CASE STUDY

READY*SET*RECYCLE
SCHOOL CHALLENGE

CABRILLO ELEMENTARY
FREMONT, CALIFORNIA

BACKGROUND
When Cabrillo Elementary School in Fremont first kicked off the Ready Set Recycle School Challenge, nobody had imagined that a month later students would be volunteering to stay in from recess to sort trash and recyclables—and do a little math. After learning that all of the school’s food waste and most of the recyclables were going to landfill, fifth grade teacher Michelle Guerrero worked with StopWaste’s 4Rs Student Action Project to help start a waste reduction program. Sixth grade student council members and interested fifth graders from Ms. Guerrero’s class met with StopWaste educators to start planning the Challenge. Cabrillo Principal Giselle Hudson, the custodian Greg Rivas, and Fremont Unified School District Recycling Coordinator Roopal Mayor were also important members of the team.

ASSESSING WASTE AND SETTING GOALS
Before starting the Challenge, Cabrillo Elementary’s daily breakfast and lunch waste would typically fill 11 32-gallon trash bags that were sent to the landfill. Students conducted a school waste assessment, manually sorting the cafeteria trash and discovered that 71% of the cafeteria waste was compostable, 15% recyclable, and only 14% was trash.

The students set an ambitious goal of bringing the compostable and recyclable percentage of their cafeteria trash down to 20% over a one-month period, and agreed on using school supplies as incentives for meeting goals.

PROCESS
To launch the Challenge, StopWaste partnered with the school district recycling coordinator, who facilitated a school-wide kick-off assembly with the Ecological Society of America (ESA), informing everyone about how to participate, while the municipal recycling company, Republic/Allied Waste, delivered compost collection bins. Once a week on a rotating basis, student volunteers along with custodian Greg Rivas spent their lunch recess performing waste audits in Cabrillo’s lunchrooms, applying math skills to create graphs and charts tracking progress toward their goals. As an added incentive, rewards funded by StopWaste were provided to the entire school for meeting benchmarks along the way.
REMARKABLE RESULTS
In one month of food scrap recycling the school reduced the percentage of recyclable and compostable materials sent to the landfill from 86% to 20%, reaching the goal set by the student council. And with students diverting the vast majority of their waste, they reduced their landfill volume from 11 bags to less than one bag per day. Additionally, hundreds of students signed pledges promising to keep all recyclables and compostables out of the landfill bin.

The story about how the whole school worked together to reduce waste garnered local press coverage in outlets such as KPIX-TV and the Tri-City Voice, and continues to provide a model for other schools to follow.

STOPWASTE AT SCHOOL
StopWaste provides 4Rs educational services to Alameda County schools (Reduce, Reuse, Recycle, and Rot). Our 4Rs Student Action Projects are based on a five step service-learning model and use curriculum designed to meet the new California Standards. E-mail us at schools@stopwaste.org.