



Sustainability Best Practice

Reimagining Food Recovery Through a Three-Pronged Approach

Orange County Public Schools, Food and Nutrition Services

USFA 2026 Winter Meeting



The Status Quo Was Not Acceptable



- Traditional share-table implementation faced site-level resistance despite existing composting and recovery programs
- Waste audits revealed 50-53% of daily school waste was food
- Recoverable items were routinely discarded
- Financial loss, landfill impact, and compliance risks identified
- Incremental fixes were insufficient

A Deliberate Three-Pronged Redesign



OCPS replaced standard recovery practices with a coordinated strategy built on three pillars:

1. Operation Redesign
2. Student-Powered Innovation
3. Community Impact Integration



Prong 1: Operational Redesign



- Replaced ad hoc share tables with structured reservice protocols
- Defined clear eligibility standards for safe recovery
- Partnered with the Department of Health for regulatory alignment
- Embedded oversight and accountability measures
- Launched Responsible Food Stewardship Pilot

Prong 2: Student-Powered Innovation



- Engaged 3DE Consulting students as strategic partners
- Presented a real district challenge for applied problem-solving
- Integrated student recommendations into operational design
- Shifted sustainability from staff mandate to student ownership

Prong 3: Community Impact Integration



- Implemented structured, high-volume nonprofit engagement
- Invited recovery partners to share demonstrated measurable outcomes
- Connected operational effort to direct public benefit
- Transformed recovery from waste mitigation to community service

Strategic Implementation



- Identified failure points through audit and review
- Designed controlled pilot for disciplined rollout
- Implemented reservice standards with DOH collaboration
- Established monitoring and compliance checkpoints
- Scaled engagement across operations

Early System Impact

- Increased recovery consistency across pilot sites
- Improved operational clarity and staff alignment
- Elevated student engagement in sustainability efforts
- Strengthened cross-department collaboration
- Established scalable district framework

Scaling the Model

- Complete full-year quantitative impact analysis
- Refine pilot protocols based on pilot performance
- Expand to additional school sites
- Revolutionize recovery standards districtwide
- Sustain student partnership model

From Compliance to Culture Shift



- Replaced passive recovery with disciplined stewardship
- Elevated students as drivers of operational innovation
- Strengthened fiscal, environmental, and community impact
- Created a replicable model for large districts

Stewardship is now embedded in practice—not policy alone.

Contact Information

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