

# REDUCING FOOD WASTE IN SCHOOLS

## Case Study: Ascham School



Located in Sydney's Eastern Suburbs, Ascham School is a progressive girls' school with around 1,200 students (Prep – Year 12). The school provides daily meals to over 120 boarders, day students and staff, as well as catering for school community events, providing great scope to influence sustainable food practices.

Ascham School's journey towards reducing food waste is being led by Head of Catering Brendan Hunt. With a background in hospitality, Brendan's expertise and passion for sustainable food practices have positioned him uniquely to make an impact within the Ascham School community. A chef by trade, Brendan understands how valuing food as an organic resource is central to achieving the Ascham School community's sustainability vision.

## MAKING CHANGE HAPPEN: A PHASED APPROACH

### Phase 1: Avoiding food waste in the Ascham Kitchen

Ascham School's reduction in food waste and diverting organics from landfill started in the kitchen, spurred by their switch to compostable packaging. This change led to a more expansive examination of waste in the kitchen, and Brendan was inspired to take action to avoid food waste in their kitchen practices.

Brendan and his Catering team began by evaluating their food processes, identifying opportunities to reduce waste through inventory management, efficient food preparation, menu planning that focused on seasonable and versatile ingredients, and repurposing surplus food. After reducing food preparation waste, they looked to source separate their food organics. A designated kitchen organics bin and source separation system was introduced, with staff receiving ongoing training over a period of six months.

### Phase 2: Source separating organics in the Ascham Dining Room

Once changes were established in the kitchen, Brendan extended efforts to the Dining Room, where boarders, day students and staff eat lunch and buy takeaways meals. With dining centralised in one area, it provided a unique opportunity for centralised waste collection, with students encouraged to be active in separating their waste. Organics collection bins were introduced, with clear signage guiding students how to correctly dispose of their food waste.

## AT A GLANCE

### CHALLENGES

- Large student population
- Daily food services for boarders, day students and staff

### BENEFITS

- Efficient catering and kitchen practices avoiding food waste
- Diverting 42kg per day from landfill
- Actively engaged students and staff



In 2023, Brendan expanded his role, adding Sustainability Coordinator to his Head of Catering remit, working to implement the school's Emissions Reduction and Sustainability Roadmap. He began working with Year 12 students in a Student Sustainability Committee, a new and exciting group of highly engaged Senior students. This increased even further in 2024, with an expanded and passionate Committee of students. The students' ongoing input has proven invaluable in refining the program and ensuring it resonates with the student body.

Ascham's Junior School students are also on board; a dedicated group of Year 6 Sustainability Prefects have made a high-quality video about sorting waste correctly in the school grounds, and presented to their peers and staff at assemblies and staff meetings. The involvement of students across both the Junior and Senior School campuses helps cultivate a culture of environmental responsibility among peers, reinforcing the message that small actions - like correctly disposing of food waste - contribute to broader sustainability goals.

Ascham's partnership with the Organic Recycling Group (ORG) provided essential support for the program's success. As their organic waste collection contractor, ORG are collecting organic waste and also supplying a digital dashboard to track waste metrics. This data-driven approach enabled the school to quantify its impact, building a business case for the long-term benefits of waste diversion from landfill.

### Phase 3: Organics collection in school grounds

With indoor waste management under control, Ascham expanded its organics source separation efforts to outdoor spaces. 'Green bins' with compostable liners were installed across the school grounds. The cleaning team collect organic waste daily, consolidating it with organics waste from the Kitchen and Dining Room.

The success of school grounds waste separation is related to effective communication, education and adoption of the systems by students and staff. Lessons were learnt from an earlier attempt to roll-out recycling in the playground, which had mixed success due in part to students not being fully on board with the system. The Student Sustainability Committee gives regular presentations in assemblies, to ensure that all students are engaged and on board with the latest sustainable actions around the school.

In 2024, the Ascham School community currently composts an impressive 42 kilograms of food waste daily.

### Ongoing actions

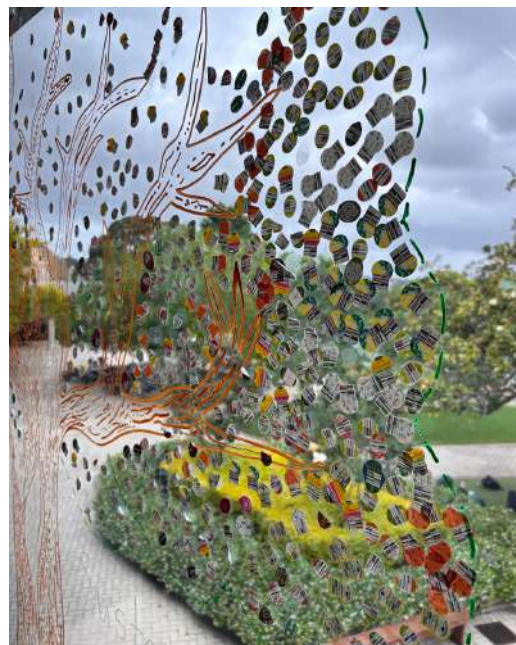
Brendan is continually looking for new ways to enhance school sustainability, particularly the catering and food services.

A significant move this year has been the installation of a Greenspace microfarm in the Ascham Dining Room. Microgreens including herbs and salad greens are grown hydroponically, with an amount harvested daily just before lunch service. The Microfarm is a great food waste educational piece, with food travelling 'food metres' rather than 'food miles' to the salad bar, with zero waste as a result. The greens are always 100% consumed, the roots and growing medium are composted, and the plastic punnets are fully recyclable.



Ascham has also recently established a partnership with Vinnies to supply their used cooking oil to the Vinnies Used Cooking Oil Recycling (VUCOR) program. Vinnies works with Scanline, a Cleanaway company, who will supply tanks and equipment free of charge. Scanline will pick up the waste cooking oil from the Ascham Kitchen to be recycled locally here in NSW into biodiesel and animal feed.

Students are developing an in-depth practical understanding about organics recycling, instigating small and important changes. Concerned about the plastic stickers on whole fruit that were entering the compost, students created a 'Sustainabilitytree' on the Dining Room window. Each sticker has been stuck onto the window in a large, continually growing tree artwork, a daily reminder with a critical environmental message



## KEY TAKEAWAYS

### Phased Implementation

Breaking down the waste reduction process into manageable phases can help establish habits and build momentum over time.

### Data driven decisions

Leveraging data on waste metrics makes it easier to advocate for sustainability investments, showcasing the tangible benefits of reduced landfill costs.

### Engage key stakeholders

Involving students through committees or leadership roles fosters accountability and enthusiasm.

### Education & Training

Ensure the whole school community understands the systems in place through ongoing training and clear communication.

*Thanks to Brendan Hunt & Ascham School for sharing their story with Sustainable Schools NSW.*

*Sustainable Schools NSW is an initiative of Environmental Education NSW, a not-for-profit professional association for environmental educators.*

*The NSW Government's Waste and Sustainable Materials Strategy 2041 has a goal of **halving organics going to landfill**. Actions by school communities and education institutions are important to achieving these goals.*