



Four Ways to Fight School Food Waste

Food Waste Reduction Guidelines for Schools

Schools, after-school programs, and all other facilities with Child Nutrition Programs (CNPs) can reduce their food waste through many easy and attainable strategies. This document will discuss various ways to reduce food waste in order of priority:

- 1) Reduce food waste at the source by encouraging students to eat what's on their plate
- 2) Start share tables
- 3) Donate food
- 4) Start a compost for a school garden

Food Waste Reduction Guidance

Schools should strive toward a reduce-first attitude by implementing strategies to reduce food waste at the source; when this is not possible, donation, share tables, and composting are the best diversion strategies. Always encourage students to eat healthy and try new foods whenever possible. Consider the following food waste reduction strategies to try in your school, in addition to donation, share tables, and composting:

Measure waste. By doing food waste audits regularly, you can see which food is wasted most often and why, and show the results to cafeteria managers so they can make smarter decisions about which food to serve. Conduct taste tests with students and survey why certain foods are thrown away.

Implement offer vs serve. OVS is a concept that applies to menu planning and meal service, and allows students to decline two of the five items offered during meal times; students must take at least a ½ cup of fruits or vegetables or a total of ½ cup of both.

Make food fun. In one study by the Smarter Lunchrooms Movement, schools that called their carrots “X-Ray Vision Carrots” doubled their consumption. Slicing apples also resulted in a 73% increase in the number of students who ate more than half of their apple.

Schedule recess before lunch. In one study by the Smarter Lunchrooms Movement, schools that scheduled recess before lunch reduced food waste by 40%.

Extend lunch periods. In one study by the Harvard School of Public Health, schools that gave students more time to eat had 13% less entrée waste, 12% less vegetable waste, and 10% less milk waste.

Share Table Guidance

The United States Department of Agriculture’s Food and Nutrition Service encourages the use of share tables in Child Nutrition Programs if they meet the “local and State health and food safety codes.” Share tables are defined by the USDA as carts and/or tables where children can place uneaten food and beverage items. Refer to the following guidelines to start a share table at your school:

- Students may take any item on the share table at no additional cost
- Items remaining on the table may be served during another meal service, such as afterschool programs
- Remaining food and beverage items may be donated to a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization



Step 1: Follow Federal, State, and Local Health and Food Safety Requirements

Step 2: Establish Guidelines for Share Tables

- **Food Allowed on Share Table:**

- Unopened, commercially pre-packaged items such as bags of fruit, cereal packs, or crackers
- Whole pieces of fruit, such as bananas or apples
- Unopened milk or dairy products, if immediately stored in a cooling bin maintained at 41°F or below

- **Food Not Allowed on Share Table**

- Unpackaged items, such as a salad bowl without a lid
- Packaged items that can be opened and resealed
- Opened items
- Perishable foods not immediately placed in a cooling bin
- Food items brought from a student's home

Step 3: Establish Food Safety Guidelines

- Maintain proper temperatures of food stored in cooling bins
- Note expiration dates
- Re-use items no more than once for meals served the following day
- Take extra precaution with students that have food allergies; it is not recommended they take from the share table

Step 4: Supervise Share Tables

- Inform cafeteria managers and supervisors of best practices and monitor items placed on tables or in cooling bins at all times
- Invite students to participate as share table helpers and monitors

Step 5: Promote Share Tables to Students and Families

- Provide families with information about share tables
- Ask for input from parents, and ensure that they are comfortable with their child participating

Food Donation Guidance

Certain food items that would otherwise go to waste can be donated to eligible local food banks and other 501(c)(3) non-profit organizations. Connect with a local food bank, church, or other non-profit organizations and discuss their requirements and best methods for food recovery.

Pre-Consumer: Food donation has been supported in all Child Nutrition Programs under a 2011 amendment of the National School Lunch Act. School food services may donate surplus food that has not been served to food banks, food pantries, homeless shelters, and similar 501(c)(3) non-profit organizations. Food must be maintained at a proper temperature and must not have been placed out with the intention of being served.

Post-Consumer: Food and beverages that are commercially-packed and shelf-stable may be donated to food banks or other organizations directly from a share table, so long as it is in its unopened original package. Donation directly from share tables is allowed according to USDA's June 2016 memo, "The Use of Share Tables in Child Nutrition Programs" (Appendix B).



Photo: Marc Schultz



Photo: Toby Talbot, AP

Food Safety

- Only food and beverage items that either have not been put out to be served or are in an unopened original package that is maintained in sound condition can be donated
- If donating temperature controlled foods, you may need to procure a cooler or refrigerator that can maintain items at 41°F or below
- All potentially donated food must be stored in a container labeled as “recovered for food recovery” and dated. This container must be stored separately from food that will be served to students

Liability Protection

- The Bill Emerson Good Samaritan Food Donation Act, passed by Congress in 1996, protects schools against civil and criminal liability when they make donations to local organizations
- The Consolidated and Further Continuing Appropriations Act, 2012 (P.L. 112-55) provides clear statutory authority for current Food and Nutrition Service food recovery policies used by institutions participating in the Child Nutrition Programs, NSLP, SBP, CACFP, and SFSP

Best Practices

- Before donating, schools should explore strategies to prevent excess leftovers in the first place (refer above)
- When possible, use unserved leftovers in subsequent meal services, such as in afterschool programs
- Use the WWF Food Waste Log to monitor how much food is recovered. This log can provide information on which types of foods are most wasted, which can then inform better food preparation practices.

Compost Guidance

Certain food items that are not eligible for share tables or food donation may be put in a separate compost bin. Students can be tasked with taking this food out to the school compost pile, including fruit and vegetable scraps from the cafeteria created during food preparation, or schools can develop relationships with local farms or composting agencies to donate food scraps. There are many local and national funding sources available for starting a school garden.

Identify ways to start composting. Composting is an easy and fun activity to begin in your school as an additional way to teach students about the food system. Food scraps can be placed into a compost bin, broken down in a worm compost, or taken to a commercial compost facility.

Start a school garden. Extend the classroom outdoors by helping your school nurture a garden all year long with the compost you produce from food. Talk to your cafeteria about using the produce grown in the garden in salad bars, meals, or in class kitchens.

Partner with local farms. Not only can you partner with local farms to procure fresh produce through networks such as Farm to School, but you can also donate your food waste to farmers to be used as animal feed or compost.

Donate fuel. Certain food items, such as used fats, oils, and grease cannot be composted, but can be donated to certain agencies in order to make biodiesel. Contact a local biodiesel manufacturer to see if they are willing to accept these items from your cafeteria.



Additional Resources

Reduction Resources:

The Smarter Lunchroom Movement: <http://smarterlunchrooms.org/>

Creative Solutions to Ending School Food Waste: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/school-meals/creative-solutions-ending-school-food-waste>

Implementing Offer vs Serve: <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/SP57-2014a.pdf>

Donation Resources:

<http://www.usda.gov/oce/foodwaste/resources/donations.htm>

Guidance on the Food Donation Program in Child Nutrition Programs, http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/SP11_CACFP05_SFSP07-2012os.pdf

"The Use of Share Tables in Child Nutrition Services." USDA Memo Code: SP 41-2016, CACFP 13-2016. SFSP 15-2016. June 22, 2016. http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/cn/SP41_CACFP13_SFSP15_2016os.pdf. See Appendix B.

Food Recovery Network: <http://www.foodrecoverynetwork.org>

Food Rescue US: <http://www.foodrescue.net>

Composting Resources:

<http://www.lifelab.org/composting/>

<http://www.farmtoschool.org>

<http://articles.extension.org/pages/73370/decreasing-waste-in-schools:-food-recycling-options>

https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/f2s/FactSheet_School_Gardens.pdf

<http://compost.css.cornell.edu/schools.html>

Recycling Resources:

<https://www.kab.org/recycle-bowl/resources/recycling-resources>

<http://www.recyclenow.com/recycling-knowledge/getting-started/recycling-at-school>

<http://www.stopwaste.org/recycling/schools>

Food Waste Facts:

<https://www.refed.com/?sort=economic-value-per-ton>

<http://www.wri.org/publication/reducing-food-loss-and-waste>