



Food Scrap Collection & Share Tables in Metro Nashville Public Schools

An Issue Brief for MNPS Stakeholders

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Executive Summary

Each year, Metro Nashville Public Schools sends roughly 5 million pounds of cafeteria food to the landfill, much of it wholesome and unopened. A 2024–2025 pilot in 11 schools diverted more than 102,000 pounds away from the landfill with low contamination and strong participation. Expanding to all 138 schools would cost approximately \$5,000 per school annually — \$9 per student — and could reduce hauling costs by up to \$267,000 per year while advancing Metro’s diversion goals. The model fits into existing lunchroom operations, leverages local composting infrastructure, and reinforces a core lesson for students: edible food is not trash, and food can nourish people, soils, or energy systems.

The Problem

The Scale of Food Waste in MNPS

Each year, roughly **5 million pounds** of food are wasted in Metro Nashville Public Schools cafeterias, much of it wholesome, edible items from federally reimbursable meals. About 80 percent of a school's waste stream comes from the cafeteria, and in schools without share tables, unopened food is routinely discarded — wasting both nutrition and taxpayer dollars. A 2019 audit found that a single school wastes nearly 38,000 pounds per year. MNPS also spends roughly \$2 million annually on compostable trays and serviceware that are landfilled alongside the wasted food.

Definitions Around Food Waste

In Metro Nashville Public Schools, *food waste* includes both edible items that go uneaten — such as unopened milk or whole fruit — and inedible scraps that are discarded. *Food scrap collection* separates organic material from trash for *compost* processing, while *share tables* and *share refrigerators* create safe spaces for students to redistribute unopened items at no cost. Together, these strategies reduce waste, *recover* edible food, and *divert* organics from landfill while maintaining food safety.

National Scope of the Problem

Food waste is a major national challenge, with about **30 percent of all food** in the United States going uneaten each year. The average household discards roughly \$3,000 in food annually, contributing to more than \$400 billion in nationwide economic losses across the supply chain. When food is wasted, so are the water, energy, land, and labor used to produce it. School-based food waste reduction allows districts to address this issue locally, modeling cost-conscious strategies that improve efficiency, strengthen stewardship, and reduce avoidable loss in taxpayer-supported meal programs.

Landfill Capacity & Long-Term Planning

Middle Tennessee depends on a limited number of [landfills with finite capacity](#). In 2025, Metro Nashville diverted just 16 percent of its waste — only 4 percent through composting — even as disposal costs rise. [Metro's Solid Waste Master Plan](#) calls for 90 percent diversion by 2050 and prioritizes organics, about one-third of the waste stream, alongside a goal to cut food waste in half by 2030. School-based food scrap collection advances these targets and aligns with the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation [Solid Waste and Materials Management Plan](#) by increasing diversion and extending landfill lifespan.

The Connection to Food Insecurity & the Meal Gap

A recent Nashville food rescue analysis estimates Davidson County faces an annual meal gap of 19.3 million meals, with more than **16 percent** of Middle Tennessee residents experiencing food insecurity. For students, inconsistent access to food can affect concentration, attendance, and performance. Share tables — permitted by the U.S. Department of Agriculture — allow unopened items to be redistributed within cafeterias at no cost, prioritizing food recovery before composting and supporting both student well-being and waste reduction goals.

The Opportunity

What An Investment Covers

An investment of about \$5,000 per school annually — roughly \$9 per student, or five cents per student per day — funds the full infrastructure and support needed for consistent performance. Funding covers interior sorting bins, exterior rolling carts, clear student-facing signage, launch training for staff and students, ongoing hauling and compost processing, and program oversight to maintain low contamination rates. It ensures schools have both the equipment and operational support required for reliability, with pilot sites reporting smooth integration into existing lunchroom routines and minimal disruption to staff.



Local Pilots Demonstrate Scalability

During 2024–2025, 11 Metro Nashville Public Schools serving 4,837 students participated in [a cafeteria composting pilot](#), diverting 102,540 pounds of organic waste — about 21 pounds per student — with low contamination and strong participation. At an average cost of \$4,767 per school, districtwide expansion could divert roughly 5 million pounds annually and reduce hauling costs by up to \$267,000. In the same period, Nashville Waste Services’ [residential pilot serving 750 households](#) has collected more than 474,500 pounds to date, demonstrating reliable infrastructure and reducing risk for expansion.

Reinforcing Academic Standards

Districtwide composting and share tables can function as real-world learning labs supporting STEAM, project-based learning, and social-emotional growth. Students track pounds diverted, analyze contamination trends, and test improvement strategies — building applied math, data literacy, and problem-solving skills. They connect decomposition science to real operations while strengthening teamwork, leadership, and communication. By embedding systems thinking and data-driven decision making into daily routines, the program prepares students for modern careers while improving cafeteria performance and accountability.

A Nationally Supported Priority

Food waste reduction is one of the few policy issues that draws broad support at the federal, state, and local levels as it improves fiscal efficiency, preserves landfill capacity, lowers disposal costs, and helps address food insecurity. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency supports prevention and organics diversion through national strategies and grants, while the U.S. Department of Agriculture promotes food recovery within school meal programs. By advancing a districtwide, data-informed model, Nashville can align with these national priorities and position itself as a leader in practical, results-driven school operations.

Albuquerque Public Schools: A Case Study

[Albuquerque Public Schools](#), serving about 142 schools and 60,000 students, has committed to districtwide food waste reduction and composting within three years. Its plan shows large urban districts can scale compliant programs with clear timelines and measurable results. With a completed pilot and documented cost projections, Metro Nashville Public Schools is similarly positioned to expand while joining a growing national movement toward data-driven food waste reduction.

Federal Protections for Share Tables

Federal law clearly allows public schools to implement structured share tables and food donation. The U.S. Department of Agriculture permits share tables within the [National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs](#) when food safety guidelines are followed, and the [Bill Emerson Good Samaritan Food Donation Act](#) provides liability protection for good-faith donations. Together, these safeguards reduce legal risk and make share tables a legally supported, widely adopted strategy to reduce waste and recover edible food.

Ready-to-Scale Local Infrastructure

Nashville already has established food scrap hauling and permitted composting capacity, enabling immediate school expansion without new capital costs. Local haulers serve regulated facilities overseen by the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation, reducing startup risk and ensuring oversight. At the same time, local nonprofits provide teacher training to integrate food waste reduction into classroom instruction, reinforcing standards-aligned learning and sustained student engagement.

Business Partnerships

A Nashville nonprofit can support districtwide rollout through its Adopt-a-Cafeteria program, pairing local companies with Metro Nashville Public Schools during lunch and seasonal refreshes. Corporate volunteers reinforce proper sorting, ease pressure on cafeteria staff, and help maintain low contamination rates. The program also creates a clear pathway for business engagement, linking hands-on service with measurable diversion results and stronger school-business partnerships.

Contact

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