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**To:** Authorized Representatives and Food Service Directors of School Food Authorities (SFAs) Participating in the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Child Nutrition Programs

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**Subject:** Reducing Food Waste in the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs

Back in 2013, USDA and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) joined forces in the fight against food waste and started the U.S. Food Waste Challenge. They called on farms, supermarkets, restaurants, schools, and local governments to join efforts to reduce, recycle, and recover food waste. More recently, USDA and the EPA announced the United States' first-ever [national food waste reduction goal](#), calling for a 50 percent reduction by the year 2030.

You may ask, "What can schools do to help out?" Schools can elect to demonstrate their commitment to reducing food waste, feeding the hungry, and conserving our natural resources by signing up to participate in the [EPA's Food Recovery Challenge](#). Schools can commit to activities such as the following:

- Reducing the amount of excess food generated in the school;
- Recovering wholesome food from breakfasts and/or lunches to donate to feed people in need;
- Recovering food waste from breakfasts and/or lunches to feed to animals (if allowed);
- Recovering food waste from breakfasts and/or lunches for composting; and
- Recovering food waste from breakfasts and/or lunches for energy generation or other use.

This is just a short list of the many activities that can be done to help decrease waste.

Starting small and concentrating on any one of the following ideas below can make an impact.

## MARKETING

Marketing is a means of communication for you to emphasize to your target audience the positive things happening in your program. Communication can be verbal, visual, written, or observable. Marketing is a great way to generate excitement for your program.

Recent studies show marketing vegetables in elementary school cafeterias, increases consumption. These efforts can be as simple as hanging posters promoting vegetables throughout the cafeteria. Use bright colors and cartoon heroes, which helps draw the attention of young children.

## SOCIAL MEDIA

Take beautiful pictures of the food you are serving and post them to the food service department and school/district social media outlets to get kids excited. Show parents the good things happening in your cafeterias.

Consider hosting a photo contest. Have students take pictures of your food and post them on your Facebook or Instagram accounts. Ask people to vote for their favorite and use the winning photos to promote items. If your school has an art or photography class, work with the teacher. Suggest a project for students that includes food photography. Consider reaching out in your community to a teacher or parent who enjoys photography and see if he or she is willing to donate his or her services. There may be someone with a background in photography or just starting out who is willing to help you for free.

## **SMARTER LUNCHROOM TECHNIQUES**

The goal of the [Smarter Lunchrooms movement](#) is to create cafeterias that guide students toward more healthful food choices. The Smarter Lunchrooms movement offers evidence-based strategies that can be used to improve children's eating behaviors and thus improve the health of children. Smarter Lunchroom techniques include the following:

- Manage portion size – Keep portion sizes appropriate by using pre-portioned cups and be sure to review correct portion sizes.
- Increase convenience – Whole fruit is more likely to be thrown away. Offer orange slices and apple quarters that are easier and faster for kids to eat. In addition, consider a grab-and-go line for kids who want to get through the line faster so they have more time to eat.
- Improve visibility – Place popular food items first in line and easy to reach. In addition, use signs to highlight these food items. This will help to improve traffic flow and reduce wait time which will allow students more time to eat, helping to reduce food waste.
- Enhance taste expectations – Make foods look and sound delicious. Give foods catchy names to increase student interest in the targeted food item.
- Use suggestive selling – Requiring students to take a food item can result in food waste. Therefore, use staff and students to promote targeted food items. Consider forming a Student Nutrition Action Committee to help market targeted food items to their peers. In addition, train school nutrition service staff to gently prompt students to select targeted food items. Allowing students to make their own choice can reduce food waste.

## **PLATE WASTE STUDY**

Find out what your food waste looks like before and after you commit to the challenge or utilize other strategies for reducing waste. Several colleges and universities in Wisconsin have Dietetics programs. Consider finding a dietetic intern to help with a plate waste study! Other options include:

### **Taste Testing and Obtaining Student Input**

Getting to know your customer, the student, and their taste preferences can help reduce food waste. One way to achieve this goal is by getting students involved in the selection of food served to them by offering taste-testing events. Student taste preferences change over time, and by offering taste-testing events, you can keep up with those changes and help influence healthier eating habits by allowing students to be part of the selection process. In addition, you can include

nutritional education about food or other fun facts to increase participation in your taste testing-event. Do not forget to invite teachers and other peers to your taste-testing event because it helps encourage students to taste new and healthier foods. Taste testing doesn't have to be a lot of work, and if you use the guide developed by our Team Nutrition staff, it will be a breeze! The guide can be found at [Home Grown Taste Testing Guide](#).

### **Get Kids Hungry! And Consider Giving Kids More Time**

Ensure snack times are not too close to lunch time, give praise, not candy (junk food is not a reward for good behavior). Try recognition, privileges, and rewards for the class – like extra recess, points/token system, fun school supplies, or other health/activity related supplies. Some ways to help get kids hungry or ensure they have adequate time to eat include:

- Recess before lunch can reduce plate waste by as much as 30 percent.
- Extending the lunch period from 20 to 30 minutes can help reduce waste by nearly one-third. Encourage lunchroom supervisors not to rush students but rather create some conversation around what kids are eating.

You may also want to consider allowing students to keep an item from breakfast or lunch to consume later in the day.

### **Utilize Offer versus Serve**

Offer versus Serve (OVS) is a concept that applies to menu planning and the meal service. OVS allows students to decline some of the food offered in a reimbursable lunch or breakfast. The goals of OVS are to reduce food waste and to permit students to choose the foods they want to eat. More information about OVS can be found in the OVS section of the [Menu Planning webpage](#).

### **Active Managerial Control**

Food loss can be controlled in each of these following steps:

- Menu planning – survey student preferences, try new seasonings, create exciting names for the menu items, and marketing your menu,
- Purchasing – order fresh product deliveries at the shortest intervals possible for your operation and assess cost effectiveness of your purchases (form of food, labor costs and amount of waste generated),
- Receiving,
- Storing – First In-First Out (FIFO),
- Producing – batch cooking, and
- Serving – portion control.

Another option is to consider working with a farmer or the Agriculture Education teacher in your SFA on composting and using compost in a school garden.

### **THE USE OF SHARING TABLES IN CHILD NUTRITION PROGRAMS ([USDA Policy Memorandum SP 41-2016](#))**

Sharing tables are an innovative strategy to encourage consumption of nutritious foods and reduce food waste in the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs. Not familiar with share tables? They are tables or stations where children may return whole food or beverage items they choose not to eat, but only if in compliance with local and state health and food safety codes.

First and foremost, children should be encouraged to consume the meal provided and program operators are encouraged to promote meal consumption through many of the strategies suggested above.

Share tables allow food or beverage items to be reused in a number of ways, including:

- Children may take an additional helping of a food or beverage item from the sharing table at no cost;
- Food or beverage items left on the sharing table may be served and claimed for reimbursement during another USDA Child Nutrition Program meal service which can include breakfast, lunch, afterschool snack program, supper program, etc.; and/or
- Food or beverage items may be donated to a non-profit organization, such as a community food bank, homeless shelter, or other non-profit charitable organization. Consider connecting with a local food recovery program.

**IMPORTANT:** SFAs are no longer required to get approval from the DPI SNT for sharing tables or food donations. Program operators must be aware of all applicable state and local health and food safety codes to ensure their use of share tables does not violate any of those codes. Applicable state and local health and food safety codes may be more restrictive than the USDA requirements, or may place specific limitations on which food or beverage items may be reused. All policies/procedures related to saving and sharing food or beverage items must be consistent with the SFA's food safety plan. Specific standard operating procedures must be developed and in place to ensure the safety of any food or beverage placed on a sharing table.

**RESOURCES:**

- [USDA Food Loss and Waste](#)
- [Food Waste section of DPI SNT Menu Planning webpage](#)
- [Food Waste and Donations section of DPI SNT Wisconsin School Food Safety webpage](#)