

# Composting and Waste-Free Lunches at Western Trails Elementary School, Carol Stream, IL



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**School Description:** Western Trails is a public elementary school in Carol Stream, IL, Community Consolidated School District 93, serving 386 students during the 2016-2017 school year. Its mission is to provide opportunities for students to achieve their personal best, become responsible and productive citizens, and embrace lifelong learning in a safe and positive environment. In the Western Trails philosophy, school is not just about children: it encompasses families, parents, community, stakeholders, society, the environment and beyond.

**Purpose and Objectives:** With assistance from the environmental education non-profit SCARCE, Western Trails completed a waste audit in February 2015. The results showed that food scraps comprised 82% of the school's waste stream. With this statistic in hand, the school decided to begin composting to reduce the amount of food scraps being sent to landfill.

## HIGHLIGHTS

Less than 1% of food scraps generated at the school currently go to landfill.

Western Trails was the first school in its district to work to reduce food waste, helping all other seven schools to follow suit.

Reusable trays, as well as compostable liners and utensils, are used.

Student council members helped create waste sorting guides for the lunchroom.

Students that bring waste-free lunches to school are recognized and rewarded.

A sharing table is used to divert food for human consumption.



Hallway compost bins – most used after snack time.

## Description of Activities:

The school signed up for a commercial composting service in March 2015, and began collecting food waste from breakfast, lunch, snack times, and after-school functions for diversion from landfill. Currently six food scrap collection bins are available in the hallways, two small bins for meeting rooms, and two large bins are present in the lunchroom. To help students and staff understand how to properly sort their waste into compost and recycling bins, a PowerPoint slide show illustrating “what goes where” was created and shared. Members of the Student Council (fourth and fifth grade students) were engaged to help create posters for the lunchroom waste center to reinforce proper sorting practices. The school has also worked with the district's food service provide, Organic Life, to reduce waste. All products provided to students at lunchtime are compostable or recyclable. Organic Life replaced previously-used plastic #6 containers with recyclable containers and removed all packets, baggies, and plastic utensils from their packaging. Students receive purchased meals on reusable trays with a compostable liner. Staff are provided

with compostable plates, and compostable utensils have replaced the plastic ones. Additionally, for those students who pack their lunch, a program has been created to encourage waste-free lunches. Students who

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bring waste-free lunches are recognized and rewarded with a note of thanks and a Spirit Stick (a motivational tool used to positively reinforce a variety of desired behaviors among school children).

Student-created signs to guide sorting waste into proper bins in the lunchroom.



**Results:** Currently less than 1% of food scraps generated at the school go to landfill. Western Trails used its experiences and the information created to train students and staff on proper waste sorting to assist other schools within CCSD93. As of

the 2016-2017 school year, all eight schools in the district are participating in a commercial compost program. Western Trails has been recognized by the Illinois Food Scrap Coalition's We Compost program, and the school has also been named an Illinois Green Ribbon school in 2017 for this and other environmental stewardship efforts.

**Next Steps:** Now that food waste diversion has been implemented at Western Trails, the students and staff will work to master this. There is still a need to continue to inform and educate new students and staff at the beginning of each school year. These efforts at school can be different than what students are doing at home, so there is a need to educate them on the reasons behind *why* we compost and recycle as well as *what* we compost and recycle. Western Trails will ask the students for new ways to promote and participate in environmental activities; specifically the Student Council members and the Kid's Club members. Western Trails will continue to use a sharing table in the lunchroom as well as donate uneaten fruit to the school nurse in an effort to reduce waste. There is also a goal of recognizing environmental efforts of staff and students on social media such as Twitter and Seesaw. As a school district, CCSD93 is considering having an Earth Ambassador in each school--someone who can drive environmental efforts at the building level and work together as a team at the district level.



Students show off their reusable water bottles and lunch boxes.

### For more information contact:

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