



From left: Melanie Martinez, Jaeleen Lopez, Damian Martinez, Diego Monroy

# WE'RE HELPING THE PLANET!

Fifth-graders in California started a program to reduce waste in their school's cafeteria.



This is just some of the food waste the students tracked in one day.

### AS YOU READ, THINK ABOUT:

How does rotting trash in landfills affect the environment?

It's lunchtime at San Marcos Elementary School in California. When students are finished eating, they don't dump their trash into one bin, like they used to. Instead, they carefully sort it. Half-eaten apples go into a special container for food scraps. Milk cartons go into the recycling

### WORDS TO KNOW

**compost** *noun*. a mixture of plants and food waste that is added to soil to help plants grow

**divert** *verb*. to change the course or direction something is moving in

bin. And empty chip bags and granola bar wrappers get tossed into the regular trash.

It's all part of a program started last year by the kids in teacher Melissa Cuevas's fifth-grade class. They set up a sorting station in the cafeteria with separate bins for **compost**, recycling, and regular garbage.

"I felt like it would help the environment and our school," says 11-year-old Melanie Martinez.

The program is already a huge success. The students are saving thousands of pounds of food and recyclables from ending up in landfills.

### Tracking Trash

The idea for the program took shape in October 2024. That's when an environmental group called BCK Programs visited Cuevas's class, teaching the kids about the nation's trash pileup. Across the U.S., about 146 million tons of waste ends up in landfills each year. That's enough to fill 8 million garbage trucks! About one-quarter of that is food waste.

As trash rots in landfills, it releases a gas called methane, which traps some of the sun's heat in Earth's atmosphere. Many scientists say too much methane has contributed to the planet's warming over time.

The kids were determined to reduce the amount of waste their school sends to landfills. They analyzed one day's worth of trash from the cafeteria, about 182 pounds. The students wanted to figure out how much of it should have been reused, composted, or recycled. It was messy, but important, work, says 12-year-old Jaeleen Lopez.

"We put gloves on and checked how much there was," she explains.

To the students' surprise, only 10 pounds was actual trash. Their classmates had thrown away piles of orange peels that could have been composted. Mountains of plastic yogurt cups could have been recycled. And heaps of unopened ketchup packets could have been saved for another day.

### Sorting It Out

Next the students worked with BCK Programs to set up the three-bin sorting station in the cafeteria. Then they created posters and a video showing their classmates how

easy it is to sort their trash at lunch. They also convinced school officials to replace the individual ketchup packets with a ketchup dispenser.

San Marcos Elementary School is now on track to **divert** about 31,000 pounds of trash from landfills each year. The students are proud of all they've done to help the planet. They hope to inspire other students to sort their garbage too.

"We made a difference," says 12-year-old Diego Monroy. "Other schools could do the same thing."

—by Alicia Green

## HOW MUCH DO WE WASTE?

Each year in the U.S., nearly 60 million tons of food is wasted. Most of it ends up in landfills. Just how much food goes to waste?

It's about **325 POUNDS** of waste per person in America.

It would fill more than **3 MILLION** garbage trucks.

It's enough to make more than **130 BILLION** meals.

Courtesy of BCK Programs; San Marcos Elementary School (kids, compost and recycling bins); Shutterstock.com (all other images)

Sources: Natural Resources Defense Council, Recycle Track Systems