

2024-2025 ACHIEVEMENTS



A Note from Our Executive Director

The 2024-2025 school year has been one of incredible growth and momentum for Cafeteria Culture. Together with students, teachers, families, and community partners, we pushed forward with bold, creative solutions to reduce waste and reimagine school cafeterias as places of student agency and climate action.

At 5 NYC Title I Public Schools, **students reduced cafeteria food waste by 35-50% through our Mindful Choice Meals** initiative, and for the first time, we **composted cafeteria scraps locally - right at schools or nearby community sites**. This model challenges NYC's industrial system of trucking organics and shows how local composting can strengthen communities. We also **started edible gardens in two of our partner schools**, where students grow, taste, and share fresh food, linking waste reduction, composting, and food production into a sustainable school food system.

Our Plastic Free Lunch Day campaign, created by Cafeteria Culture students, has now reached **4,103 schools nationwide, eliminating more than 30 million single-use plastics**. We also **trained 841 NYC teachers** to run student-led waste audits, extending our impact citywide.

These wins reflect the creativity and leadership of youth from historically marginalized communities, proving that when students are given the tools and a platform, they drive change across NYC and beyond. Looking ahead, we will scale Mindful Choice Meals, refine best practices for school-to-community composting, expand edible gardens, and continue to bring student voices into the policy arena.

Thank you for being part of this journey. I am honored to continue the bold journey that Debby Lee Cohen and I started together 16 years ago. Your support fuels real climate solutions led by students, and together we're proving that change starts with youth in the cafeteria.

With gratitude,



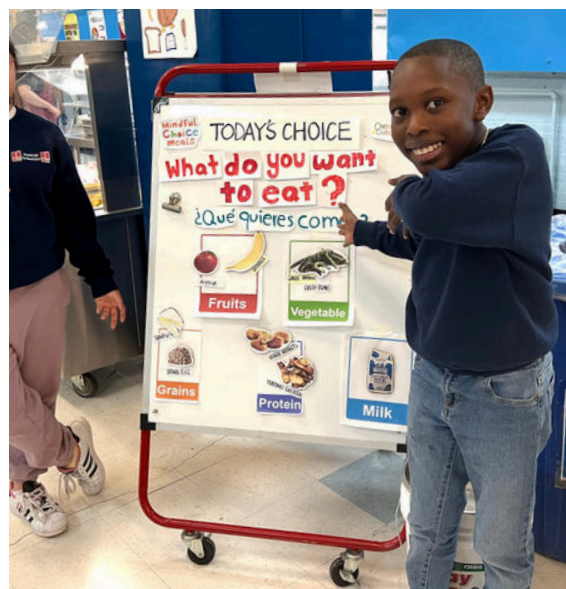
Atsuko Quirk
Executive Director, Cafeteria Culture



Food Waste Reduction Achievements

Reducing Food Waste Through Choice and Communication

Cafeteria Culture's **Mindful Choice Meals** (MCM) program was designed in response to our finding that 45-80% of cafeteria food waste was discarded completely untouched. During the 2024-2025 school year, at five NYC Public Schools, we helped students educate peers and adults about the USDA's Offer vs. Serve food choice guidelines and improved menu communication, allowing students to actively choose what they wanted to eat rather than receiving pre-plated meals. As a result, **food waste was reduced by 35-50%, food consumption increased by 15-40%, and school lunch participation rose by 12%.**



Mindful Choice Meals menu board detailing the day's lunch options at the serving line at PS/MS 188.

Composting Cafeteria Food Scraps Locally



PS/MS 34 students chopping cafeteria food scraps to put in their compost tumbler at their newly created edible garden.

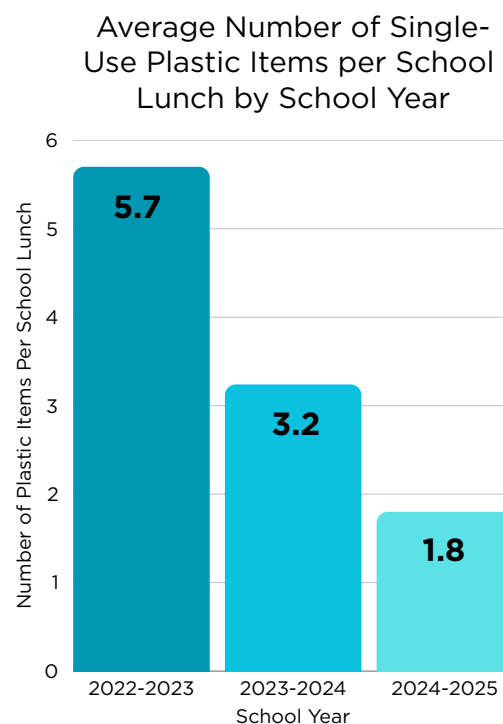
Cafeteria Culture advanced local composting of cafeteria food scraps through partnerships with Compost Power and other local community composting sites, including Polo Grounds and Red Hook Farms, and brought in-school compost tumblers to two partner schools. Our students turned **161 pounds of cafeteria food scraps into a local resource** rather than trucking them to distant facilities, reducing emissions and engaging students in real-world climate solutions that build soil and community resilience. Next, we aim to make this a routine and identify best practices for scaling this model citywide.

Plastic Waste Reduction Achievements

Lasting Impact Beyond Plastic Free Lunch Day in NYC

Our Plastic Free Lunch Day (PFLD) campaigns have transformed daily cafeteria service beyond one-day events. The average number of single-use plastic items served in NYC Public School cafeterias **on regular school days** (not on PFLDs) was reduced from **5.7 in 2022** to **just 1.8 in 2025**.^{*} This shift, based on data from regular kitchen-serving cafeterias, reflects a sustained, system-wide change in daily operations. Our modest estimate shows that this reduction **prevents over one million single-use plastic items from being served each school day across NYC Public Schools** compared to three years ago.

^{*} The data excludes Satellite Meal and Cafeteria Enhancement Experience sites (self-selection serving style).



National Expansion of Plastic Free Lunch Day



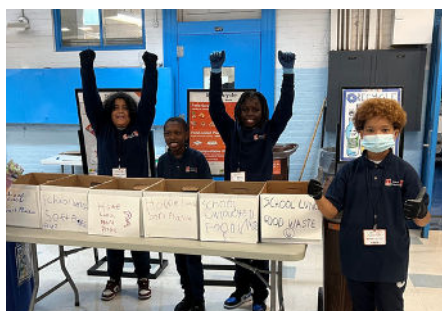
Students advocating for a plastic-free school breakfast at Highland Community School in Oakland, CA.

PFLD, originally created by Cafeteria Culture students at PS 15 in Red Hook, Brooklyn, in 2018, continued to expand as a biannual national initiative, **reaching 4,103 schools across 37 states**. Since the first national PFLD in 2022, major districts such as Miami-Dade, San Diego Unified, and Baltimore City Public Schools have become regular participants. On each PFLD, school lunches were served without single-use plastics, demonstrating how student-led action has grown into a nationwide movement for upstream, systemic change.

School Program Achievements

Students Took Compost Action to City Hall

17 students from 2 partner schools participated in the Save Our Compost rally at City Hall, with 8 students delivering testimony before the New York City Council to advocate for local composting solutions that reduce waste and environmental inequities.



Lifted the Voices of Over 2,000 Students

Across five partner schools in frontline communities experiencing environmental inequities, our programs helped students see that their voices matter by transforming everyday cafeteria experiences into drivers of lasting, systemic change.

Implemented Rigorous Data Collection

Conducted 11 detailed cafeteria waste audits, providing valuable data to the NYC Public Schools' Office of Food and Nutrition Services and policymakers to guide more climate-smart cafeteria practices and future waste reduction strategies.



Built School Compost and Garden Sites

At PS/MS 34, students helped create an edible garden connected to a compost tumbler, closing the loop from cafeteria to soil. At PS/MS 188, students built a native pollinator garden linking composting to increased biodiversity.

Equipped Students With Filmmaking Skills

Integrated filmmaking into programs by producing 4 student-made videos where students explored why food waste reduction matters for climate and community health. Students learned to communicate their ideas and experiences through visual storytelling.



Other Notable Achievements

Trained 841 Teachers for Climate Action Day

Conducted in collaboration with the NYC Public Schools' Office of Energy and Sustainability, we guided educators to use our toolkits to lead waste audits and take climate action in their schools as part of NYC Climate Action Day.



Led 28 Free Weekly Afterschool Art Classes

At the Lower Eastside Girls Club, students explored creative expression and environmental themes through zine making, printmaking, collage, podcasting, dioramas, and painting, culminating in a public exhibit at A.I.R. Gallery.

Led a Summer Program for Middle Schoolers

At PS/MS 188 in Manhattan, middle schoolers became environmental stewards by creating a native pollinator garden on school grounds and visiting local composting partner sites to help food scraps turn into healthy soil.



Microplastic Madness Reaches New Audiences

Cafeteria Culture's award-winning documentary, *Microplastic Madness*, continues to reach audiences worldwide, with 221,000 views in 45+ countries since 2019. In 2024-2025, the film gained 27,273 new views, inspiring action on plastic pollution.

Our YouTube Channel Reached 36 Million Views

Cafeteria Culture's YouTube channel, CafCu Media, shares student-led stories about plastic pollution, climate action, and their community-based solutions. Our films continue to reach audiences worldwide, amplifying youth voices far beyond NYC and inspiring action for environmental and social change.



Program Outcomes

Overview: From Cafeterias to City Hall

In each of our 5 partner schools, we ran our Mindful Choice Meals (MCM) program, combining climate and nutrition education to reduce untouched food waste and locally compost what remained. Our staff engaged students across all grades with interactive lunchtime activities, while partner classes led peer teach-ins, made posters and banners, created educational videos, and shared their learning with kitchen staff and decision makers. Students also visited local compost sites to help turn food waste into a resource and – most notably – joined a rally and testified to the New York City Council, advocating for equitable food systems in their communities.

Beyond the school day, we extended this work through weekly afterschool art and media classes at the Lower Eastside Girls Club, where students combined art, storytelling, and activism to address environmental and social justice issues.



3rd Graders preparing cafeteria food scraps to be locally composted on-site at PS/MS 30X.

PS/MS 30X Wilton (Mott Haven, Bronx)

Piloted In-School Compost Tumbler and Reduced Food Waste

In our first year at PS/MS 30X, we piloted an in-school compost tumbler system, giving students hands-on experience turning cafeteria scraps into nutrient-rich compost. We adapted MCM for Third Graders, leading to a 50% reduction in cafeteria food waste and a **60% reduction in untouched food waste** on MCM day, as well as a **41% increase in food consumed**.



Staff member educating about the 5 food groups on a Mindful Choice Meals Day.

We plan to continue the local composting pilot in collaboration with the nearby Friends of Brook Park Community Garden and begin revitalizing the school garden, using locally-made compost to grow produce.

PS/MS 46 Arthur Tappan (Harlem, Manhattan)

Piloted Local Composting with Compost Power and Testified at NYC Council

This year, our Fourth Grade program at PS/MS 46 partnered with Compost Power to bring cafeteria food scraps directly to the Polo Grounds community compost site in the co-located public housing complex where many students live. Inspired by local composting and its community benefits, students joined a rally and testified to the NYC Council about its importance. With MCM at PS/MS 46, the **number of food portions/items of untouched food waste was reduced by 53%**, making local composting a daily, achievable goal.



PS/MS 188 The Island School (Lower East Side, Manhattan)

Presented at the EPA and Created a Native Pollinator School Garden

Fifth and Seventh Graders explored how food waste impacts local and frontline communities. After visiting Newark, NJ for an environmental justice tour led by Ironbound Community Corporation, Seventh Graders created a collaborative map tracing their cafeteria waste's journey, motivating them to participate in our MCM program and champion local composting. They proposed creating a compost and garden site at their school, presented at the EPA, and testified at the NYC Council about the importance of local composting.

Our work with Fifth Graders at PS/MS 188 focused exclusively on MCM, including testing and refining our Know What We Throw Toolkit. Their schoolwide outreach and leadership **reduced all lunch waste by 37% and untouched food waste by 58%.**

During the summer of 2025, we led a program through PS/MS 188's Summer Rising program and created a native pollinator garden designed and stewarded by our students. This coming school year, we plan to expand the garden and add a compost tumbler.



Incoming 8th Graders applying compost to their pollinator garden during our Summer Rising program.



7th Graders presenting their Waste Journey Map showing the importance of local composting to the EPA.

PS/MS 34 Franklin D. Roosevelt (Lower East Side, Manhattan)

Built Edible Garden and Compost Site

Our partnership with PS/MS 34 has been going strong since 2012, and this year brought a new initiative. Fourth Grade students led a successful Zero Waste Week that combined MCM and PFLD practices every day, **reducing food waste by 42% and plastic waste by 99%**. Inspired by this success, we built a compost and garden site in April, growing tomatoes, okra, beans, and more. Every week, we invited teachers from all grades to join us for garden sessions, transforming this space into a hub for fresh food and hands-on learning.



4th Graders combining locally-made compost with perlite and vermiculite in their new school garden.

PS 15 Patrick F. Daly (Red Hook, Brooklyn)

Partnered with Red Hook Initiative to Locally Compost Food Waste

At PS 15 in Red Hook, where we first piloted MCM in 2022, we worked to integrate MCM as a permanent part of daily cafeteria practices. We also collaborated with Red Hook Farms near the school to locally compost cafeteria food scraps. We engaged with two Second Grade classes, including a class integrating differently-abled students. This residency helped us refine the MCM curriculum for both our youngest and most diverse learners.



2nd Graders at Red Hook Farms preparing school food waste to be locally composted.

Partnerships and Funders

Partnerships and Support Fueling Our Mission

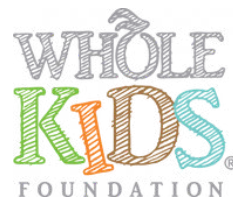
Our partners and funders continue to power Cafeteria Culture's mission and growth. Compost Power makes local composting of cafeteria food waste a reality alongside our students, while UpClear generously redesigned our website to better share our impact.

Our partnerships with NYC Public Schools' Offices of Food and Nutrition Services and Energy and Sustainability allow us to rapidly scale our student-led pilots to achieve citywide change, teaching thousands of students and training hundreds of teachers each year. Together, we're building the foundation for equitable, climate-smart cafeterias across New York City and beyond.

We are grateful to our funders, who are a driving force in keeping our mission alive, our programming functioning day-to-day, and fueling student-led climate action in communities most impacted by environmental inequities.



LILY AUCHINCLOSS FOUNDATION



New York City Council



Looking Ahead

Despite challenges in the nonprofit sector this year, our focused team has not only sustained our programming – we have grown stronger, more strategic, and more ambitious in our goals. Your support will allow us to double down on what matters most: building student leadership and piloting scalable, community-driven solutions.

At the heart of our work is a commitment to Title I schools and their students. Many of these students live in shelters or public housing, are English Language Learners, or are differently-abled. Your support ensures that these young people not only have access to experiential climate education but also see the power of their voices in shaping real change.

Looking ahead, we are excited to take on bigger challenges. We are expanding local composting models in public schools, creating school gardens, running meticulous waste audits, and elevating student-led climate action through our national Plastic Free Lunch Day campaign. We are also building new toolkits, growing our team, and deepening our capacity to create lasting systemic change from the cafeteria up.

Thank you for helping us build something powerful and enduring. If you would like to make a donation, you can **donate at this link** or by scanning the QR code below.

With sincere gratitude,



Executive Director, Cafeteria Culture

