

## Circle of composting life in full swing at Springhurst

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(Photo: Tania Savayan/The Journal News)

DOBBS FERRY - As lunch ended on a recent weekday, Springhurst Elementary second graders were throwing their hands in the air, waiting to be picked for what has become a highly sought-after job: Compost keepers.

At the end of lunch, students who are chosen grab an apron, gloves and stand at their posts, which are trash can bins adorned with signs identifying food for composting, recycling, garbage and a bucket to pour excess liquid.

Dana Kim, 7, spotted a rogue plastic bag with uneaten peanut butter apples.

After a couple of “ews,” she grabbed the out-of-place bag, dumped the messy leftovers into the compost bin, and threw the bag in trash.

The end-of-lunch compost keepers assignments are one of several new initiatives started at Dobbs Ferry’s only elementary school designed to better manage the school’s waste and educate students about green practices.

The composting project, which is so far only at Springhurst but will eventually be implemented at the middle and high schools, was spearheaded through efforts from speech pathology teacher Barbara Miglio and Sara Sellitti, a parent with children who attend the elementary school.

“At the beginning, we had to sign these kids up, and now they all want to do it,” Sellitti said.



Kindergartener Peyton Lai shows the compost bin with snack waste used for the vermi-composting at Springhurst Elementary School in Dobbs Ferry.

(Photo: Tania Savayan/The Journal News)

In 2015, Miglio and Sellitti started talking about the possibility of composting at the school to create the soil they needed to sustain Springhurst’s garden, which for years they had fertilized with expensive compost from the Stone Barns Center in Tarrytown.

“The kids are learning that you need to feed the soil in order to grow the plants,” Miglio said. “So they’re learning that composting actually feeds the soil, puts the nutrients back in the soil.”

Sellitti added: “That idea evolved into using the lunch waste because there’s such a large quantity of waste here, and to incorporate their own food back into their garden.”

This eventually led to hiring a consultant in February 2016 to determine how much garbage was being generated and how they would design composting models to take care of that waste.

Nine months later, an industrial-sized composting model was implemented at the school, adding to three other compost methods implemented over the last two years.

The four different methods are: Mixing classroom snack food waste and leaves in plastic tumbler bins; hardware cloth-enclosed outdoor spaces to store and churn weeds, grass and dead plant material; vermi composting with red wiggler worms to compost newspaper and food scraps; and industrial-sized bins for cafeteria waste built by Springhurst's maintenance staff.



Barbara Miglio, speech language pathologist, and parent Sara Sellitti are coordinators of the Compost Kids Initiative at Springhurst Elementary School in Dobbs Ferry. *(Photo: Tania Savayan/The Journal News)*

Three of these methods use oxygen to help the composting process either by manually turning the mixtures or using a fan that pumps air through PVC pipes.

The worm method relies on the red wigglers to eat, digest and excrete the waste to eventually make fertilizer — a process that fits in nicely with the kindergarten science curriculum and allows them to see it first-hand because the worms sit in a classroom fish tank so they can add orange peels and other discarded foods during the day.

“We study the structure of worms and habitats of worms, so this goes right in with us,” said Christine Brennan, a kindergarten teacher.

With the help of about \$4,000 in grants from the Dobbs Ferry Schools Foundation and the district's Parent Teacher Student Association, they've also brought in an educator through the New York Botanical Garden, paid for teachers to learn about environmental education, and developed “Compost Days” events to raise awareness and educate about green practices.

Dobbs Ferry is not the first district to implement composting at its schools, but they are the only ones so far to compost industrial-sized waste on their campus.

Anna Giordano, who founded her nonprofit We Future Cycle in 2014 to work with school systems to implement recycling and composting programs with educational material, said she's helped 15 districts in Westchester County implement recycling and composting programs.



Parent Sara Sellitti, co-coordinator of the Compost Kids Initiative, talks about the compost tumbler used for classroom snacks at Springhurst Elementary School in Dobbs Ferry. (Photo: Tania Savayan/The Journal News)

School systems in New Rochelle, Katonah-Lewisboro and White Plains compost industrial-sized waste, but they don't do it on-site like in Dobbs Ferry; they have it carted off to a commercial composter in Ulster County.

For those bigger school systems, she said, it's not feasible to properly collect, process and store the compost like you could at a smaller school, but the results have been significant.

In New Rochelle, where they've implemented composting at nine of its 10 schools, they've seen a 96 percent reduction in garbage delivery to landfills, and annual savings around \$130,000. Isaac Young Middle School, for example, generated 400 pounds of trash per day and is now down to 8 pounds of daily garbage.

Springhurst, which used to generate about 175 pounds of garbage per day, has cut its trash in half, but they're hoping to get to zero waste.

"If there's adults that are really empowered by this, it's a no-brainer, it's just converting people's thinking," Sellitti said. "The kids get it, they embrace it, they want it ... they're saving the Earth."