

IMPACT REPORT 2025-2026



Reimagining school cafeterias as climate action hubs where students drive equitable zero-waste solutions: reducing food waste, supporting local composting, and eliminating plastics through science, civic engagement, media, and the arts!



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“This year marked a major step toward systemwide food waste prevention – scaling solutions across NYC public schools while building stronger local systems to compost what remains.

A Note from Our Executive Director

We have so much to celebrate from this past year, but what makes us proudest is seeing thousands more students become part of the movement to prevent food waste. Their choices, curiosity, and participation are at the heart of everything we do. In Spring 2026, at the request of the Office of Food and Nutrition Services, our Mindful Choice Meals program reached **12,661 new students** through a **32-school citywide pilot**. Most importantly, we saw that MCM could prevent food waste even without Cafeteria Culture staff onsite, an exciting milestone as we work toward systemwide change.

At our partner schools, students helped **compost over 2,200 pounds** – more than one metric ton – of cafeteria food scraps within their own schools and surrounding communities, connecting this local process with student learning. We also built **three new school garden and compost sites**, expanding opportunities for students to experience the full cycle from cafeteria scraps to healthy soil and new growth.

Seeing students make these changes in their own cafeterias reminds us why this work matters. When students are given the knowledge and opportunity to lead, their everyday actions can grow into something much bigger and help transform the nation’s largest school district.



Key Achievements
2025–2026 School Year

Our Reach



14,378
Students Reached in NYC Public Schools



30,102
New Students Joined Plastic Free Lunch Day Nationwide



223
Educators, Staff, School Food Managers, and Supervisors Trained for MCM

Local Composting



2,217
Pounds of School Cafeteria Food Scraps Locally Composted

Food Waste Prevention



674
Pounds of Food Waste Estimated Prevented Through the Mindful Choice Meals Pilot

Plastic Waste Reduction



35
Million Single-Use Plastics Estimated Avoided in NYC Public Schools Since 2022

Youth Leadership Impact



84%
of PS/MS 46 Students Believe They Can Make Change in NYC After Our Program



Food Waste Prevention Achievements

Mindful Choice Meals Went Citywide

The 2025–2026 school year brought us one step closer to making food waste prevention as part of everyday cafeteria operations across NYC.

By piloting Mindful Choice Meals (MCM) in one school in each of the 32 NYC Public School (NYCPS) Districts, we demonstrated that student-centered food waste prevention can work beyond our directly supported partner schools. The pilot also reinforced our earlier findings that when students choose their own meals, food consumption increases. This progress is laying the groundwork for lasting change across NYCPS.

12,661

New Students Reached

15–40%

Of Food Waste Prevented

Mindful Choice Meals Citywide Pilot

A total of 38 schools, representing at least one school in each of NYC’s 32 school districts, participated in the citywide MCM Pilot in Spring 2026, bringing our food waste prevention and nutrition education program to thousands of new students across the city. Among schools and School Food Managers who responded to a post-pilot survey, **70% rated the program as either “Very Successful” or “Successful Overall.”** (See Figure 2 on Page 8.)

The pilot was made possible through collaboration with the NYCPS Office of Food and Nutrition Services (OFNS). District Supervisors trained kitchen staff, and School Food Managers and cooks took an active role in incorporating MCM into their cafeterias. Several schools engaged principals, teachers, students, and other staff to make MCM a full school effort.



“By thoughtfully choosing their meals and engaging with enthusiasm, students participated more fully in school lunch, supported by staff who understood the purpose, resulting in higher participation and a noticeable reduction in food waste.”

— Assistant Principal,
PS 108K Sal Abbracciamento

What is Mindful Choice Meals?

MCM is a food waste prevention program that creates more meaningful interaction between students and cafeteria staff, helping students to select the foods they intend to eat without pre-plating, while meeting existing USDA guidelines. With a combination of classroom interventions and cafeteria operational changes, MCM pilots in NYC Public Schools have reduced cafeteria food waste by up to 50% and increased student meal consumption by 15–46%.



MCM Case Studies

These case studies show how different levels and types of engagement shaped the implementation of MCM, from Green Teams leading peer-to-peer outreach to dedicated teachers and highly engaged School Food staff. Despite these different approaches, all three schools achieved measurable food waste reductions.

These pilots show that **once School Food staff are on board, MCM can meaningfully reduce food waste across a range of school settings.** Strong engagement from students, teachers, and school leadership can further strengthen its impact.

Together, these schools offer valuable lessons for moving MCM from a pilot to an everyday cafeteria practice across NYCPS.



Lorpu
Cook in Charge, PS 15
Patrick F. Daly

“At first, students go ‘um, um’ and take time to make up their minds. But be patient and consistent. As time goes on, they become fluent [in making their choices].”



Teamwork

MCM uniquely connects stakeholders across the NYCPS system who do not typically work together. During our pilots, principals, teachers, cafeteria staff, school aides, students, OES Sustainability Specialists, and OFNS Supervisors and Managers all worked together. Bringing these groups into the same trainings encouraged knowledge sharing and collaborations that otherwise may not have happened.

Challenges

The primary challenges that participating schools reported were slowing down the service line as students adjusted to choosing what they wanted on their plate. With a limited time for schoolwide outreach, some students or staff members didn’t fully understand the procedures, which also led to slowdowns in some cases. Others mentioned that advance menu communication with students will improve the flow of the service line.

1

PS 8 Emily Warren Roebling

PS 8’s Green Team brought MCM directly to their peers through classroom outreach. This student-led approach contributed to a **62% reduction** in the number of food portions left untouched.



2

PS 76 William Hallet

At PS 76, MCM was primarily driven by the School Food team, who fully embraced the program even with less involvement from the broader school community. The school achieved a **53% reduction** in the number of food portions left untouched.



3

Queens School of Inquiry

At Queens School of Inquiry, an active Green Team and engaged teacher helped drive MCM participation. While some cafeteria staff needed time to adjust to the operational change, the school achieved a **24% reduction** in food portions left untouched.



MCM Systemwide Change Timeline

2023–2025

Partner School Pilots
Developed and refined MCM with our partner schools over two years, demonstrating measurable reductions in food waste and increased student food consumption.

2025–2026

Citywide Pilot Phase 1
Expanded MCM across all 32 NYCPS school districts, testing school-led implementation with OFNS District Supervisors training and supporting cafeteria teams.

2026–2027

Citywide Pilot Phase 2 and School District 1 Rollout
Deepening citywide pilot implementation and supporting most District 1 schools to adopt MCM as daily cafeteria operations.

MCM Pilot by the Numbers

Waste Audits with Students

Across the **22 waste audits** done during the pilot, Cafeteria Culture worked side by side with students, from first graders to high schoolers, measuring what was eaten, wasted, and left untouched. Their work generated the data that helped us measure to MCM’s impact. **More than 200 students took an active role** in sorting, weighing, counting, and documenting cafeteria waste. By collecting the data themselves, students saw firsthand how their choices reduced food waste.

Less Food Waste, More Food Eaten

Data from pilots shows that giving students meaningful choices can lead to both less food waste and more food eaten, creating a better mealtime experience.

Compared with regular meal service, MCM resulted in:

- **29% less food waste** per student
- **23% more food consumed** per student (both measured by weight)
- **53% fewer food items left completely untouched**



Isabella Wang
Queens School of Inquiry

“I felt really awesome participating in the waste audit. It showed me visually how much food we don’t eat and waste every day. I loved that I was able to make a positive impact on my school. I always felt glad to do more and help the earth anyway I can.”

Figure 1. MCM Results Compared with Regular Service

Food Waste and Consumption	MCM Program	No Intervention
Food Waste per Student (grams)	132.99	187.54
Food Consumption per Student (grams)	149.34	121.62
Percentage of Untouched Food Waste Items	22.3%	47.0%

All values represent K–8 averages based on school lunches served; home lunches are excluded.

MCM Pilot Survey Results

Following the citywide MCM pilot, Cafeteria Culture gathered feedback from participating schools, OFNS, and OES staff. Their responses highlight overall success, positive outcomes, and challenges, offering insights for future implementation.

Figure 2. Overall Ratings of Mindful Choice Meals

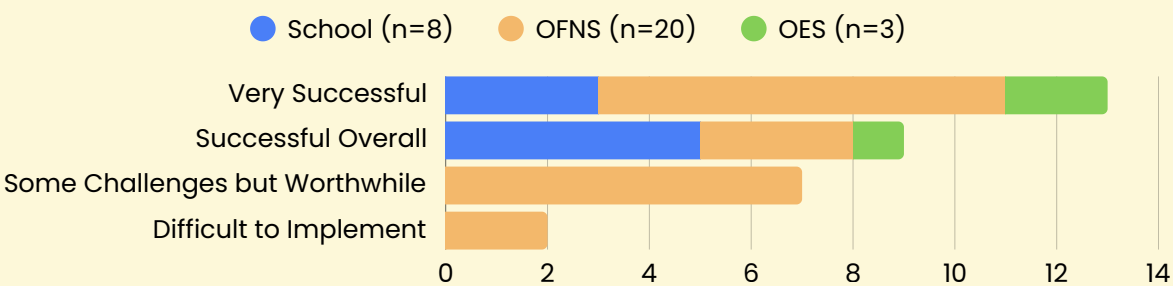


Figure 3. Positive Outcomes from Mindful Choice Meals

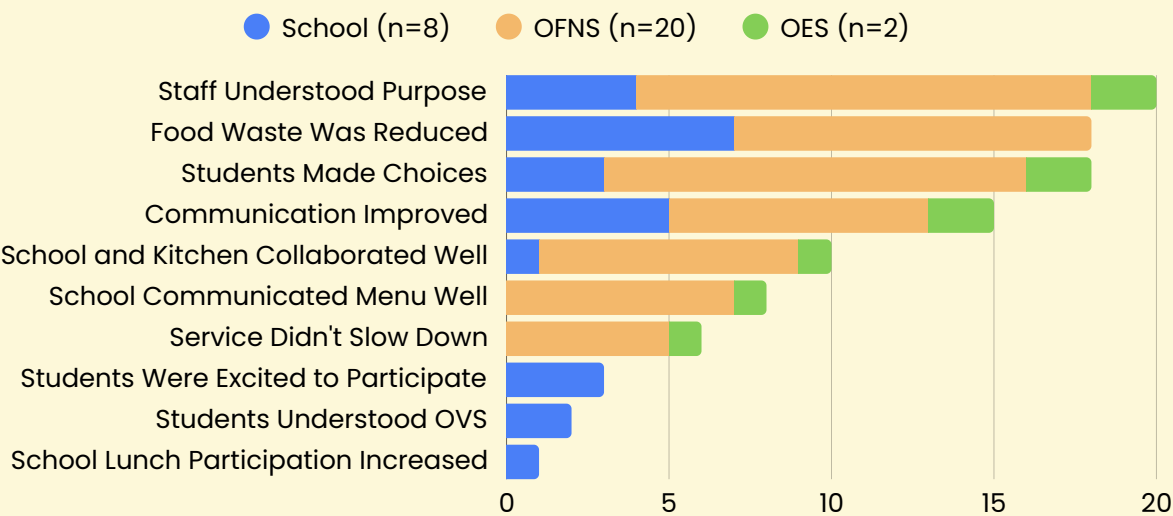
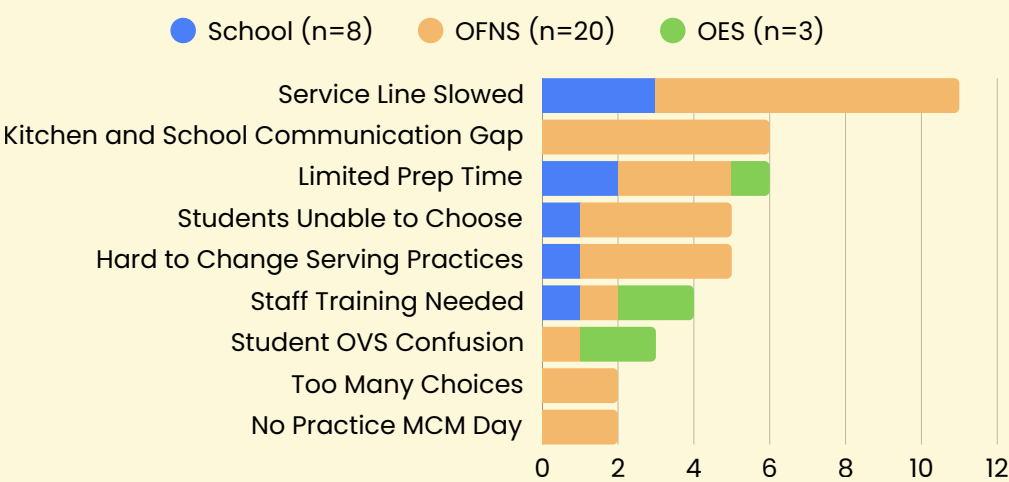


Figure 4. Challenges of Mindful Choice Meals





Local Composting Achievements

Keeping Cafeteria Food Scraps Local

In the 2025–2026 school year, Cafeteria Culture strengthened our local composting work with a **new dedicated Compost Coordinator**, allowing us to expand food scrap collection and hands-on composting at partner schools. By connecting cafeterias with school gardens and nearby community composting sites, our students helped to turn cafeteria food scraps into nutrient-rich soil used to grow fresh produce in school gardens, deepening their understanding of how food, community, and the environment are connected.

2,217
Pounds of Food Scraps Processed Locally

4,295
Lunches Diverted to Local Composting

Local Composting Results

We are developing different models for keeping cafeteria food scraps local, from school compost tumblers to collaborating with nearby community composting sites. The table below shows how these approaches vary across schools and what we are learning about collection, processing, and local composting capacity.

Figure 5. Cafeteria Food Scrap Collection Details
October 2025 - June 2026

Participating Schools	PS/MS 46 (K-8)	PS 15 (K-5)	PS 30X (K-5)	PS/MS 34 (K-8)
Area/Borough	Harlem, Manhattan	Red Hook, Brooklyn	Mott Haven, Bronx	Lower East Side, Manhattan
Type of Food Scraps	All Food Scraps Including Meat, Dairy, and Bones	Fruits and Vegetables	Fruits and Vegetables	Fruits and Vegetables
Processing Site	Polo Grounds by Compost Power	School Tumbler/ Red Hook Farms	School Tumbler	School Tumbler
Average Amount per Day	65 lbs	35 lbs	35 lbs	25 lbs
Average Lunch Count per Day	191	150	200	100
Collection Frequency	1-2x week	2-3x month	2-3x month	2-3x month
Total Weight of Food Scraps Processed	1,697 lbs	520 lbs Across PS 15, PS 30X, & PS/MS 34		

Grand Total: 2,217 lbs (≈1 metric ton)

We collected the most food scraps from PS/MS 46, as a result of our partnership with the nearby Polo Grounds community composting site operated by Compost Power. Unlike in-school tumblers, the site can process all types of food scraps, allowing our Compost Coordinator to collect more from the cafeteria and demonstrating the value of accessible community composting infrastructure. While school based tumblers have a limited capacity, they offer students frequent hands-on opportunities to learn about composting and experience the process directly.

Local Composting Case Studies

There is no single approach to local composting that works for every school. Available space, processing capacity, nearby community composting infrastructure, and opportunities for student participation all shape what is possible. Cafeteria Culture is working with partner schools to explore different models of local composting while shaping programs to each school’s setting and resources.

The following case studies use three approaches:

- 1. Full Community composting,
- 2. Hybrid community and in-school composting, and
- 3. In-school composting only.

Each has different strengths, from processing more food scraps to providing hands-on learning opportunities.



Jaimere Rush
Compost Coordinator,
CAFETERIA CULTURE

“Working with these schools taught me that every school can find a way to turn food scraps into something that gives back to the earth.

1

**Full Community Compost Processing
PS/MS 46 with Polo Grounds Site**

Cafeteria food scraps are processed at the nearby Polo Grounds Community Composting Site operated by Compost Power, allowing all types of food scraps to be collected at larger scale.



2

**Hybrid Community and In-School Processing
PS 15 with Red Hook Farms**

An in-school tumbler supports hands-on learning, while additional food scraps go to the Red Hook Farms due to their greater processing capacity.



3

**In-School Compost Processing with Tumbler
PS 30X and PS/MS 34**

In-school tumblers and a new school garden create a closed-loop system, giving students hands-on experience turning food scraps into compost to grow fresh produce that they can eat at their school.



CASE #1 PS/MS 46 Arthur Tappan Full Community Compost Processing

Large Volume Is Processed at Compost Power Site

At PS/MS 46 in Harlem, cafeteria food scraps travel just a four-minute walk to the **Compost Power site** within the Polo Grounds public housing community, where many students live. Because **the site can process all types of food scraps, including meat, dairy, and bones**, the school can divert a much larger volume than is possible with an in-school tumbler.

Students separate food scraps in the cafeteria, visit the site to see how they are transformed into compost, and conduct outreach to let local residents know they can drop off their food scraps there.

Our partnership with Compost Power also offers a promising model for expansion. Nearby schools could potentially use the same community composting infrastructure, connecting more students and families to local composting and creating a local composting hub.



Domingo Morales
Founder, CEO
COMPOST POWER

“Our hyper-local model keeps resources in the community while showing students the magic of local composting. It’s amazing to see them take what they learn in the classroom, work with their own cafeteria food scraps, and get their hands in the soil for their own community.



Hybrid Community and In-School Processing

A Two-Part Approach to Food Scrap Processing

At PS 15, we combined in-school composting with a nearby community site. Depending on the collection day, cafeteria food scraps are either processed in the school's **compost tumbler**, providing hands-on learning opportunities for students, or brought to **Red Hook Farm's compost site** for processing.

Because the school's tumbler has limited capacity, there are periods when new food scraps cannot be added until the compost has fully broken down. During those times, we bring the collected food scraps to Red Hook Farms, a 15-minute walk from the school, which accepts fruits and vegetables. Most PS 15 students have visited the farm on field trips and are already familiar with the site, making it a natural extension of the school's composting efforts.

This hybrid approach keeps food scraps local while allowing the school to maintain the educational benefits of on-site composting, even when it cannot process everything itself.



Brendan Parker
Assistant Director,
RED HOOK FARMS
RED HOOK INITIATIVE

“There's real power in young people taking on environmental justice where they live. These students make sure their food scraps go where they belong - back into soil that grows food for Red Hook.



In-School Compost Processing with Tumbler

Growing Food with School-Made Compost

PS 30X

At PS 30X, we recently completed building a school garden and compost site in a previously inaccessible area due to long-term construction. Students assist with processing food scraps and apply the compost to the garden, growing native plants and fruits and vegetables that are used in food exploration classes and are distributed to families through the school's food pantry. By learning in garden, nutrition, and compost education classes, students experience the full food cycle.



PS/MS 34

PS/MS 34 was the first school where we built and piloted a school garden and compost site, teaching us important lessons that have assisted us with building other sites. Students there have received experiential compost education for the past two years, and have adjusted to separating their food scraps in the cafeteria to be composted. With hands-on student involvement, they have seen that their food scraps are a resource after using compost to grow tomatoes, peppers, strawberries, carrots and more.





Challenges

In-School Composting: Although sealed, elevated tumblers are designed to prevent rodents, gaining initial support from principals and custodial staff can take time. School staff have limited time to maintain compost tumblers, so they require additional care and troubleshooting from our Compost Coordinator. Tumbler capacity is another constraint, as collection must pause while full batches finish composting.

Community Composting: Nearby community sites can process larger volumes, but convenient sites are not available near every school. Processing capacity also varies, with some sites unable to accept all types of cafeteria food scraps.

Next Steps

We will continue working with partner schools and expand to additional schools to:

- Strengthen existing programs by continuing to refine composting practices with partner schools.
- Expand school-to-community composting to **schools near Compost Power sites**, which can process all types of food scraps.
- **Test a multi-school model** to assess how efficiently one Compost Coordinator can manage collection across multiple schools.
- Measure impact by collecting data on effectiveness, scalability, students' knowledge of composting, and food scrap diversion to local composting.

Learning with Compost Power

Through our partnership with Compost Power, **Domingo Morales** led several hands-on composting workshops and field trips to his composting sites for students from five partner schools. His extensive knowledge, passion, and strong presence brought composting to life for students, while offering a real-life role model for careers in environmental work. Students worked with food scraps from their own cafeterias, chopping and mixing them with wood shavings and learning how process and manage compost, and learned how it benefits the community.





Plastic Waste Reduction Achievements

From Plastic Free Lunch Day to Systemwide Change

Plastic Free Lunch Day (PFLD) is now a well established national movement, with new school districts continuing to join each year. Across NYCPS, years of advocacy are also translating into sustained reductions in single-use plastics during everyday meal service. Building on this progress, Cafeteria Culture is taking on new challenges, working to reduce plastic waste in new grab-and-go style cafeterias that rely heavily on packaged foods..

30,102

New Students Joined PFLD

4,053

Schools Participated in PFLD

35 Million

Plastic Items Avoided in NYCPS

Plastic Free Lunch Day

Plastic Free Lunch Day (PFLD) Keeps Growing Nationwide

PFLD continues to expand across the United States, with **more than 1.7 million students nationwide participating each year**. Recently, additional medium- and small-sized school districts have joined, including Lexington, Kentucky, and Kingston, New York. This continued growth reflects increasing interest among school systems in reducing single-use plastic at the source and rethinking cafeteria waste.

“Plastic lasts forever. But my sandwich lasts one lunch. So why we use something that sticks around forever?”
— Fifth Grader, PS 196 Grand Central Parkway (Queens)

Continued Plastic Reduction in NYCPS Cafeterias

Across NYCPS, where PFLD is now held tri-weekly, these practices are extending plastic reduction beyond one-day events toward systemic change. The average number of single-use plastic items served in NYCPS cafeterias on regular school days (not on PFLDs) has been **reduced from 5.7 in 2022 to just 1.25 in 2026**. Our modest estimate shows that this reduction prevents over one million single-use plastic items from being served each school day across NYCPS’s traditional cafeterias compared to four years ago.

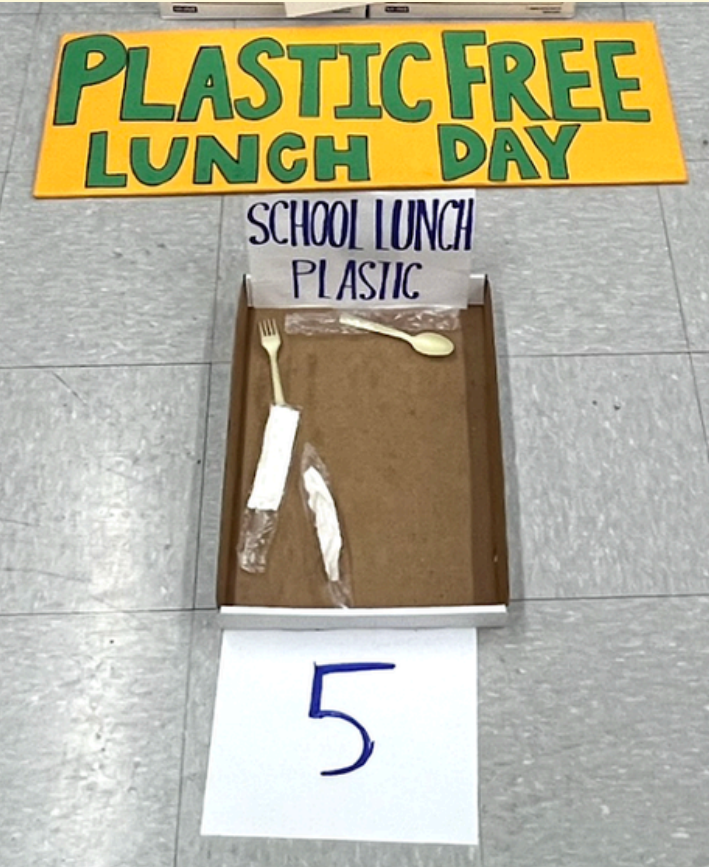
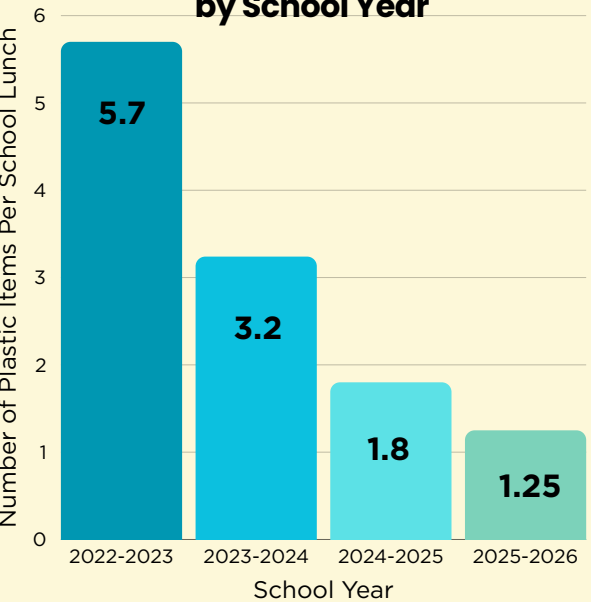


Figure 6. Average Number of Single-Use Plastic Items per School Lunch by School Year



Data including compostable utensils, not including Garb-and-Go style Cafeterias.

Cafeteria Enhancement Experience

New Grab-and-Go Style Cafeterias Expanding Across NYCPS

The NYCPS Cafeteria Enhancement Experience (CEE) model was developed to modernize school cafeterias by replacing traditional full-service cafeterias with more welcoming dining spaces, updated furniture, and a grab-and-go style meal service with individually packaged items. Designed to encourage school meal participation, the **CEE model is now in 21.3% of NYCPS cafeterias**, impacting 34.6% of meals served citywide in mostly middle and high schools, and is slated to expand to elementary schools.¹



Detailed Waste Audits Conducted in Three CEE Schools

To understand the impacts of the CEE model on waste generation, we conducted waste audits in three CEE schools.

Our waste audits found that:

- CEE cafeterias generate **86% more disposables** than traditional cafeterias,
- School food packaging and foodware accounted for over **70% of CEE cafeteria waste** by volume, and
- Students have an average of **3.16 single-use plastic items per meal** compared to 0.91 per meal (not including compostable utensils) in traditional cafeterias.



Challenges

The challenge is how to preserve what works about CEE while **addressing its growing packaging waste**. More welcoming cafeteria spaces and convenient meal service can help increase school meal participation, but the full grab-and-go model also relies heavily on individually packaged foods.

Expansion to elementary schools presents an additional challenge. Younger students often need more hands-on support to choose foods, open packages, and navigate the sorting. As CEE expands to younger grades, it will be important to preserve meaningful interactions between students and cafeteria staff that can be lost in the shift to grab-and-go service, while retaining the benefits of more welcoming dining spaces and convenient meal service.

Next Steps

Cafeteria Culture will recommend to Office of Food and Nutrition Services in NYCPS to pilot new serving approaches in existing CEE cafeterias to reduce packaging while preserving student choice and the benefits of CEE. We will evaluate the results through **follow-up waste audits** and **explore Plastic Free Lunch Day in CEE** settings with student participation.

As CEE expands to elementary schools, NYCPS has introduced a **hybrid model** that combines modernized cafeteria spaces with:

- Hot entrées served by kitchen staff from steam tables
- Student self-selection of fruits and other appropriate side items

We will conduct waste audits in these schools to measure food waste and food consumption and evaluate how the hybrid model performs.

19 ¹ NYC Department of Education. (2026). School Kitchens Dashboard. Retrieved August 14, 2026, from <https://experience.arcgis.com/experience/2c9dccc1de04155a14657db25ee10c9>; Schaefer, M. (2026). Review of Schools' Food Donation and Composting Efforts [Report]. New York City Comptroller, 1-50. <https://comptroller.nyc.gov/wp-content/uploads/documents/MH25-077S.pdf>



School Program Achievements

Linking Composting with Local Environmental Justice Issues

Students in our programs learned about the environmental justice implications of the industrial, trucking-based waste system, and experienced real-life examples of **food waste prevention and local composting as a solution**. They got their hands dirty visiting community composting sites, planting in school gardens, doing street tree care, and collecting cafeteria food scraps. Outside of traditional classroom experiences, students testified before NYC Council, engaged and educated others in their communities, and used art to communicate complex environmental concepts to the public.

14,378

NYCPS Students Reached

84%

Of PS/MS 46 Students Believe They Can Make Change

School Program Outcomes

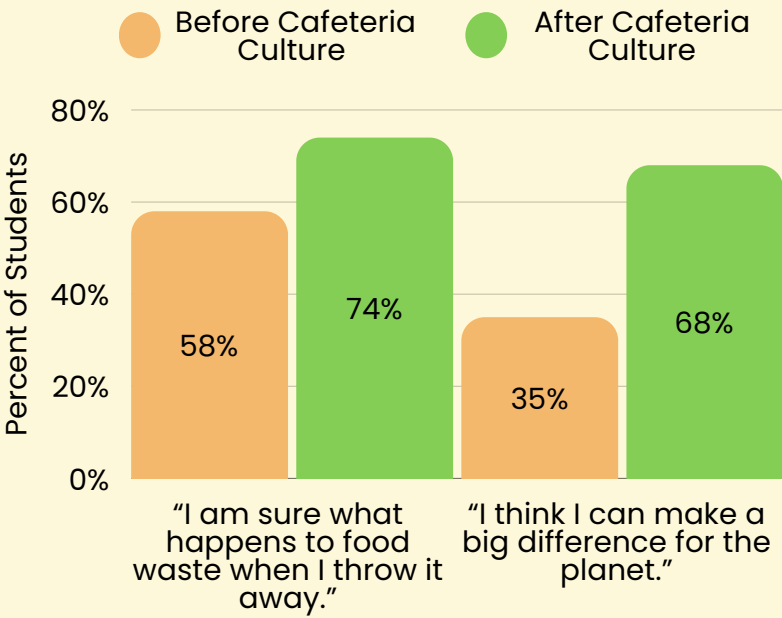
Students Learn, Lead, and Take Action

Our school programs are designed to move students from understanding environmental problems to seeing themselves as part of the solution. Pre and post surveys show growth not only in students’ knowledge of food waste and waste systems, but also in their confidence that they can make a difference. Through hands-on learning, community engagement, and opportunities to speak directly to decision makers, students put that learning into action.

At PS/MS 46, 92% of students demonstrated a deeper understanding of what happens to waste after the program, while **84% believed they could make change in NYC as fifth graders**.

Students had the opportunity to put that belief into practice by **testifying at a New York City Council hearing**, experiencing firsthand that young people can have a voice in decisions affecting their communities.

Figure 7. Change in Fourth Graders’ Knowledge and Opinions at PS 30X



“I can be a mayor because I have the power, I have the voice, and I have the strength.”
 — Janmairo, Fifth Grade, PS/MS 46

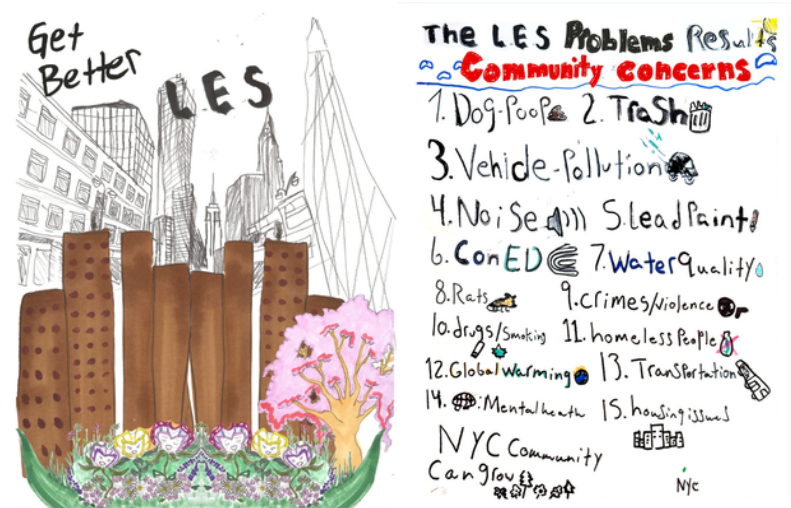
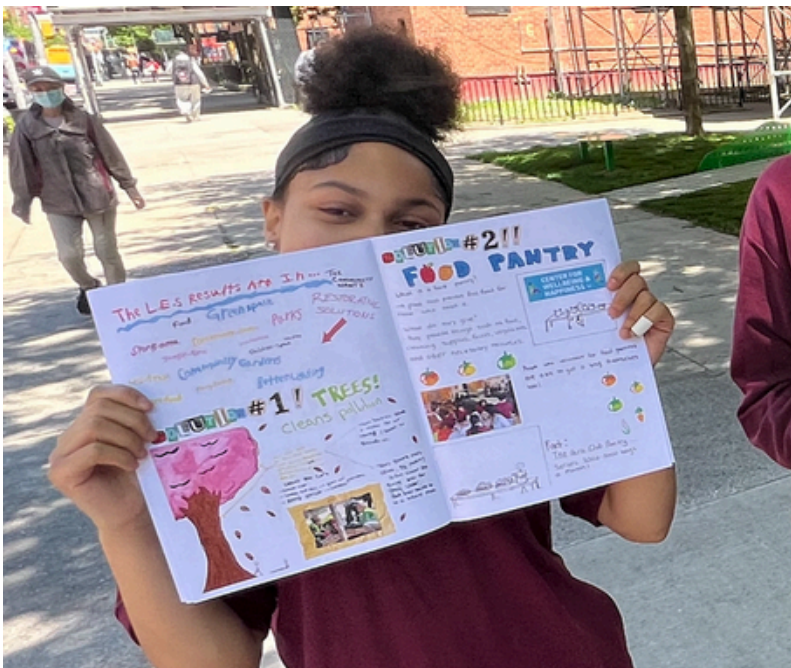
PS/MS 188 The Island School

Eighth Graders Participate in Community-Based Research

Eighth Grade students in their final year of working with Cafeteria Culture developed skills in community-based participatory research, advocacy, and communication. They assisted with the design of and administered a survey to their neighbors to understand what residents felt were the most pressing environmental concerns in the area.

They then explored different solutions to the most frequently mentioned issues. This included visiting a food pantry, doing street tree care, and hearing from a former public housing resident about how he founded a community composting nonprofit.

As a culminating project, students synthesized the data they collected in their community survey and shared the solutions they learned in a bilingual zine titled *Get Better LES* that the students distributed to community members on the Lower East Side. This zine was also included in the local Center for Wellbeing and Happiness’ *What We Grow Together* art exhibition during July–December 2026.



Indoor Edible Garden

Our staff built an indoor garden for students to experience the full food waste and growth cycle. As their playground is also a public park, the school requested that we grow edibles indoors. The garden includes two raised beds complete with built-in grow lights. The food grown is used in afterschool cooking classes.



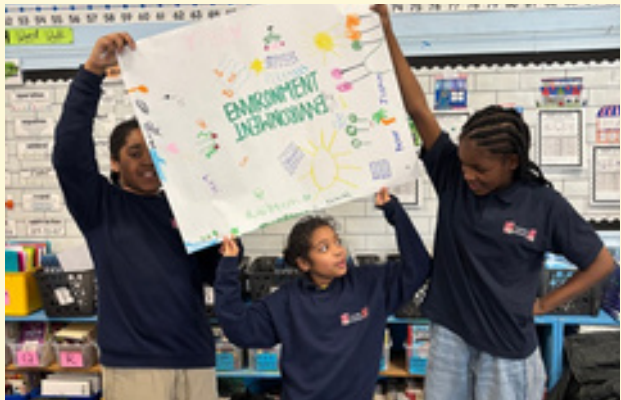
Nutrition Education

We worked with students in K-2 grades exploring the food groups offered in the cafeteria and practicing making choices for lunch. We also providing real-life examples of these foods in the classroom through cooking and tasting activities where many students tried new foods.



Fifth Graders Explore Environmental Justice

Fifth Graders learned about waste equity in and out of the classroom by creating a *Journey of Our Waste* map, “environment” and “justice” posters, and doing street tree care. This created a foundation of knowledge they will build on next year with their own community engagement work.



Street Tree Care

Eighth and Fifth Grade students learned about the benefits of street trees, including reducing air pollution and the urban heat island effect. They loosened the soil, removed litter, and applied compost and mulch to trees in their neighborhood, helping to keep the trees healthy for everyone.



Collaborated with Lower East Side Ecology Center

PS/MS 46 Arthur Tappan

Connecting Waste Equity and Local Composting

We remained with the Fifth Grade class for our second year, exploring the waste cycle by creating a **Journey of Our Waste map** to deepen their understanding of the connection between environmental justice and waste. By participating in our local composting pilot with Compost Power, students got real-life examples of how waste can be a resource instead of a burden for communities.

Local composting grew from a pilot into a routine cafeteria practice throughout the school year. We held a few MCM Days and a recent MCM Day waste audit showed approximately **40% less food waste** compared with the baseline from early in the school year.



Amiya
Fifth Grade, PS/MS 46

“It’s not fair that our garbage goes to Newark, NJ, where one in four kids have asthma. Our garbage shouldn’t hurt kids in another community.”



Waste Equity Simulation

Who really pays for our trash? Fifth Graders answered this question by playing our waste equity game. After purchasing snacks, paying taxes, and seeing the mayor pay companies with taxpayers’ money to take the trash away, students realized that we are the ones paying for our trash to be thrown away, not those producing it.



Testifying for NYC Council

Using what they learned by participating in our composting pilot at Compost Power’s Polo Grounds site, these Fifth Grade students testified before the NYC Council about the **importance of local composting**, asking that to be included in DSNY’s 10-Year Solid Waste Management Plan.



Community Outreach and Education

Students conducted in-person **community outreach** to inform their neighbors about the benefits of local composting, the harms of the current industrial waste cycle, and encouraged neighbors to drop their food scraps off at Compost Power’s community composting site.



New School Garden

Our staff built a school garden and used compost made from cafeteria food scraps to grow collard greens, carrots, raspberries, mint, and marigolds. Students also had hands-on garden activities with their librarian as the space became a “Reading Garden,” complete with outdoor bookcases.



PS/MS 34 Franklin D. Roosevelt

Second Year of School Garden and Compost Pilot

At PS/MS 34, the school garden and local composting pilot entered its second year, with **local composting becoming a routine practice** integrated into the school community. Cafeteria Culture staff collected cafeteria food scraps monthly to process in the compost tumbler, often with the assistance of students. The compost produced through this system supports the school garden, helping students experience a full cycle from cafeteria food scraps to soil and food growing.

Fourth Grade students learned about the journey of their food waste from the cafeteria when put in the brown bin and sent to an industrial composting site, versus being locally composted. They educated their peers and the PTA about waste equity by presenting their **Journey of Our Waste map**.

Second Graders worked with Cafeteria Culture in the garden, planting, harvesting, observing growth, and composting, linking what they were learning in science classes about plant life cycles with real-world experiences.



PS 30X Wilton

Closing the Loop: From Cafeteria Food Scraps to Growing Food

In Spring 2026, our staff built and began the first growing season in a **new school garden and compost site** located in an area of the schoolyard that was blocked for the past three years due to ongoing construction. The site features two compost tumblers, six raised beds for growing edibles, and additional space around the beds for growing native plants.

Fourth Grade students helped **transform the new garden and compost site into a living classroom**. They collected and composted cafeteria food scraps, helped build and care for the garden, and learned how compost returns nutrients to the soil to grow new food. Their hands-on learning extended beyond the schoolyard through **street tree care** in the surrounding community.

Students assisted with planting and maintenance of the garden, and continued to engage with the garden over the summer as our staff ran a free weekly Summer Rising class onsite. **Produce is used in classrooms and garden sessions for tastings and is distributed for free to community members through the existing school pantry.**



Collaborated with Big Reuse



PS 15 Patrick F. Daly

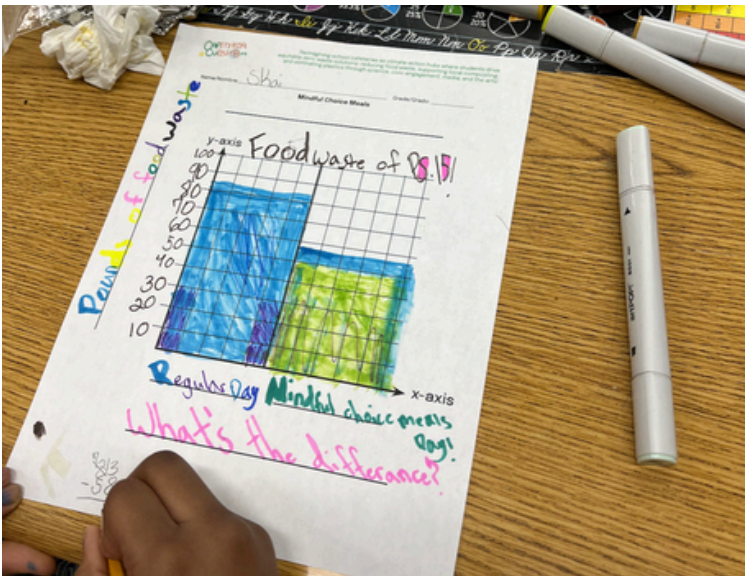
Daily MCM Implementation and Creative Food Education

PS 15, where both the first PFLD and MCM Days began, **implemented MCM for a full week**, allowing us to observe how the new serving approach progressed over consecutive days. Both cafeteria staff and students became more comfortable with the process over time, with meal service becoming smoother and students more confident in making their own choices. A waste audit showed a **45% reduction in food waste** compared with our baseline audit before MCM.

Now a local composting pilot school, our staff collect food scraps at PS 15 monthly. Depending on the collection day, scraps are either composted on-site or brought by our Compost Coordinator to the nearby Red Hook Farms community composting site.

Our staff worked with two groups, including Fourth Graders and an Academics, Career, and Essential Skills (ACES) class with differently-abled students. For the ACES class, our staff developed new teaching tools, including an interactive puppet show to teach MCM.

Fourth Grade students also **testified before NYC Council** about their experience with local composting and advocated for its inclusion in DSNY’s 10-Year Solid Waste Management Plan.



PS/MS 278 The Paula Hedbavny School

School-Led Mindful Choice Meals Program

PS/MS 278 is our newest partner school, where we tested a minimum-support implementation model for MCM before running our citywide pilot that still resulted in a 32% reduction in food waste. Our staff conducted:

- Baseline and day-of MCM audits and provided training for teachers and kitchen staff on Offer vs. Serve (OVS) practices and serving adjustments.
- Cafeteria Culture staff worked directly with K-2 Grade students after the 2 audits to review and compare the food waste data and discuss menu items and food components.

Student OVS education and outreach, menu communication, and broader school engagement activities were led independently by the school, providing an important opportunity to evaluate how MCM could function with minimal direct Cafeteria Culture involvement across multiple grade levels.



Lower Eastside Girls Club

Environmental Advocacy Art Classes

Cafeteria Culture continues to offer free weekly afterschool environmental art classes to middle school students at the Lower Eastside Girls Club during the school year. This year, these sessions focused on video creation, printmaking, including linocut and screenprinting, and zinemaking. Students learned about the waste cycle, local composting, and various environmental justice issues. They created media about food waste, littering, landfills, gardens, and climate change in various formats, including videos, postcards, posters, zines, t-shirts, and tote bags.





Other Notable Achievements

Building Evidence and Tools for Food Waste Prevention

Working alongside students, our staff conducted numerous detailed waste audits to measure food waste, consumption, and cafeteria waste patterns. These audits are central to our evidence-based recommendations to NYCPS for more climate-smart meal service. We also expanded our MCM Toolkit with new resources to help educators bring MCM into their own schools and trained stakeholders across NYCPS to use these tools to reduce food waste.

25

Waste Audits Conducted at NYCPS

223

Educators, Staff, and School Food Staff Trained for MCM

100+

MCM Toolkit Downloads

Waste Audits

We conducted 25 waste audits this year to evaluate the effectiveness of our MCM, and to quantify the full impacts of the CEE model on waste generation. These detailed audits are critical to our evidence based work, providing the data needed to evaluate results, refine our approaches, and confidently scale successful pilots.



Teacher Trainings and MCM Webinars

We held 2 teacher trainings, providing NYCPS educators with practical tools and resources to introduce MCM concepts in the classroom and support student food choices. We also held 4 MCM webinars for school and NYCPS staff, including principals, cafeteria staff, school aides, teachers, and OFNS and OES staff, focused on implementing MCM in school cafeterias.

MCM Toolkit

We published our free MCM Toolkit to help schools bring MCM into their own cafeterias and classrooms. **More than 100 educators across the country** have already accessed to the MCM Toolkit. We continue to refine and expand the Toolkit with waste audit guides, classroom lessons, presentation slides, and more.



Partnerships and Funders

Our partnerships with the organizations, government agencies, coalitions, and funders below ensure that our programs are constantly evolving. We are grateful to be able to work with them all!



Looking Ahead

This year showed us what is possible when students, cafeteria staff, educators, and communities are given practical ways to rethink school food and waste. The next chapter is about turning what we have learned into lasting practice.

We see exciting opportunities ahead: bringing MCM into everyday cafeteria operations across more schools, connecting schools to neighborhood composting hubs, and helping shape the next generation of NYCPS cafeterias to serve students well with less food and packaging waste. At the same time, we will continue testing, measuring, and learning alongside students so that their experiences help inform the systems designed for them.

Most of all, we are excited to see young people grow from learners into leaders. Whether weighing food waste, making compost, growing food, creating media, or speaking before City Council, they are showing us what a more climate-smart and equitable school food system can look like.

There is much more to do, and we are ready for what comes next.

If you would like to support the next chapter of our work, please [click here](#) or scan the QR code.

With sincere gratitude,
Atsuko Quirk
Atsuko Quirk
Executive Director,
Cafeteria Culture

