



Michele D. Johnson

District Recycling Coordinator

**Office of Facilities Management, Newark Public Schools
Essex County, New Jersey**

For more than four decades, Michele Johnson has been a steadfast, inspiring presence in the [Newark Public Schools](#). Now in her seventh year as the district's recycling coordinator and her forty-third year working for Newark Public Schools, Michele has built a career defined by diligence, passion, and a belief that sustainability is both a responsibility and a gift to the next generation.

A self-starter by nature, she pursued professional training, becoming a Certified Recycling Professional (CRP) and earning the national certification as a Sustainable Resource Management Professional (SRMP). Her commitment to climate action was inspired by Al Gore's *Climate Reality Project*, which solidified her resolve to help students and staff understand that climate solutions already exist and that everyone has a role. As she puts it, "Sustainability is important because we must sustain. We need to preserve and take care of the spaces we share—our neighborhoods, our parks, our schools. When we value our surroundings, we help protect our future. The little things we do make a difference."

Michele's leadership strengthens Newark's efforts to ensure every student learns in a safe, sustainable, and well-maintained school environment. Newark Public Schools have more than 79 buildings across all five wards of the city, requiring vigilant oversight of building operations, capital improvements, maintenance, and sustainability initiatives. Within this enormous system, Michele has carved out a critical role championing recycling, energy efficiency, green purchasing, and environmental education. She believes that when students learn sustainable practices in school, they bring those habits home, shaping families and communities. "I am protecting and preparing the earth for the next 20 years," she says. Her presentations to students, school staff, and custodians are hands-on and rooted in her belief that sustainability must be modeled. She even purchases clothing and footwear made from recycled materials so students can see practical recycling in action.

Building a Culture of Recycling

A defining pillar of Michele's work is the district-wide recycling program, which includes trained custodial staff, routine training for new employees, and continuous updates for existing staff. She oversees recycling of cardboard, bottles, cans, and lightbulbs; manages district reports; coordinates e-waste efforts; and ensures that every classroom has accessible, clearly labeled bins. She also hosted a schoolwide recycling contest with incentive prizes to keep staff and students engaged. Her composting



demonstrations—complete with worms—show students how nutrients cycle back into soil to nourish food and plants. Her enthusiasm is contagious, and her message is clear: even small actions add up.

Advancing Energy Efficiency

The district is also advancing energy-efficient infrastructure improvements. Energy efficiency and energy-tracking actions make up a major portion of each school's Sustainable Jersey for Schools certification portfolio. Every Newark school has completed an energy audit through [New Jersey's Clean Energy Program's Local Government Energy Audit \(LGEA\) program](#)—an impressive feat for such a large system. Newark Public Schools participates in the [Sustainable Jersey–PSE&G Energy Efficiency Partnership Program](#), which helps schools better manage energy use and access high-impact incentives. The district works to assess building performance, conduct energy audits, and plan upgrades, efforts that will lower utility costs and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. These improvements are especially important for Newark's aging school buildings. “By adding energy-efficient systems and new boilers, we can help the district do better,” Michele explains. This work ensures that Newark's facilities not only function well today but remain viable for years to come.



Integrating Sustainability into Curriculum and Daily Operations

Michele's influence also extends beyond energy and waste. She is proud of the District's curriculum that is linked to sustainability, which ensures that teachable moments in iSTEAM, engineering, and technology programs help students tackle real-world conservation challenges. She works with the City of Newark to align district and municipal recycling requirements and champions waste-reduction practices such as paperless workflows. Newark Public School's commitment to green purchasing, including environmentally friendly supplies, equipment, and vehicles, further reflects the culture she works hard to build. Outside her district role, Michele volunteers with the Rutgers Soil Testing Laboratory, visiting sites across New Jersey to assess soil health. A graduate of Newark Public Schools and Winston-Salem State University, she loves sharing information about green jobs and the growing sustainability economy with the students, showing them the wide range of careers available. She hopes to “pay it forward,” giving future generations the tools and opportunities they need to care for the earth.

Trees for Schools Grant Recipient

One of the district's most exciting new initiatives is the \$249,997 [Trees for Schools](#) grant awarded to the Newark Board of Education. The program is a joint effort of the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection, Sustainable Jersey, and The College of New Jersey. The grant will fund native tree plantings across school campuses, increasing shade, reducing heat impacts, beautifying grounds, managing stormwater, and contributing to a healthier climate. Michele is very proud of this project and is working with experts on species selection and planting plans for spring 2026. “I have never been so proud as the day I planted my first tree,” she reflects. “I have watched it grow. I love to put my hands in the dirt.” The ten Newark schools that were selected for trees are: Michelle Obama Elementary School, Chancellor Avenue School, Speedway Avenue Elementary School, Nelson Mandela Elementary School, Luis Munoz Marin Elementary School, Peshine Avenue, Elementary School, First Avenue Elementary School, South Street Elementary School, New Jersey Regional Day School, and Technology High School. Newark Public Schools have also received \$48,000 from the Sustainable Jersey Grants Program to support



projects such as the Louise A. Spencer's school garden, Newark Go Green recycling program, Avon Avenue Community Orchard and Garden, and more. The 2026 grants cycle for schools funded by the PSEG Foundation is currently accepting applications through March 9, 2026. Learn more [here](#).

Districtwide Success: 61 Newark Schools Achieve Re-certification

Her contributions also play a pivotal role in [Sustainable Jersey for Schools certification](#). Newark Public Schools is the largest district in New Jersey, and 61 schools have met the rigorous requirements for re-certification in 2025. Michele helps organize and submit the applications, working with the schools to complete actions and apply for grants. Her tenacity is well known throughout the district. She jokes that she “keeps asking until people get tired of saying no,” but her persistence leads to results. Her colleagues know her as someone who does the research, asks tough questions, seeks out experts, and follows every thread until a project is complete and inclusive. “If I don’t have the answer, I get it,” she says. “I follow through and figure out all the parts of the puzzle until the project is done well.” She added, “Sustainable Jersey for Schools is an important resource for my work. The webinars, sustainability actions, and technical assistance always lead me to the answers for how to get things done in my district.” Her work is supported by a strong team in Newark Public Schools, and she is especially grateful for the leadership of Corey Dawkins, Executive Director of Facilities; Dr. Tracyann Williams, Director of Facilities; Valerie Wilson, School Business Administrator; Superintendent Roger León; and Assistant Superintendent Dr. José Fuentes.

More about Michele

Michele's passion for service is rooted in her upbringing in Newark's South Ward. Her mother served as chief of staff for two Newark mayors, and her father was a teacher in the district. Their dedication to service shaped Michele's values. Her family frequently helped students in need with clothing, meals, and mentorship. They also instilled in her a fierce commitment to caring for her neighborhood and environment. “I live what I learned,” she says. “Everything I do comes from how my parents lived and what they taught me.”

Outside of work, Michele fills her life with music, family, and joy. She sings in several choirs, including the Holidivas, and is a member of the West Orange Campus of New Hope Baptist Church. Growing up, she danced ballet with the Alvin Ailey program and excelled in track, proudly anchoring her high school relay team. Today, she is the devoted mother of a son and daughter, and the proud grandmother of five grandchildren. She gardens, she laughs, and she brings warmth and purpose to everything she touches.

A Legacy of Environmental Stewardship

Above all, Michele loves her work. “If you love what you do, you will be successful and that is me,” she says. Through her determination, compassion, and unwavering belief in the power of small actions, she has helped build a culture of sustainability that touches every school in Newark. Her legacy is not just in recycling bins, energy upgrades, or new trees—it lives in the thousands of students who now understand how to care for their community and their planet.

