

**TESTIMONY TO THE MARYLAND SENATE
COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION, HEALTH, & ENVIRONMENTAL AFFAIRS
SB0124: Public Schools – Grant Program to Reduce and Compost School Waste**

Position: Support

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On behalf of the Institute for Local Self-Reliance and MD-DC Compost Council, I am pleased to submit this written testimony in support of *SB0124: Public Schools – Grant Program to Reduce and Compost School Waste*.

My name is Brenda Platt and I direct the Composting for Community Initiative at the national nonprofit, the Institute for Local Self-Reliance (ILSR). I also serve on the Steering Committee of the MD-DC Compost Council, which voted at its January meeting to support this bill.

Whereas trash generated ends up in polluting landfills or incinerators, food scraps and other organic materials that are composted have many benefits: creating job, enhancing soils, protecting the climate, reducing garbage, to name a few. Compost is a valuable soil amendment that provides needed organic matter. Indeed, the Maryland Healthy Soils Program is promoting the widespread use of healthy soils practices among farmers in Maryland. Increasing soil organic matter is specifically named, along with the ability of soil to sequester carbon and reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

While composting is an age-old technique, very little of Maryland’s food waste is recovered; less than 18% of the 941,000 tons of wasted food in Maryland in 2020 was recycled.



Maryland Food Waste Data

- MDE’s statewide waste characterization study indicated that food waste comprised approximately 18% (774,000 tons) of waste disposed in Maryland in 2020
- Marylanders generated over 941,000 tons of food waste in 2020
- Only 167,000 tons were recycled (17.8%)

Source: David Mrgich presentation, MDE, Maryland Food Recovery Summit, December 1, 2021.

One beauty of composting is that it ranges from small sized (a worm bin in a classroom) and medium sized (such as at farms) to large industrial sites, and everything in between. There is an unprecedented opportunity to spur locally based composting and connect it to soil health, resilient food systems, and climate protection. Small and medium sized sites can scale up to create a robust distributed and diverse infrastructure. See ILSR's [Hierarchy to Reduce Food Waste & Grow Community](#) (included also as an attachment).

To capitalize on this moment, we need to teach and empower Maryland's next generation – youth and young adults – to reduce wasted food and feed the soil. Schools are vital to teaching and demonstrating how the food we eat and toss is connected to healthy soils and protecting the climate. A \$500,000-per-year grant program will have tangible, immediate, and far-reaching impact. Schools can be the foundation for reducing wasted food and demonstrating local composting, thereby helping to build the culture of food reduction and composting know-how and practice within Maryland communities.

I have been tracking school initiatives to reduce wasted food. (See, for instance, [ILSR's Guide to Composting Onsite at Schools](#).) There are countless examples around the country of schools source-separating food scraps for collection to off-site composters. Many schools are composting onsite, engaging students in the process and using the resulting compost to grow food in school gardens. A wide variety of systems are available and there are numerous methods for composting at schools. Not surprisingly, students composting at school can spur home composting as well as participation in municipal and county programs. In addition to composting, many schools have moved away from single-use foodservice ware (like plastic cutlery and disposable trays) and have opted for durable washable ware. I know of schools that have installed refrigerators to enable them to rescue surplus food to donate to those in need. Some school districts have incorporated how to measure and reduce wasted food into their curriculum and hands-on learning activities.

All of these projects require investment. Sadly, few of these model programs are in Maryland. A grant program would accelerate and help replicate such needed programs in our state.

Also worth noting is the importance of outdoor education to student physical and mental health. We now know, for instance, that outdoor education improves student attention and focus for indoor education, and children spending 2 hours outside each day have less myopia. Support for outdoor education is more critical than ever as the covid pandemic morphs into an endemic. Composting typically takes place outside and can be easily integrated into an outdoor education program.

SB0124: Public Schools – Grant Program to Reduce and Compost School Waste is noteworthy for creating a grant program that would fund a wide array of programs including education, rescuing edible food, reducing food packaging waste, and building composting infrastructure. Its focus on funding student-led projects is terrific. Many of the school composting projects I have seen are successful because they engage and empower students in the process. Young composters become old composters.

Thank you for taking action on this. I urge you to pass this bill.

Hierarchy to Reduce Food Waste and Grow Community

