



Food Waste Reduction in School Meals Programs



Schools have a special role in providing nutritious, well-balanced meals for students and to educate the next generation about environmental stewardship through reduction and recycling of waste.

School Meal Programs

The National School Lunch Program provides nutritionally balanced, low-cost or free meals to children each day in public and private schools and residential child care institutions. School meals must meet nutrition standards based on the latest *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*. USDA is committed to prevent hunger among children and to be responsible stewards of Federal dollars. Child Nutrition Program policy aims to limit food waste and unnecessary costs of meal programs.

Things to Consider

Food waste is a concern for many schools. Various stakeholders need to be engaged to create a successful food waste reduction program. In addition, students need to be frequently reminded of how to build a school meal. Students are generally compassionate people. Any type of food waste reduction program during school meals should not:

- pressure students to donate to please others;
- encourage students to take food they do not plan to eat, simply to donate;
- prevent students from eating foods they selected for their meal.

Some Ways to Increase Consumption and Reduce Food Waste in Your School:

- Implement “offer versus serve,” to allow students to decline certain menu items, including milk.
- Increase food choices so students can select a food they are likely to eat.
- Ensure kids have ample time to eat. Best practice would be a minimum of 15 minutes for breakfast and 20 minutes for lunch *after* they receive their meal.
- Complete a food waste assessment to determine which food items are most frequently wasted.
- Implement [Smarter Lunchroom](#) techniques, such as having sliced fruit available daily, self-serve utensils are at the appropriate portion size, and signage that identifies items included in a meal.
- If local policies permit, allow students to save items for later consumption, such as an apple.
- Set up a sharing table for students to place items they are not going to consume. Ensure that only students can take things from the sharing table, not adults.
- Compost food waste for school gardens. Only plant based food can be composted. Paper products, protein foods, and dairy foods must be sorted into a separate bin.

Unserved Food

Large amounts of unserved food on a regular basis suggests the need to review menus and production practices. All alternatives permitted to eliminate waste by Program regulations and local health and sanitation codes should be exhausted before discarding food. Where it is not feasible to reuse leftovers, excess food may be donated to a non-profit organization, such as a community food bank, homeless shelter, or other nonprofit charitable organizations. Good Samaritan Laws typically provide protection from any liability of such donations.

Food Safety

The practice of taking food out of the cafeteria and sharing tables must be limited to only food items that do not require time and temperature control, such a whole fruit or a bag of baby carrots. Foods such as prepackaged crackers/graham crackers, bowl pack cereals, and condiment packets that are maintained in their original packaging, and are free from contamination may be re-used by foodservice if there are standards in place as what is accepted and staff are trained. Any food that requires temperature control or any unpackaged food cannot be served or donated.

If you are considering the reuse of food through sharing tables or donation:

- Contact your local food safety inspector to discuss the process
- Develop standards and policies to support the process
- Train staff and students

FDA Food Code 3-306.14

Enforcement

To assist local enforcement agencies with routine food safety inspections the Bureau of Nutrition and Health strongly recommends that schools include guidelines for sharing tables in their food service program's HACCP plan as well as provide proper food safety and food handling training to employees.

ISU Extension and Outreach Sample [Sharing Table SOP](#)

Special thanks to Iowa State University Extension and Outreach for reviewing this resource.

USDA Memos Referenced:

SP 11-2012, CACFP 05-2012, SFSP 07-2012 Guidance on the Food Donation Program in Child Nutrition Programs
SP 41-2014 Clarification on the Policy on Food Consumption Outside of Foodservice Area, and the Whole Grain-Rich Requirement

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