

MEASURING THE IMPACT: HOW WASTED FOOD AUDITS ARE INSPIRING STUDENTS AT WEBSTER AVENUE ELEMENTARY

How can students learn the importance of preventing wasted food? Webster Avenue Elementary School in Providence, Rhode Island is tackling this question. As part of the Rhode Island School Recycling Project's (RISRP) Get Food Smart program, students at Webster are leading hands-on wasted food audits that connect cafeteria sorting with real-world environmental benefits. These audits do more than track discarded food. They inspire students to think critically about sustainability, climate change, and how their daily actions can create a positive impact.

Fifth-grade teacher **Stephanie Rioux** saw a chance to deepen her students' engagement after watching the RISRP team conduct an audit in the lunchroom. She quickly got involved by assigning students to help with the third wasted food audit of the school year. Then she invited RISRP to present the results to her class, using data and storytelling to bring the issue of wasted food into focus.

The Audit in Action

The audit process began with coordination between the RISRP team and lunchroom custodians to make sure no trash bags were collected before being measured. Students used a luggage scale and a Food Waste Audit Log to weigh and report on bins before and after collection. By subtracting the weight of empty bins from the full ones, they calculated the net weight of food scraps, liquids, recyclables, and landfill trash.



Students using a luggage scale to weigh bags of recycling.

After gathering the numbers from all three audits, the team calculated an average daily wasted food total. This number was then multiplied by the number of school days since the sorting station was installed to estimate the total impact of Webster's waste reduction efforts. The data was presented to students to help them see how small actions add up to real environmental change.

To connect the numbers with larger climate issues, the presentation began with a NASA KIDS video explaining the greenhouse effect. This short animation helped students understand how wasted food in landfills produces methane, a potent greenhouse gas, and how composting and donation can help reduce these emissions.

Turning Data into Understanding

After the presentation, students were asked to reflect on what they learned by writing down a takeaway on a sticky note. Their responses showed a strong sense of awareness and pride:

- "I didn't know how much Webster is helping the earth."
- "It is not good to waste food."
- "We are going to save the world if we pull this off."
- "Our school is helping the world."
- "I learned that greenhouse gas heats up the world like a greenhouse."



Students using a luggage scale to weigh bags of recycling.

The audit made the issue of wasted food personal. Students connected their lunchroom behaviors with global environmental outcomes and discovered how they could be part of the solution.

This type of hands-on learning is a cornerstone of the Get Food Smart program. Regular food audits reinforce a culture of waste reduction while offering real-world applications in science, math, and environmental studies.



Webster Avenue Elementary has set an ambitious goal to reduce wasted food by 50 percent by 2030. With the support of teachers, custodial staff, RISRP, and the enthusiasm of student leaders, the school is well on its way. More importantly, it is empowering students to become environmental stewards who understand the value of measurement, reflection, and action.

To learn more about bringing the RISRP Get Food Smart program to your school, visit rireyclingclub.org.