

Minimizing Food Waste through Food Donation and Share Tables

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Regulatory Authority: USDA Policy Memo [SP 11-2012](#) , [A.C.A. § 6-18-716](#); Bill Emerson Act 42 U.S.C. § 1791; Arkansas Good Neighbor Act (2025) A.C.A. §20-57-105

Response Required: No

Attention: Superintendents, Child Nutrition Directors and Business Managers

Contact: Courtney Erick

Phone Number: 501-324-9502

Email: Courtney.erick@ade.arkansas.gov

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Arkansas Department of Education, Division of Elementary and Secondary Education, Nutrition Services recognize the importance of minimizing food waste in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and School Breakfast program (SBP). Child Nutrition Program policy aims first to limit food waste and unnecessary costs. If a school has leftover food on a frequent basis, menu planning and production practices should be adjusted to reduce leftovers. However, unforeseen circumstances occasionally result in leftover food. The following highlights best practice in minimizing food waste via food consumption outside of the foodservice area, utilizing share tables, and through food donation.

Consumption Outside of the Food Service Area:

Meals offered in the NSLP and SBP are intended to be consumed at school in a designated foodservice area during the established meal service period. Due to a limited lunchtime period and increased amount of fruits and vegetables offered as part of the reimbursable meal, some students may want to save items for later consumption. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) encourages this practice to promote the consumption of fruits and vegetables and reduce food wasted. For food safety reasons, this practice should be limited to food items which do not require cooling or heating, such as

- Whole fresh fruit.
- Packaged baby carrots/celery sticks.
- Prepackaged grains e.g. graham crackers.

Contact your district's Environmental Health Specialist from the Arkansas Department of Health to ensure the district's proposed policy on saving food for later consumption meets all applicable food safety standards.

Share Tables:

Share tables allow schools to reuse food or beverages served in NSLP and SBP in a number of ways. Food and beverage items may be retrieved by students from the share table at no cost, served and claimed for reimbursement during another meal service or donated to an eligible non-profit organization.

USDA recommends sharing food and beverage items including:

- Unopened pre-packaged items.
- Whole pieces of fruit.
- Unopened milk or juice.

In accordance Arkansas State Board of Health Rules Pertaining to Retail Food Establishments [3-501.11\(A\)](#) time and temperature control for safety foods such as milk should be stored in cooling bin or on ice at 41 ° F or below.

USDA does not recommend sharing food and beverage items including:

- Unpackaged items.
- Packaged items that can be opened and resealed.
- Open packages.
- Perishable food when a cooling bin or ice is not available.

Contact your district's Environmental Health Specialist from the Arkansas Department of Health to ensure the district's proposed policy on sharing food meets all applicable food safety standards. For further information on food safety requirements when re-serving foods please refer to the U.S Food and Drug Administration [Food Code](#).

Food Donation:

Donating leftover food is a responsible way to reduce waste and support the community. When reuse is not feasible, excess food may be donated to eligible nonprofit organizations such as food banks, shelters, or other charitable groups. Both federal and state laws provide protection for those who donate food in good faith. The Bill Emerson Good Samaritan Food Donation Act offers national liability protection, while the Arkansas Good Neighbor Act reinforces these safeguards at the state level—promoting safe and lawful food donation practices.

How to Donate Leftover Food:

1. Child Nutrition Director should discuss donation of leftovers with Superintendent, obtaining approval before proceeding.
2. Identify a nonprofit "partner" that will accept the leftover food, such as food bank, homeless shelter, etc.
3. Obtain a copy of the organizations 501(c)(3) documentation.
4. Obtain "partners" contact information to call when donation available.
5. Retain records demonstrating the food donation by utilizing the [Food Donation Form](#).
 - Keep records of what, how much and when donations are made.
 - Keep records of who picks up the leftovers and have them sign and date at the time of pick up.
 - Child Nutrition Staff sign when they release leftovers to non-profit organizations.
6. Child Nutrition Director should monitor leftover donations, reporting food cost to administration and revising planned production and menus to minimize leftovers.

Contact your Area Specialist via email or at 501-324-9502 for further details.