



# Cafeteria Recycling & ORGANICS COLLECTION Set-Up Guide & Handbook



Developed by the GrowNYC Recycling Champions Program,  
in partnership with the NYC Departments of Education and Sanitation



**NYC**  
Organics Collection

Call 311 or visit  
[nyc.gov](http://nyc.gov) for more  
information

**Introducing organics  
recycling.**

Your organic waste will be made into  
compost or renewable energy.



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## Introduction

*Over 700 NYC schools will be collecting their organic waste in addition to recycling in the cafeteria. This new practice will require all students to separate recyclable and organic materials left over from their meals into separate bins at their cafeteria sorting station. This handbook outlines the organizational steps and best practices so you can effectively begin these sorting programs in your cafeteria.*

Cafeteria recycling with Organics Collection is a simple practice that compliments your school’s existing recycling program. Every time we sort our recyclable and organic materials, instead of throwing it away, we reduce our need for landfills, thus lowering NYC’s expensive landfill costs and decreasing greenhouse gas emissions. Benefits of cafeteria recycling and organics collection can be far reaching—addressing areas of cleanliness, conduct, stewardship and responsibility—reinforcing classroom recycling practices, and building positive, sustainable habits. Cafeteria recycling with organics collection also:

- Reduces cleanup for SchoolFood, School Aides, and Custodial Staff by reducing litter.
- Sorting Stations create a more organized cafeteria routine and orderly environment.
- Reinforces classroom recycling practices and contributes to positive, sustainable habits.
- Offers an opportunity for students to take a leadership and/or mentoring role.

### What is Composting?

Composting is when organic-based waste material is converted into fertilizer or soil amendments that can be used to improve the quality of soil for street trees, gardens, and more.

### What goes into the Organics Bin



All leftover food (including meat, bones & dairy)



compostable plates



paper products: paper boats, plates, cups, napkins

### What goes into the Recycling Bin



Milk and juice cartons, bottles, yogurt and fruit cups, plastic utensils

### What goes into the Trash



All styrofoam, soft plastic, wrappers, rubber gloves

NOTE: All common cafeteria recyclables are part of NYC’s [BLUE STREAM](#) recycling, which encompasses [METAL/GLASS/PLASTIC/CARTONS](#).

# SECTION I:

## Organizing a cafeteria recycling program

### I. FIRST THINGS FIRST: Set a Date

Cafeteria recycling and organics separation can start at any time of the year—certainly the earlier in the school year the better. Set a goal for a start date. Consider school attendance, vacations, and proximity to when you plan student outreach.

### II. EVERYONE COUNTS: Meet with Key Participants

Find a time to get a key group of people involved in the initial plans. It's with this group that you will share and outline responsibilities, identify assistance, and garner needed support. Remember, the important thing is just getting the conversation started! Some general questions you may want to ask them are:

- What is the biggest challenge(s) to getting the recycling and organics program up and running in the cafeteria?
- What is working about the current process in the cafeteria? What isn't working?
- What are some next steps for working around the challenge(s)?

#### Who Should be Included?

**Principal and/or Assistant Principal:** Support from school administration is critical to the success of any school recycling and organics program.

- Administrators should be included in an initial planning meeting with other key participants. Their presence at the meeting is essential to clearly communicating the strategy for the cafeteria recycling and organics setup and symbolizes the importance of effectively sorting cafeteria waste.
- Once the cafeteria sorting setup is launched, school administrators may be needed to make a few announcements in the cafeteria to explain and reinforce the setup with students.

**Sustainability Coordinator:** Sustainability Coordinators can play a vital role in arranging organizational meetings with other key participants (listed in this section) and work with the SchoolFood and the Custodian Engineer to secure the necessary resources (see Section I, Part IV: Materials & Setup) for the sorting station setup. NOTE: If you are unsure of whom your Sustainability Coordinator is you should ask your Principal.

- Additionally, the Sustainability Coordinator can organize the Green Team, or recruit additional students, to become cafeteria recycling and organics monitors – this has proven to be an effective way to sustain proper sorting in the cafeteria (see Section I, Part V: Get Students Involved).

#### Our key participants are:

Principal or assistant principal:

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Sustainability Coordinator:

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Custodian Engineer:

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SchoolFood Manager:

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**Custodian Engineer:** Your Custodian Engineer and custodial staff will be an essential part of the conversation and can possibly provide you with materials for the sorting station. You also may need to coordinate with him/ her about storage of recyclables once they have been collected from the cafeteria and before they're put out for pick-up (see Section III, Part IV: Storage of Recyclables). He /she may also be able to provide you with some useful ideas for how to arrange the bins so lunch will run smoothly.

**SchoolFood Manager:** Your SchoolFood Manager, along with the Custodian Engineer, will be able to offer you invaluable information about the day-to-day oversight of the cafeteria. If you can't locate all of the supplies you need from your Custodian Engineer, check with your SchoolFood Manager. They typically have extra materials such as a liquids bucket and strainer, extra lids for the 55 gallon bins and they may also have a floor rack for the liquids bucket.



Properly implemented sorting stations can create a cleaner cafeteria, limiting waste and cleanup times

## Note: Campus Buildings

If there are multiple schools in your building, it's ideal but not essential to have every school participating in cafeteria recycling and organics separation. If you are including multiple schools, expand this list to include the Sustainability Coordinators, Principals and APs from other schools.

**School Aides**—School Aides' support and input is critical to the planning and implementation of cafeteria recycling and organics separation. Some school aides may manage arrival and dismissal, swipe students in for lunch and make announcements.

- School Aides are key actors in ensuring that cafeteria recycling runs as smoothly as possible so include them in the entire planning process. They may offer some advice or ideas about how a recycling and organics program can be streamlined into the existing practices/routines of the cafeteria. Properly implemented sorting stations can create a cleaner cafeteria, limiting waste and cleanup times while maintaining a more orderly environment. This offers an incentive for School Aides to take an active role.

### III. KNOW THE LAY OF THE LAND: What is the Cafeteria Culture?

Observe existing habits (all of this will tell you about the cafeteria culture and help you to take the next steps for implementing cafeteria recycling and organics collection; you can't make change if you don't know what to change.) Observe the following:

- Where do students line up for lunch?
- What are the routines of students when they finish their lunch?
- Is there a dismissal process?
- Where are the bins located? Are they clearly marked?
- Does staff clean tables in between lunch?

### IV. DO YOUR HOMEWORK:

**Materials & Setup** – Find, purchase, or assemble a cafeteria recycling station that best suits your school's needs. Please see the "Set-up Best Practices" section for ideas and images.

**Bins & Lids** – Typically, large bins (usually gray 55 gallon Rubbermaid bins) and a smaller liquids bucket (to collect remaining milk and juice) can be found in the cafeteria kitchen or from your Custodian Engineer. Lids are highly recommended for metal, glass and plastic bins so as to distinguish recycling bins from trash bins, and limit recycling contamination. Square holes can be cut into the center of lids. DSNY will provide bins for organics.

**Signage** – Signage will be provided by the New York City Department of Sanitation . Any signs should be protected with lamination.



**Sorting Stations** – Sorting stations that are convenient and noticeable will increase recycling and organics collection rates so student input here can be valuable. SchoolFood can provide you with a floor rack to rest the liquids bucket on. Once recycling and composting is launched, stations should be present everyday and bins should always remain together; they are not to be separated. DO NOT place any trash bins in the cafeteria away from the sorting station, as this will encourage disposal without sorting. Consistency will foster good recycling habits, as well as allow for student participation to improve.

## V. ALL TOGETHER NOW: Get Students Involved

NYC schools have taken a variety of approaches to student outreach. Remember that launching cafeteria recycling and organics collection can also be fun, and involving students can be a great way to bring some positive energy to the lunch room—have a raffle, create a temporary mural, etc. Remember to keep it simple, but feel free to be creative. Here are the basics (see Section II: Set-Up Best Practice for more ideas and images):

- **When?** What periods in your school schedule— advisory periods, assembly times, homerooms – exist when students can be introduced to the process? Look for opportunities to do outreach during lunch or address entire grades during advisory periods. Whatever path your school chooses, remember that it is best to address all students in as concise a time frame as possible leading up to your launch date in the cafeteria.



- **Where?** Could the cafeteria host a town hall meeting during an advisory or homeroom period prior to lunch? Would it be better to host an event or assembly in the auditorium? In either case it's best to set up a demo sorting station. If you're using the cafeteria, then the sorting station can be in the location where it will be placed permanently.
- **Who?** Involving student leaders in your outreach is a great way to increase participation and integrate into the school's culture. Administrative figures present will help bring structure to the process. If you're planning on having students monitor the recycling to start, this would be a good time to involve them.

## VI. SPREAD THE WORD: Communicate to Staff

Even if staff is not present in the cafeteria, it's great to generate support and awareness by informing them about the cafeteria recycling and organics program. A pre-drafted overview flyer is available on our Cafeteria Recycling website. Staff can also be reminded of the cafeteria sorting efforts during the year and updated on any progress relating to your school's recycling and organics collection goals.



## VII. IT'S SHOWTIME! : Rollout the Cafeteria Launch

Now that you have completed the above steps, it's time to present the new and improved cafeteria to the school community! Set a day for the launch, create buzz by hanging up signs and spreading the word, and then have an "unveiling" ceremony. It will be helpful to use this as an opportunity to demonstrate the steps and to point out the new signage (See Section II: Cafeteria Best Practices for additional ideas on how to customize your cafeteria roll out.) Make your progress public – some ideas include involving students and conducting interviews for the school newspaper, math classes measuring results, or science classes conducting a waste audit.

# SECTION II: SET-UP BEST PRACTICES

*While each cafeteria has a unique layout and culture, some best practices have been established that may be easily modified to work in every cafeteria. Below are some proven ideas to implement your launch and some examples of model cafeteria setups.*

## I. MAKING IT WORK: Organizing Best Practices

### I. Unveiling the New Sorting Stations

Work to make the roll-out itself as exciting and fun as possible – mark this occasion ceremoniously, so students, staff and faculty will remember the event. Some schools have held town hall style meetings (this is particularly effective for campus buildings with more than one school), in which student leaders helped by explaining and demonstrating the new recycling process. They also asked for volunteers from the audience to show how it's done.



## II. Student Outreach

Recruiting student leaders for outreach is key—their voices will be an effective tool for spreading the message about the new cafeteria recycling program. The sustainability coordinator can meet with them to work on their plan for outreach. In the past, it has worked well to have students approach tables in pairs, both on the day of the launch and before and after, explaining the process for recycling, why it’s important, and even demonstrating the steps.

ELEMENTARY	INTERMEDIATE
<p><b>MAKE IT FUN!</b> One school used the term “Cafeteria Rangers” for their student cafeteria monitors</p>	<p><b>STUDENT LEADERS:</b> Students do table to table outreach and education explaining the new sorting practices.</p>
<p><b>PAIR STUDENTS:</b> Older students mentor younger students to model and assist with cafeteria protocol.</p>	<p><b>USE STUDENT TALENTS:</b> Give students a chance to showcase their talents in promotional activities (ex. Student DJ entertained during lunch)</p>
<p><b>STUDENT RAFFLE:</b> Tickets are distributed to each student who correctly sorts their items.</p>	

## III. Establish a Routine

Establishing a routine is important – the consistency from day to day will aid in making the program a success. Being clear about each step in the process is key—the signage will support this, as will demonstrations on the day of the roll-out and periodically after that, if necessary. Remember you want to make recycling and sorting part of everyday school life –something that ultimately becomes second nature for the students and staff alike.

## IV. Dismissal

Be mindful of existing dismissal processes. Are students allowed to empty their trash individually as they choose, or are they called by table? You may want to provide additional time for the new sorting procedures, or modify existing dismissal practices so students have time to properly sort their items.



## V. Managing Stations

When managing the stations, it is useful to know who is responsible for each step. This is a team effort. Reference the chart below for delegation of responsibilities.

### School Food Staff Responsibilities

- Set up sorting stations
- Empty and rinse liquid buckets after each lunch period, and return them to sorting stations
- Locate waste in a designated area for custodial staff to pick up
- Order clear bags from your kitchen manager

### Custodial Staff Responsibilities

- Work with SchoolFoods to make sure bins match signs
- Purchase blue recycling bin (at least one per station)
- Clean floors, walls, and spills
- Bring waste to storage area or dumpsters for sanitation pick-up. Food Scrap bins are picked up daily and must be curbside by 4pm

### Administration and Sustainability Coordinator Responsibilities

- Annual orientations to students on cafeteria sorting
- Periodically check on signage and station conditions
- Reinforce students cleaning up after themselves, not leaving trash behind on tables or the floor

## II. SETTING IT UP: Sorting Station Best Practices

### I. Cafeteria Layout

Survey the current cafeteria layout and flow: There are a few different ways to set up the sorting stations in your cafeteria. You may decide first the number of stations you'd like, where they'll go, and then find the materials to supply them (coordinate with SchoolFood and Custodial Staff). Or you can find out what materials you have in your school and then establish how many stations can be created. Here are some tips to keep in mind:

- Sorting stations should be conveniently located. Students are a great resource to ask about good locations.
- Stations should remain in the same place every day, and bins should never be separated. DO NOT place any trash bins in the cafeteria away from the sorting station, as this will encourage disposal without sorting.
- If bins are not on wheels, they are less likely to be moved around.
- Consistency is important; if you have multiple stations, they should have identical signage and operation.



## II. Cafeteria Setup

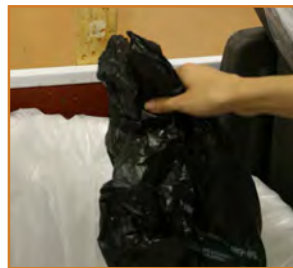
Though actual setups will vary according to cafeteria layout and design (see next section), all cafeteria sorting set-ups must include the following four steps:



**STEP 1:**  
**POUR**  
liquids into bucket



**STEP 2:**  
**RECYCLE**  
cartons, cans, bottles,  
foil, and hard plastics



**STEP 3:**  
**DISCARD TRASH**  
plastic bags, foam  
wrappers, and film



**STEP 4:**  
**COLLECT ORGANICS**  
food scraps, compostable  
plates, paper boats, cups,  
plates, and napkins

## III. Cafeteria Sorting Station Example – P.S. 138 in Brooklyn



# SECTION III: Follow-Up & Troubleshooting Guide

*Once the new cafeteria sorting stations are implemented, you will need to monitor and troubleshoot the setup. Below are some solutions on how to tackle challenges you may run into as you work to get the new sorting practices established.*

## I. Follow-up

Once you've introduced cafeteria recycling and organics collection, it often takes a couple of weeks to establish a new routine with students and staff alike. The first weeks offer an important window of opportunity to speak with staff, faculty and students about the new setup – make a few adjustments if something is not working. Seek input from staff; you may need to clarify any logistical issues with SchoolFood or custodians. Just remember, consistency is important, so it is ideal to create a functional setup as quickly as possible.

In addition to working out any kinks with the recycling and organics setup, you will need to check in on the students' sorting process. Here are three effective ways to monitor cafeteria sorting:

**Announcements:** Ask any School Aides or Assistant Principals that make announcements during lunch to briefly remind students to properly separate and sort their waste items. Cafeteria announcements are an easy way to explain the new setup, but if your cafeteria is especially large or rowdy, they may have limited effect. If this is the case, then reinforce with a more formal announcement from the principal.

**Student Monitors:** One way to empower students and increase recycling and organics collection rates is through the use of student monitors at each station. A club or Green Team can serve as an effective way to remind students to sort their items. Students could be rotated throughout the lunch period to monitor and explain the sorting steps to their peers. If a student presence is not sustainable due to scheduling, it can be slowly reduced as student habits and participation increase.



**Check-Up Visits:** After the first couple of weeks, unannounced check-ups and visits are important to make sure all components of the sorting setup are in place from day to day. There are many components involved in a cafeteria sorting setup and it is important to frequently monitor progress. Unannounced visits are the best way to truly capture what is happening in the cafeteria. Please keep in mind these visits should not be imposing like an official inspection, but are a great opportunity to capture a snapshot of student behavior and the setup of the sorting stations. If improvement is needed, use the opportunity to address them with the respective parties (SchoolFood, School Aides or the Custodial Crew) in a constructive manner.

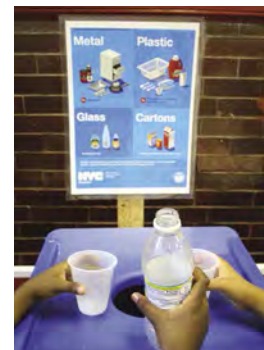
## II. Troubleshooting

### I. Lack of Support

Support and leadership from your school’s administration, Custodian Engineer, Sustainability Coordinator and SchoolFood Manager is important to the success of cafeteria sorting practices. Custodian Engineers have annual mandatory recycling trainings, which cover cafeteria recycling, hosted by the NYC DOE Sustainability Initiative, the NYC Dept. of Sanitation, and GrowNYC. If support remains an issue then partner with a group of students, or staff, to ask for change—this can be a powerful way to generate support.

### II. Litter & Cleanliness

Part of generating support for cafeteria sorting can come from pointing out the negatives. Litter, lack of cleanliness, and misbehavior in the cafeteria are not reasons why sorting isn’t possible, they are reasons to initiate sorting. SchoolFood employees, custodians, and even school safety may be spending an extraordinary amount of time cleaning up after students in the cafeteria. An orderly cafeteria that recycles and collects organics will save staff a lot of time and effort and make their job more pleasant. Students must take personal responsibility for their cafeteria waste – recycling and organics collection can be the leverage with which bad habits and behavior are improved. Look within your school’s existing lunch structure and schedule to find opportunities to address these issues.



### III. Student Participation

So you’ve held a cafeteria recycling and organics collection launch, but many students are still not correctly sorting their waste. Basic things can be done, such as asking School Aides or APs present in the cafeteria to make a quick reminder announcement every day as a way to plug the new practice. Student monitors can be helpful in reinforcing new habits with sorting. Make sure that monitors never clean up for students—they are only there to guide and remind students. Some schools have found campaigns, competitions amongst grades, or set goals with rewards to be beneficial.



#### Examples include:

- **Student Raffle** – Students receive a raffle ticket after they have successfully sorted all of their waste. Students could win reusable water bottles, t-shirts, homework passes, etc.
- **Classroom Competition** – Use Green Team students to monitor the sorting area and to award one point to each student’s homeroom that correctly sorts their items. The Green Team students track the points each lunch period for an entire week. At the end of the week, the class with the most points earns a classroom award (ex. Pizza party, lunch out, extra recess, homework pass, etc).

### IV. Storage and Collection of Recyclables and Organics

**Recycling** - NYC school kitchens do a good job recycling. Find out where the kitchen’s recyclables are stored or placed prior to going out to the curbside – cafeteria recyclables could be placed with them. Recyclables are picked up according to your route schedule but if you think your school would benefit from additional DSNY recycling pickups, then schedule a walk-through with DSNY by clicking, [here](#) . As outlined by DSNY, all blue stream recyclables (metal, glass, rigid plastic, milk and juice cartons) are picked up curbside, there is no dumpster service for

blue stream recyclables. Recyclables can be stored outside beside a dumpster or in an easy to access fenced in area adjacent to the school. There may also be a spare or sparsely used closet or storage area near the kitchen. If this is the case, then Custodians and School Food Managers will need to be in agreement about the location

**Organics** – Schools with organics collection are on a special Department of Sanitation pickup route. Organics collection containers must be placed curbside in their designated pickup spot by 4 pm daily.

## V. Sorting Stations

Consistency is crucial to developing positive habits. If stations are not out every day, in the same location, then students do not have the opportunity to sort their items. SchoolFood employees should not need to bring the sorting stations in and out from the kitchen. If this is happening, speak with your SchoolFood Manager about directing the kitchen staff to keep the stations in their place. If custodians move the stations to clean the floor, please ask the Custodian Engineer to remind his or her staff that the stations should be put back in their place. Also, any School Aides or teachers working with students in the cafeteria should be instructed through a conversation or school memo to please not bring bins closer to their tables, or wheel them around freely. Trash and sorting bins should always be together. Floors could be marked as to where bins go, or wall-posted signage can be the visual markers of where bins are always to be located.



Organics will be collected even with a small amount of contamination

## VI. Contaminated Recycling or Organics

The NYC Department of Sanitation does allow for a small amount of contamination to be in the recycling and organic streams. In other words, it's not the end of the world if a banana peel and a chips bag ends up in the recycling or a plastic fork ends up in the organics collection bin. Of course, a sorting program should always work to limit contamination, and strive for the cleanest stream of recyclables and organics. A clean organics stream enables an effective composting process at facilities. Non-organic material may damage equipment, interfere with the compost process, and contaminate the soil amendment.

**Recycling** - Utilizing lids with holes is the best way to limit trash from being placed in a recycling bin. If you have recycling bins with lids and holes, the biggest contaminant will be milk. This is problematic as milk creates odor and vermin issues during storage. As a result, the liquids bucket should be greatly emphasized during the student outreach or recycling launch. Students should also be encouraged to finish their milk before dumping out the remainder. If the milk is frozen, then that carton should be placed in the trash.

**Organics** - If a very small amount of non-compostable material is present in the bin, it is still acceptable, however it is important to emphasize that uncontaminated compost is imperative to a successful organic collection program. This is an area where Cafeteria Monitors can make a big difference with the sorting process.

## VII. Costs

Cafeteria sorting setups can happen without your school incurring any additional costs. Most NYC schools already have the supplies to set up the sorting stations in the cafeteria, including the widely used gray 55 gallon Rubbermaid bins which are used by Custodian Engineers and School Food. Lids are the only variable, and lids to fit the

common 55 gallon bins, can be purchased using the Recycling Champions Bin Guide , or through the custodian’s SDI catalog. Look to your principal’s budget or your custodian engineer’s budget to fund the purchase of lids. Any signage should also be protected from food and liquid spills, therefore the other small cost may be laminating or protecting signage.

## VIII. Lack of Consistency

Common problems: Bins are not set up in the correct order each day, the sorting station is relocated, or bins and/or signs become damaged or missing. Successful cafeteria sorting is a result of creating new habits—to that extent, consistency is paramount. It is important that bins and signage are in the same place every day. If you find the bins are not returned to the cafeteria after they are emptied or if signage becomes missing or damaged, it is important to replace them immediately. Typically, SchoolFood is responsible for the cafeteria setup each day—speak with one of their employees to address this situation (NOTE: in some schools, custodians fill this role).

## IX. Missing Bins and/or Signage

If bins become misplaced or damaged, the Custodian Engineer has a budget to order new ones. Alternatively, you may ask SchoolFood if they have an extra gray, 55 gallon bin with a lid. Simply cut a square hole in the lid (large enough for a milk carton) and place a blue label on the bin and lid. Replacement signs can be downloaded from the DSNY . If your organics bin becomes damaged or is missing, please contact your DDF for a replacement.

## X. Sustaining the Setup From Year to Year

The majority of students will learn to sort their waste in elementary school and will carry this practice with them through middle and high school. However, if you launch cafeteria recycling and organics collection program to all grades in your school this year, then make sure incoming students are informed about the process during an orientation or their first lunch. This can be organized by the Sustainability Coordinator and executed by students or another member of the staff. A reminder can be sent to your Custodian Engineer and SchoolFood staff at the beginning of the year, with a Recycling Champions pre-drafted letter. Both custodians and SchoolFood managers are aware that cafeteria sorting should be happening, and will do their part to make it a part of every school day.

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**For more information on Organics Collection, contact:**

**GrowNYC**

[www.grownyc.org/rcp](http://www.grownyc.org/rcp)  
[schoolrecycling@grownyc.org](mailto:schoolrecycling@grownyc.org)

**NYC DOE Sustainability Initiative**

[schools.nyc.gov/sustainability](http://schools.nyc.gov/sustainability)  
[sustainability@schools.nyc.gov](mailto:sustainability@schools.nyc.gov)

**NYC Department of Sanitation**

[www.nyc.gov/recycles](http://www.nyc.gov/recycles)