

Brooks & Julian Elementary Schools

2026 Project Report



The Project:

Rival Oak Park Elementary D97 schools, Gwendolyn Brooks and Percy Julian, used their competitive relationship for good, collaborating across schools to motivate better waste habits and show that competition can drive collective action. Through their *Zero Waste Wednesdays - Battle of the Bins* lunchroom competition, students from the Brooks Earth Action Team (BEAT) and the Julian Lunch Trays inspired both schools to significantly improve their lunchtime waste diversion metrics and drove a culture shift towards sustainability.

Project Focus: Waste Management

Students involved: 890

Staff Involved: 21

Location: Oak Park, IL

Students impacted: 870



We believe that the more we build these contests into our routines, the more that sustainability will become part of the school culture.



The Process:

Students from both schools worked together to design a cross-school competition, create activities, videos, and lessons to teach students how to sort waste correctly, and gather raffle prizes from PTOs and local businesses. They hosted assemblies featuring waste sorting trivia and a speed-sorting game, asking their peers to test their recycling, composting, and landfill waste sorting knowledge. After this phase, they launched the *Battle of the Bins* competition, installing new see-through waste receptacles for transparency, and auditing cafeteria waste at the end of lunch periods to compare contamination rates across schools. Students from each school supervised the bins and ran "Trash Trivia" to drive home new behaviors. The school with the lowest total amount of trash and contamination over the three contest days won a student-built "Trash Trophy" out of repurposed waste and the grade level with the lowest amount of trash won a zero-waste ice cream party.

The Outcomes:

While Brooks came out on top for the competition, the true winner was our Earth, as both schools saw significant improvements in their waste diversion and contamination rates. Some lunch periods at Brooks produced zero contamination in compost, where previously plastic and trash would have been common contaminants. These driven student teams proved that behavior can change quickly with the right motivation. The Brooks and Julian teams plan to expand Zero Waste Wednesdays and continue working together across schools to support further district-wide sustainability projects.

