

Get Food Smart, Stay Food Smart

Sustainability at William D'Abate Elementary

It started with a simple question at William D'Abate Elementary: What can we do to stop wasting so much food? The answer: a robust wasted food prevention program that has resulted in 13.6 tons diverted, thousands of meals recovered, and a model for statewide change.

This transformation is part of a growing statewide initiative powered by the Rhode Island School Recycling Project (RISRP) and funded by the USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture to help Providence schools cut waste, encourage environmental stewardship in students, fight climate change, and support food security.

RISRP works with schools to embed sustainability into their day-to-day operations and focuses on reducing wasted food. RISRP has developed a replicable, community-driven model that's already in place in more than 50 Rhode Island schools, with plans to expand to 25 more in the coming year. This program is called Get Food Smart.

Their approach begins with waste audits to identify the sources and scale of wasted food. Engaging key players from the school is critical. This includes lunchroom staff, custodial staff, and admin to ensure everyone is on board and has a clear idea of expectations. From there, schools are supported in setting up lunchroom sorting stations, where student leaders—awarded the title of 'Rangers'--and staff help students separate their lunch leftovers into surplus for donation, food scraps for compost or animal feed, liquids, recyclables, and landfill-bound trash.

This strategy encourages circular thinking in students as they discover that resources don't have to be wasted, and that even small actions can contribute to big change. Through food recovery, composting, and student engagement, RISRP helps schools reduce their environmental footprint while building stronger community ties and habits for a less wasteful future.



Get Food Smart Program

Since the Get Food Smart program launched at William D'Abate Elementary School on November 14, 2023, the school has become a standout success in Rhode Island's wasted food reduction movement. This program has allowed student involvement to go beyond participation to foster leadership and pride in this initiative as 'Rangers'. Some successes thus far include:



Over **50 students** now serve as "Food Waste Rangers," volunteering to help classmates sort lunch waste correctly.



The school has diverted **13.6 tons** of food from the landfill in just a few months.



5,958 pounds of edible food have been donated.



Wasted food at the school has already been reduced by 11%, with a goal of reaching **50% by 2030**.



This initiative has reduced the school's carbon footprint by **24 metric tons of CO₂**, equivalent to removing **6 gasoline-powered cars** from the road for a year.

Key to success, the school community is heavily involved in the mission, with custodial staff, administration, lunchroom staff and teachers championing the program.

In recommending the program to other elementary schools in Providence, William D'Abate Principal, Brent Kerman said the following: "The benefits to the students and school are tremendous. Many teachers have generated authentic Science and Math projects around this work. It has been fantastic for our students and school as a whole."

Celebrating Community Impact

On October 18, 2024, D'Abate Elementary held a schoolwide assembly to celebrate the achievements of its Food Waste Rangers, teachers, custodial staff, and cafeteria team. The event, full of personal stories and student laughter, was co-hosted by Art Teacher **Kira Melville** and Librarian **Marissa Salvas**. Special guests at the ceremony included RI DEM Director of Sustainability, **Dave McLaughlin**; Lieutenant Governor, **Sabina Matos**; Providence City Councilman **Oscar Vargas**; and Providence Director of Sustainability, **Priscilla de la Cruz**, who all honored the school leadership, staff, and students for their tremendous work. While the awards ceremony added a fun and uplifting conclusion to the school year, organizers stress that it's also part of a larger strategy to educate the next generation about the importance of caring for the planet and building a more sustainable, shared future.



Call to Action

With funding support from the Rhode Island Foundation and 11th Hour Racing's Grant Program, RISRP is scaling up its efforts. The long-term goal: make every public school in Rhode Island a "Food Smart" school by 2030.

If you are a school superintendent, principal, teacher, or community advocate, now is the time to get involved. RISRP provides the tools, training, guidance, and funding. What they need is your commitment.

Ready to bring the Food Smart program to your school? Check out the RISRP website at www.rirecyclingclub.org.

