

Whittier Elementary School

2026 First Place - Middle/Elementary Division



The Project:

The Whittier Elementary Green Team launched a snack-time composting pilot to divert 160 lbs of food waste from landfills while building lifelong sustainability habits in kindergarten and 1st grade students. These young scholars practiced sorting food scraps and learned how composting benefits the environment, with the goal of engraining composting as a common practice and cultural norm across the school community.

Project Focus: Waste Management

Staff Involved: 2

Location: Downers Grove, IL

Students impacted: 86



We feel very optimistic that this composting pilot for Kindergarten and First Graders will turn into a composting program for the whole school at Whittier Elementary!



The Process:

The initiative began with an in-school assembly led by volunteers from the local nonprofit Greener Grove, where over 80 Kindergarten and 1st grade students learned about composting and practiced sorting food scraps using common snacks like bananas and clementines. Then, each classroom received a five-gallon bucket with compostable liners. After snack time each day, students placed food scraps in the buckets instead of the trash. Sixth grade Student Council members collected the compost daily, replacing liners and transferring waste to a larger outdoor cart for bi-weekly collection from WasteNot Compost. The program was shared through PTA communications, local newsletters, and presentations to district and village partners.

The Outcomes:

The pilot demonstrated immediate, measurable impact. The first compost pickup on April 27—representing two weeks of waste from four classrooms—diverted **40 lbs of food waste** from landfills. Based on this rate, the school estimates diverting **160 pounds by the end of the school year**. Beyond these results, students developed a hands-on understanding of composting and began building daily habits of separating food waste. The project generated strong community support, with interest from other district schools, PTA leadership, and village partners, and has positioned Whittier to expand composting schoolwide in the following year.

