

Project Title Cafeteria Compost Collection

School Yorktown High School

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Brief summary of the project

Each Wednesday, students throw their lunch food scraps and soiled food trays into compost collection bins. A hauler then empties the bins into their truck and takes it to an industrial composting facility. The Yorktown Environmental Club decided to start this collection in April 2019, and it continued in the 2019-20 school year. The Club created the educational and promotional materials, raised funds to pay the private hauler, and organized the volunteers who oversee sorting during each of the three lunch periods. The project has resulted in diverting nearly 200 gallons each week of trash to composting.

Getting Going

How did the project start? In years leading up to the project, the Yorktown Environmental Club had greatly improved recycling at the school by conducting a waste audit, creating signs, making educational videos, and working with facilities staff. The Club then decided that the next step was to reduce trash by composting in the lunchroom.

Who were important people to contact at the beginning? The Club:

- invited a teacher from Abingdon Elementary School to talk about their composting collection pilot program;
- contacted the Yorktown Principal and an assistant principal, and received their support
- contacted the Arlington County Solid Waste Bureau to see if compost collection could be done through the County's contract, using their haulers (this would have been the easiest and least expensive option, but was not available yet).

What are the threshold resources that need to be identified at the beginning before proceeding further? (For example, robust parent volunteer network, elevated loading docks, nearby outdoor spigot). The project is dependent on a consistent supply of student and/or adult volunteers, and the ability to raise funds to pay the private hauler (The Compost Crew). The school must have space in the trash / recycling area behind the school for the compost totes.

What are the policies (if any) from APS or elsewhere that may affect the project and need to be considered? None.

What budget and/or funding sources were needed? The Club solicited proposals from two private haulers. The Club decided to pay The Compost Crew to haul 3 64-gallon totes each week, for \$265 per month. The Club assembled funding from a GoFundMe campaign, the Yorktown PTA, a small grant, and bake sales.

Implementation

Did you pilot or test the project and then scale it up? If so, describe your process. We started in April 2019, and collected compost each Friday in April and May. This allowed us to see that we could continue it in the 2019-20 school year.

As you rolled the project out, how did you present this to students and encourage their participation? The Club made a variety of promotional and educational materials, including banners, posters, signs for the compost bins, an announcement in the morning, and slideshows that played in the lunchroom. Each week on composting day, the custodians or a volunteer puts the bins, along with recycling bins and trash bins, in a central location (on other days, trash and recycling bins are placed in pairs throughout the lunchroom). At least one student or parent volunteer stands with the bins and helps students determine how to sort their waste. The volunteer has tongs and/or gloves, so that they can grab items and re-sort as necessary. After six months, most of the students know what to do and are supportive (many ask why we don't do it every day). However, some students are too embarrassed to approach the sorting station, and some students do not have any apparent interest in sorting correctly.

Approximately how many students were involved, and how many were affected? There were approximately 20 students in the Club working on this project. The composting collection affected all of the students who eat lunch in the lunchroom (approximately 1500).

What obstacles were overcome? Are there continuing obstacles? What lessons did you learn from doing this? At first, the wrong number and size of totes were delivered, they were not lined with compostable liners, and the hauler did not come the day after the lunchroom collection. For the 2019-20 school year, we bought our own compostable liners, and student volunteers line the bins each week after they are emptied. Also, there was a big wind storm the day after the first collection (before the hauler came). The bins fell over, and scraps and trays started to blow away (luckily a volunteer ran by and cleaned it up). We learned that we needed to place the bins against a fence so that they are sheltered from wind. For 2019-20, we asked the hauler which day it would come (Thursday), and scheduled the lunchroom collection for the day before (Wednesday). We had organized student volunteers who needed service hours for the National Honor Society, but most of the volunteers did not want to actually work with students to make sure that the waste was sorted appropriately, so we stopped seeking volunteers from outside the Club. We worked through a variety of ways of displaying signs

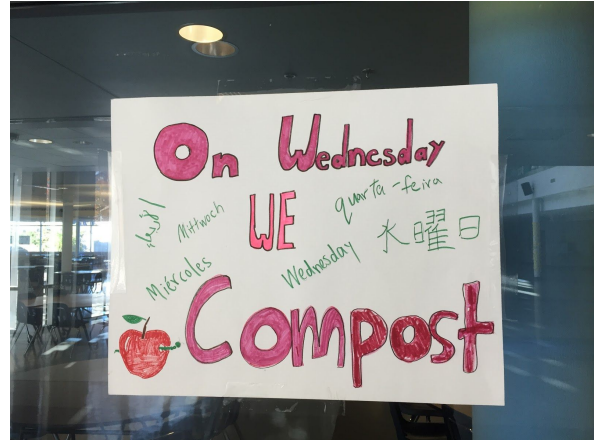
about what is compostable, but the signs kept falling off or were too low for students to see. We were able to clip signs that stand up above the bins, which is much more clear and visible. We found that it was not complicated for students to remove trash from trays and compost the tray and food, except that most students had ketchup packets on their trays, which dramatically increased the amount of time and effort to remove the packets, and usually students had to dump everything on the tray in the trash in order to remove the ketchup packets. In winter 2020, APS started piloting bulk dispensers for ketchup and mustard, which made compost collection much easier.

After seven months of weekly compost collection, we were still relying on having at least one student or parent volunteer at each of three lunch periods, to monitor sorting and continue to teach students how to compost. It would be more sustainable to have lunchroom custodians or lunchroom monitors be responsible for overseeing the sorting and correcting mistakes. Yorktown custodial staff are quite supportive, and although we did not want to impose these responsibilities on them, they have become central to the compost collection. Some custodians go around to lunch tables with a wheeled trash bin, collect waste, then come back to the compost bins and sort the compostables, recyclables, and trash. This is quite effective, and it helps students who are too embarrassed or unsure of themselves to approach the sorting station.

Will the project continue into future years? If so, how will you keep continuity? We will continue the project as a Club as long as there are students in the Club that want to do it, and we can continue to find funding. This is a pilot program that should help APS and the County as it implements compost collection more broadly in coming years. Eventually, when the County's new composting facility comes online and it starts composting collection, schools can and should be included. Composting collection could be done every day, and custodial staff and lunchroom monitors could have the responsibility for overseeing proper sorting.

What effect has it had on the school? The school takes pride in the composting program. When it launched in April 2019, APS made a [Green Scene](#) video that helped to explain and promote the program. The video helped to ensure that the school administration and staff could see all of the benefits of the program. We hope that as students graduate, they can compost in college and beyond. In terms of environmental impact, we are diverting 192 gallons of trash to compost each week.

Are there photos that could help others visualize how this worked for you?



Replication

Do you have resources you used that would be helpful for someone trying to replicate this project? Would you be willing to share them? We have signs and slideshows that we would be happy for others to use. Please contact Ana Ratcliffe for those materials. We also think that this [guide](#) to school compost collection is a good resource for schools thinking about starting a compost collection.

What else should someone wanting to implement a similar project at their school know?