

# USDA INFANT AND PRESCHOOL MEAL PATTERN IN SCHOOL MEAL PROGRAMS: Co-Mingled Preschool Meals

The Infant and Preschool meal pattern follows the guidelines of the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) meal pattern. The purpose of this Infant and Preschool meal pattern is to help schools better meet the nutritional needs of the infant and preschool students they serve. The Infant and Preschool meal pattern requirements better align with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, including a greater variety of fruits and vegetables, whole grains, less added sugar, and appropriate portion sizes.

Although every effort should be made to serve preschool students using the Preschool meal pattern, this may not be possible in every scenario. In certain situations when students are *co-mingled* at meal service, the K-5 meal pattern may be used to serve preschool students.

## Overview of Co-Mingled Meal Service

All these conditions must be met to utilize the co-mingled meal service provision:



1. Preschool students eat at the *same time* as older students;
2. Preschool students eat in the *same location* as older students;
3. It is difficult to distinguish preschool students from older students; and
4. It would be operationally difficult to serve different foods or different amounts of foods during the combined meal service.

## Examples of Co-Mingled Meal Service

- Students of varying age groups are dropped off by parents or buses before school and go to the cafeteria to eat breakfast. As all students are eating at the same time and same location and students are not separated by class, it could be difficult for staff to distinguish preschool students from older students.
- At lunch, the preschool class eats immediately following another grade group or are mixed with the older age groups. There is no time for serving staff to switch serving utensils or change line items.
- Preschool students come down to the cafeteria to eat at 11:30 am. Kindergarten students begin entering the same serving line at 11:45 am. Some days the preschool students are completely through the line and seated prior to the kindergartners entering the cafeteria. Some days the kindergartners enter the line while the preschool students are still being served. As there is not consistently enough time for food service staff to finish serving preschool students prior to kindergartners entering the line, the comingled meal service provision could be used.
- A school offers grab n' go, pre-bagged breakfasts from carts in the entry to the school. Students of all age groups, including preschool students grab a bag when walking through the entryway. It is impossible for staff to distinguish preschool students from older students when they are taking the bags; therefore, the co-mingled flexibility is used.

## Examples of When the Preschool Meal Pattern Must be Used

- Preschool students are served at the same time and in the same location as an older grade group. However, the cafeteria has two serving windows. One serving window can serve the older grade group, while the other could serve the preschool students. The Preschool meal pattern should be offered at the second window in this case.
- There is a fifteen minute gap between serving an older grade group and the preschool students. Staff have the time to modify the serving line to switch serving utensils and to remove non-creditable foods, such as chocolate milk before the preschool students arrive. The Preschool meal pattern should be used.
- Meals are brought from the kitchen to the preschool classroom(s) and preschool students consume the meal there, such as the breakfast in the classroom model. The meals must meet Preschool meal pattern requirements.

## Options to Avoid Co-mingled Meal Service

Younger children enrolled in preschool programs have different nutritional needs than older children. Therefore, the USDA encourages School Food Authorities (SFAs) to explore meal service options to avoid comingled situations.

Ideas for avoiding co-mingled meal service include:

- Offering breakfast in the classroom
- Staggering meal service times to allow staff time to modify the serving line to accommodate the Preschool meal pattern
- Serve meals family-style in the classroom



For more information, visit the [Infants and Preschool in NSLP and SBP](#) webpage.