



A lesson in sustainability

Maryland school district leads the way in organics

Perhaps it's only fitting that a school district would step to the forefront when it comes to sustainability. That's the case in Harford County, Maryland, located between Washington, D.C. and Philadelphia.

For starters, the district committed to the idea of sustainability four years ago when it hired Andrew Cassilly as its first Resource Conservation Manager. Cassilly quickly went to work, implementing a single-stream recycling program that delivered \$75,000 in savings in the first year. But Cassilly was just getting started.

"Education systems are full of idealists," Cassilly says. "That's what teachers are. They suggested we go further and develop a comprehensive composting program. The bigger leap was selling it operationally to district management. They were open to the idea but we needed to show the details had been planned out."

Turning the right idea into the right solution

To make a good idea a reality, the district did two things. First, they turned again to Waste Management. "We had a very good experience with Waste Management from our waste and recycling programs. Now we wanted to develop a large-scale composting program. To roll something out on this scale, we needed to tap into their knowledge of composting in our district," Cassilly said.

Cassilly's next task was to get buy-in at a higher level. To do that meant showing a long-range plan. Waste Management and Cassilly assembled a meeting with representatives from procurement, food and nutrition, facilities, operations, individual school stakeholders and Waste Management consultants. This meeting enabled all constituents to ask critical questions and express their views. Waste Management demonstrated how it would leverage existing composting truck routes to manage costs and shared examples of customized recycling and composting signage they'd create to communicate the new program to students and staff.

Developing a plan involved a piloted approach that would initially involve six schools – four elementary, one junior high and one high school. A key differentiator for the Harford County Public School District is that they needed to position the pilot as a 'commercial composting program' rather than a small 'residential scale' program. "Commercial composting is a more user-friendly process that can handle the volume generated by a school, and eventually the greater school district, when the plan is rolled-out," said Cassilly. A pilot program enabled the school district and Waste Management to monitor the logistics, make adjustments and, perhaps most importantly, develop strong advocates within the district.

"The six schools are really excited about the program. They've all said they'll call the powers-that-be if we need support in selling it." That's no small factor as one of the key considerations of the district is making sure the schools, teachers and students are all onboard with a program that involves a shift in daily behavior.

"We all are committed to the '3-Rs' – reduce, reuse and recycle. What the organics program really involves is a fourth 'R' – rethink. So we need to be sure we have buy-in," says Cassilly.

"Everyone agrees philosophically with the idea of implementing an organics program. What Waste Management helped us do is prove it can be done operationally."

*Andrew Cassilly
Resource Conservation Manager
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KEYS TO SUCCESS

- Obtain buy-in at all levels – district management, teachers, custodians, students
- Think big, act small – start with an organics pilot program, then roll it out sequentially
- Inform and educate – behavior changes require investments in training and communication
- Celebrate the full impact – a sustainable approach has benefits that go beyond cost-savings

Lessons for everyone

As the program took hold, what Cassilly and others learned is that kids are very quick to adapt to new approaches – like separating food waste from regular waste in the cafeteria.

“For the elementary kids,” Cassilly says, “one day is all it takes. High school is a bit more challenging. We needed to get them to rethink more established behaviors, which required customized signage and education. For the adults – teachers and custodians – it’s an even bigger shift.”

Another finding – the greatest opportunity for improvement in waste efficiency came with the younger kids.

“Elementary kids by far are the biggest contributors to food waste. High school kids eat or share everything. So there’s not as much waste for them to separate when they leave the cafeteria. Most of the food waste in high school comes from the kitchen,” says Cassilly.

Organics: The longer-term view

When measuring the performance of the organics program, the Harford County Public School District is looking at something more than just cost-savings. “Our goal is to achieve cost-neutrality. We’re not looking for operational savings like with the recycling program. Down the line – yes on cost-savings, but not initially. The major win here is changing mindsets. It’s an environmental and educational story. We’re proving it can be done and it’s something that aligns completely with the concepts we’re teaching in our curriculums.”

There are other benefits, too. For example, separating waste early-on helps reduce the load of heavy bags that custodians currently have to carry out and hoist into dumpsters. Cassilly sees a real opportunity to reduce injury claims with the organics program. Separation will also serve to improve recycling performance by reducing instances of food contaminating traditional materials like cardboard and paper and preventing them from being recycled. Down the road, plans are in place for a sequential rollout – from the original six schools to 12, then 24 and, eventually, to encompass all 51 schools in the district. Looking further, Cassilly sees composting and organics as an idea with even broader application.

“When we show success with a fully-functional organics program, it will spread quickly. I can see the local community college calling us, plus other school districts and businesses, too.”

A good lesson in organics, it seems, can apply well beyond the classrooms and schools of Harford County.

Material Classes Disposed in the School Waste Stream



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