

Feeding Students, Not Trash Cans

Policies and Practices to Curb Food Waste in School Cafeterias



Background

Surveys show that students across the nation are embracing the new school meal standards, yet food waste in school cafeterias continues to be an issue of concern. While a recent study by the Harvard School of Public Health showed that new school meal standards did not increase food waste, plate waste has always been a problem for large institutions like schools. Creative solutions are needed to reduce waste. Discarded food is a lost opportunity for improving student nutrition and a waste of precious resources. With time-limited lunch periods and increased effort and funding going towards school meals, proactive strategies are needed to encourage students to safely save some food items to eat at a later time, or to utilize excess food for better purposes than feeding trash cans.

Federal and State Policies

- There is no federal or state prohibition against allowing non-perishable school food items to be saved by students to consume later in the school day. This flexibility is outlined in [USDA SP 41-2014](#), *Clarification of the Policy on Food Consumption Outside of Foodservice Area*.
- USDA and the California Department of Education (CDE) encourage schools to allow students to take some food items with them to eat at a later time. These practices should be limited to food items that do not require cooling or heating, such as whole fruit or a bag of baby carrots.
- USDA and CDE encourage schools to utilize practices that minimize the waste of uneaten food, such as setting up sharing tables in the cafeteria. These practices are only acceptable when in compliance with applicable State and local health codes and consistent with the school's Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point plan.
- USDA and CDE continue to recommend that schools allow students adequate and reasonable time to be served and eat their food during the meal period. Additional recommendations can be found in USDA's [Reducing Food Waste and Creative Solutions to Ending Food Waste](#).

State and Local Food Safety Regulations

- The [California Retail Food Code](#) (CalCode) is the state's comprehensive food safety law. CalCode promotes uniformity of food safety regulations. Local health departments follow this state law, although local interpretation, enforcement and inspection criteria may vary.
- CalCode does not prohibit saving unopened, prepackaged, non-potentially hazardous food items in a backpack for later consumption or the use of sharing tables for these foods. This includes packaged fruits and vegetables and whole fruits that could be washed prior to eating. Staff or students should be encouraged to wash whole fruit that is not peeled before eating.
- CalCode does not prohibit perishable prepackaged food items on sharing tables as long as the Time as a Public Health Control guideline is used and carefully monitored (CalCode 114000). Perishable food may be held without temperature control for up to four hours before it must be discarded. Cafeteria managers should have a plan indicating that food items would be discarded after the meal period, along with written records that account for the time when food is taken out of temperature control, disposal time, and what food is discarded.
- Local health department policies may be stricter than CalCode. Contact the local health department to ensure compliance with local procedures before implementing new practices.

Case Studies: California School District Best Practices

Mountain View School District: Curbing Food Waste at Breakfast

In order to increase breakfast participation, Mountain View School District in El Monte used a School Breakfast expansion grant to implement Grab n' Go Breakfasts at their 12 schools. Students pick up breakfast from a Grab n' Go cart when they arrive at school. After seeing that some students didn't want to eat first thing in the morning, school administrators decided to allow students to take certain food items in their backpacks to eat at a later time. Each breakfast item on the cart is labeled to easily identify which foods are safe to be eaten later. The labels identify the food items as either "Backpack Safe" or "Eat Now". The Food Service Director relied on USDA's policy guidelines¹ to determine which breakfast items are backpack safe. Foods that can be eaten later include grain items, whole fruits, and juice. Proteins and milk must be eaten at breakfast. Most students end up eating their "Backpack Safe" items during recess. In the event a student is running late, a "Backpack Safe" breakfast is also made available to him/her. With 93% of students qualifying for free or reduced-price meals, the district is making sure that students reap the full benefits of the most important meal of the day while dramatically improving breakfast participation.



Los Angeles Unified School District: Second Chance for Leftover School Meals

USDA also allows child nutrition programs to consider alternative options to reduce food waste. One such alternative is donating leftover food to a community food bank or charity. In an effort to reduce food waste on school campuses, the LAUSD Board of Education passed *The Healthy Students, Healthy Families, and Healthy Communities* resolution in April 2011. The resolution allows the district to donate excess cafeteria food to needy families and children.² Donations are limited to packaged food items that have not been served to children. Organizations receiving the food are responsible for picking up leftovers no later than 30 minutes after the end of the lunch period and keeping food at the appropriate temperature. Sound menu planning and production practices help reduce excess food; however, there are times when unforeseen circumstances, such as a teacher failing to notify the cafeteria manager of a field trip, lead to a surplus of school meals. Rather than throwing away nutritious, quality meals, the district takes steps to make these meals available to needy families. Additionally, LAUSD will soon start an education campaign to encourage students to take allowable non-perishable meal items with them to consume at a later time.

Oakland Unified School District: Sharing Tables Reduce Food Waste

For over a decade, Oakland Unified has used sharing tables to mitigate food waste in cafeterias. This practice has been easiest to implement in elementary schools, where students are trained and supervised by an adult to place their unconsumed food items on the table. It is recommended to have someone, either an adult or trained student, encourage students to place and share appropriate food items on the tables. Most of the meal items in elementary schools are pre-packaged, which makes it easier to share food items. Food items placed on sharing tables include: pre-packaged hot and cold entrees, milk, whole fruit, and fruit/vegetable packs (e.g., bagged baby carrots or apple slices). Because middle and high school students are served on plates, fewer items can be shared (usually only milk, whole fruit, and bagged vegetables or fruit). While sharing tables have made a difference in reducing food waste, the district has also moved forward with a community food donation program, similar to the one at LAUSD.

Contact

Contact us to learn more about maximizing consumption of school meals and minimizing food waste.

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¹ "Expansion of Traveling Apple: Sponsors may now allow a child to take one fruit, vegetable, or grain item offsite for later consumption..."
<http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/Exploring-SummerMeals-Toolkit-03-06-14.pdf>

² Food Donation Process at LAUSD, <http://etf.lausd.net/sites/default/files/Ref%20Guide%205634.0%20-%20Food%20Donation%20Policy%2010.31.11.pdf>