

NYC schools kick organic waste from curb to composting

By Chris Nicholson

If compost can make it there, it can make it anywhere.

In an effort to reduce its garbage footprint, the New York City Department of Education has partnered with the Department of Sanitation to launch its Organic Waste Collection Program in the city's schools. The effort was inspired by a 2012 self-funded pilot program organized by a handful of PTAs in Manhattan's Upper West Side, says John Shea, chief executive officer at the New York City Department of Education.

The following academic year the city took over and collected organic waste from 89 schools, then grew the program to 358 schools in 2013-14. This month the effort will expand to cover nearly 750 schools in every borough, with aspirations to include all of the city's 1,300 public educational facilities by

the 2016-17 year.

Participating schools have a station of color-coded refuse bins in cafeterias—one for organics, and others for liquids, recycling and landfill. Students are educated to separate their waste accordingly. The organic waste is collected by the city and brought to commercial composting facilities where it is used to create nutrient-rich soil for resale.

"Forty percent of the waste stream from New York City schools is generated from the cafeteria," Shea says, adding that some 80 percent of that is compostable organics and paper. "We realized that if we could divert that waste, we could not only save the city money, but we could also make an extraordinary environmental impact and make a statement about recycling."

The financial benefits will



Different bins in nearly 750 New York City schools help students separate organic waste for composting.

only increase over time, says Bridget Anderson, deputy commissioner for recycling at the New York City Department of Sanitation. NYC spends approximately \$100 per ton to dispose of trash in landfills, while the cost of disposing of organics is 40 to 60 percent less, Anderson says. The lower costs are made possible by sales of the end product.

Once the city's entire school

system is participating, she expects the department will be able to negotiate even lower costs with the composting facilities that receive the waste.

In the first 18 months of the program, the sanitation department collected over 1,900 tons of organic waste from the schools, according to a report filed with the mayor's office in March 2014.

Chris Nicholson is copy editor.

TIPS FOR BUILDING AN ORGANICS COLLECTION SYSTEM

Bridget Anderson, deputy commissioner for recycling at the New York City Department of Sanitation, offers tips for districts launching an organics collection system:

- Ensure that everyone in the food-to-waste chain is on board, from cooks to janitors to teachers to principals. And look for an enthusiastic representative in each school to champion the effort—to ensure everyone is educated about organics collection and complies with their responsibilities. "They're the army that actually makes it happen," Anderson says.
- Start school programs in neighborhoods where local trash haulers also collect organic waste. Mirroring the effort means students are receiving the same environmental message at home and in school.
- Distinguish organics from trash. Students and staff members need to know how to distinguish organic material. So when starting a separation program at a new school, expect a learning curve. Position volunteer "green teams" of students and teachers at each bin to provide guidance in the first few weeks of implementation.
- Simplify the process by using compostable trays and cutlery. These items are generally more expensive, but if bought through a co-op can be revenue-neutral.