

Every afternoon in Maryland school cafeterias, unopened milk cartons, fruit, and sealed sandwiches are swept into trash cans just minutes before lunch ends. Perfectly edible food and food scraps are treated as garbage and hauled away to be burned in incinerators or buried in landfills, where it fuels climate pollution and harms nearby communities. As Maryland students, we have seen this persist over and over again.

Maryland legislators should fund and expand composting and food waste diversion grants this legislative session. While Maryland has taken important steps in recent years, too much food waste is being burned or buried, exposing our local communities to harmful pollution and wasting resources that could instead be used to nourish people and enrich our soils. Investing in composting and food recovery would reduce methane emissions, lower disposal costs, and create healthier learning environments for students across Maryland.

When food waste is buried in landfills or burned in incinerators, it produces methane, a greenhouse gas more than 80 times as potent as carbon dioxide in the first 20 years after it is released. In Maryland alone, landfill methane emissions in 2023 had the same climate impact as more than [700,000 gas-powered cars](#). These emissions worsen extreme heat, flooding, and severe storms that Maryland communities are already experiencing. At the same time, landfills and incinerators release pollutants linked to asthma, respiratory disease, organ damage, and cancer. Due to decades of environmental injustice, marginalized communities are far more likely to live near these facilities, carrying a disproportionate share of the health burden. Continuing to send food waste to landfills and incinerators puts Maryland families at risk of preventable health issues.

Maryland schools are a major and often overlooked source of food waste, but they are also an opportunity for change. Across the country, school cafeterias generate an estimated [1 billion pounds of food waste](#) annually, much of which remains unopened or uneaten. With food recovery programs, this unopened, uneaten food can be redistributed to the broader community, helping improve food security. With composting, food scraps can decompose without releasing large portions of greenhouse gases, turning into fresh, nutrient-rich soil instead. The cost barrier is surprisingly low. A school can operate both composting and food recovery programs for roughly \$2,500 per year, covering bins, hauling, and basic supplies.

To address this issue Maryland legislators should fully fund and expand statewide food waste diversion grants this session. One clear opportunity is [House Bill 429](#)/Senate Bill 599, which would establish statewide grant programs to support food waste reduction, composting infrastructure, and county-level diversion efforts. These grants would provide the resources needed to keep food out of landfills and incinerators. But like past initiatives, its impact will depend on whether it is fully funded and carried through. Previous bills, such as the SB124 school composting grants, demonstrated overwhelming demand and support from schools across the state, yet were unable to move forward. House Bill 429 will help schools afford compost bins, hauling services, and food recovery equipment, while also helping counties build the composting capacity they need. Maryland students are ready to lead on climate action and food waste reduction. What we need now is for state leaders to meet us with the funding and commitment to make these solutions possible before another school lunch ends up in the trash.