

**Important Note:** This activity was developed for the original Green Lunchroom Challenge program, a voluntary pledge program for K-12 schools to improve the sustainability of their food service



operations. The project was coordinated by the [Illinois Sustainable Technology Center Technical Assistance Program](#) with funding from US EPA Region 5.

The following page(s) represent the content of this activity as it appeared on the original project web site, complete with available points and instructions for submitting documentation. **The project is no longer funded and as of June 2018 schools may no longer submit activity documentation to earn points and recognition as described.** The activity is presented for your information to guide your organization's sustainability efforts.

If your school or district implements the suggested activity and wishes to share its experiences, please email [Joy Scrogum](#). Your story may be incorporated into a blog post on this web site, the main ISTC site, or shared on social media to foster networking and inspiration among peer institutions.

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# Do a baseline lunchroom waste characterization (pre waste-free lunch day or policy implementation)

**Activity Category:** Zero Waste Lunchrooms

**Activity:** Do a baseline lunchroom waste characterization (pre waste-free lunch day or policy implementation)

**Rationale:** Before making any changes to your lunchroom procedures with the intention of reducing food waste, it's important to get a feel for what types of waste, in what quantities, are being currently generated on a typical day. If you don't take the time to assess the status quo, you may make incorrect assumptions about what constitutes the majority of your waste stream, and take actions based on those assumptions which will ultimately not impact waste



From [A Guide to Conducting and Analyzing a Food Waste Assessment](#)

generation to the extent you had hoped. A baseline waste characterization helps to identify the major categories of waste that need to be addressed, and can also highlight simple changes that could be made to achieve immediate results. For example, if you conduct a waste characterization and find that a significant percent of what's in your lunchroom trash cans are actually recyclables that are ending up in the wrong bin, you know that actions like educating staff and students about recycling procedures, improving bin signs, and considering changes to the number and location of recycling bins could be effective strategies to reduce the amount of waste being sent to landfill (and thus reduce the costs of waste hauling for your school). Further, if you see that a large proportion of the food waste in the bins are a particular category of food, such as vegetables, you could focus efforts to make that category of food more appealing, adjust portion sizes, etc. to reduce the amounts wasted. Establishing the status quo before any changes are made also allows you to accurately measure the impacts of your changes. You can do a follow-up waste characterization (see the Activity list) after you've made changes and compare the results to your baseline to assess the efficacy of your efforts.

**Activity Description:** Conduct a waste audit of your school's lunchroom. (**Note: Districts participating in the Green Lunchroom Challenge may conduct an audit of one or more representative schools in your district, or schools which are being targeted for process changes to reduce waste.**) Use the US EPA's [A Guide to Conducting and Analyzing](#)

a [Food Waste Assessment](#), or other documents in the Resources section below, as a guide for the process if you are using your own staff and/or students to conduct the audit. Alternatively, you may solicit the technical assistance of an external organization to perform the audit for you or alongside your staff (see the Resources section below for organizations which may provide assistance). Sort and record the weights or calculated volumes of each category of waste encountered. For food waste, you may wish to estimate, or separate and weigh, the amounts of different types of food (e.g. vegetable sides, fruit sides, entrees, beverages, beverage containers, etc.) to better guide your waste reduction strategies, but that level of analysis is not required to earn points for this activity. **You may perform an audit of pre-consumer (kitchen) waste, post-consumer (dining area) waste, or both, but please be aware of the fact that auditing both will allow you to identify the most effective strategies for reducing and preventing food waste and other forms of waste at your facility.** Note also that this activity is an excellent opportunity to involve a class or student club, providing additional hands for the waste sort and an engaging experiential learning opportunity for students. Involving students in the sorting process can also be a great way to get their buy-in for any process changes that are later implemented based on the results of this baseline audit.

**Earn Challenge Points (250 points):** Submit a Word or PDF document **describing your waste characterization process** (if you follow the EPA's guide or another organization's guide, you may simply reference the guide you followed. **Include who conducted the audit (staff, students, parents, or some combination?), the date of the audit(s), a copy of your data sheets** (you can use samples provided in any of the guidance documents below or create your own) **and results summary.** (For an example of how to break waste into categories and report the percentage of total represented by each category, see the "Waste Characterization" section of [Recycling and Waste Reduction Opportunity Assessment: Forest Preserve District of Cook County](#). You do not need to exactly match all the categories listed there, as not all may be appropriate for your situation. This is simply to help you understand what is meant by sorting the waste into distinct categories.) If you represent a district and conducted audits at more than one school, information from all schools assessed should be included in one document, along with the rationale for choosing those schools. **Include at least 2 photos from your sort**, depicting how you sorted waste and who was involved. **Describe 3-5 ideas for reducing food waste and/or other waste categories at your facility(ies) based on your results.** Email your document to Joy Scrogum at [jscrogum@illinois.edu](mailto:jscrogum@illinois.edu).

#### Resources:

-  [A Guide to Conducting and Analyzing a Food Waste Assessment](#)
-  [Waste Assessments & Waste Audits](#)
-  [School Waste Assessment Form](#)
-  [Waste Audit Sort Sheets](#)
-  [Recycling and Waste Reduction Opportunity Assessment: Forest Preserve District of Cook County](#)
-  Organizations that may provide technical assistance:
  -  [Illinois Sustainable Technology Center](#) (contact [Shantanu Pai](#) or [Joy Scrogum](#))

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