority and being able to devote resources to focus on it requires the skillful balance of moving at a pace that the school can handle, while staying proactive and pushing forward.

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

Overall, there was much alignment on the goals of the programming among stakeholders. Understanding and accordance was either intrinsic or gained with only a little stakeholder engagement. In this type of initiative, so much is achieved through one-on-one communication where concerns can be addressed and barriers can be troubleshooted. Additionally, because of the community support there were many advocates and champions that were deputized to spread the messaging and to steward the process.

Educators and school administration are often stretched thin. The support offered by the community, the students, and the professionals involved ensured that the individuals within the schools were not burdened by these new efforts. In this way, the grant funding was especially impactful. Without it, too much of the work of standing up and overseeing the new composting and food reduction programs would not have been possible. The only stakeholder group that was not unified with the goals was the maintenance staff at some of the schools. Despite attempts to make inroads with this group, some of the maintenance staff were resistant to the program, because they saw the responsibility of removing a new stream of material to the outside disposal containers as adding more work and a possible breach of contract. At some schools, this responsibility fell to students.

Communication with this group has been ongoing as it is important element to rolling out this work, district-wide.

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

Our experience underscores that durable food waste reduction programs grow best when seeded by community demand, nurtured by grassroots leadership, and supported by patient, well-coordinated institutions. Student advocacy identified food waste as a climate issue, creating urgency and legitimacy that helped unlock action across the school system and the City. This values-based framing proved more powerful than compliance-driven approaches and set the conditions for long-term commitment.

What worked particularly well was the ecosystem approach. No single organization carried the effort; instead, schools, students, haulers, food recovery organizations, city staff, and technical assistance providers each played distinct and complementary roles. Programs were allowed to start small, adapt to individual school contexts, and scale only when capacity and buy-in were present. Sustained, hands-on technical assistance was critical, ensuring that new systems were understood, trusted, and integrated into daily routines rather than treated as one-off pilots.

The primary challenges were operational rather than ideological. While goals were widely shared, implementation varied by school depending on staff capacity and internal champions. Maintenance and facilities staff resistance emerged in some cases, driven by concerns about workload and contractual responsibilities, highlighting the importance of engaging these stakeholders early in program design. Food recovery efforts also faced initial hesitation due to liability and food safety concerns, which required time, dialogue, and trust-building to overcome.

For others seeking to replicate this approach, the core lessons are clear: start with people, not infrastructure; be clear in your messaging; invest meaningfully in education and technical assistance; and move at a pace that schools can realistically sustain.