

HELPING SCHOOLS SAVE FOOD:

# Food Share Table



## A Step-by-Step Guide for Alameda County Schools

Food waste is a national problem with approximately 40% of edible food ending up in landfills and never reaching a plate, while many Americans lack reliable access to a sufficient amount of affordable, nutritious food. In Alameda County, hunger has increased even more than nationally. One out of five residents seeks help from the Alameda County Community Food Bank; two thirds of those in need are children and seniors.

Schools can play an influential role in helping solve this problem, for example, by setting up a food share table and by considering surplus food donation. Federal and state laws protect and encourage such actions. In California, SB 1383 establishes a state-wide goal to donate 20% of edible food currently being disposed of by the year 2025, while SB 557 allows schools to donate food that has been served but not eaten and placed on school share tables.



*Thanks to the Oakland Unified School District for piloting the best practices shared in this guide, and to the Alameda County Department of Environmental Health for providing valuable guidance.*



# Food Share Table

A food share table in the school cafeteria allows students to share their unwanted, still sealed or unopened food items, so other students can select these food and beverage items at no cost during mealtime. Different types of containers can be used to collect shareable items. Wire baskets, clear plastic tubs or other transparent containers are best because they enable students to see what's available to choose.

## 1. Setup

The food share table is part of the school cafeteria's waste sorting station. Ideally, place it first in line, so that students can set aside food share items before they start to separate liquids, compostable items, recyclables and trash.

At schools that use a double row of waste bins, the food share station can be set up in the middle, next to where students stack their trays.

Do not place the food share container directly on the floor, or on the same level as the liquid dump bucket, in order to avoid contamination and splashing of liquids.



## Signage

Make sure the food share basket, crate or bin is marked clearly with signage that reads "Food Share" and shows examples of acceptable items.



To download a printable food share table sign, as shown here, visit [www.StopWaste.org/food-share-sign](http://www.StopWaste.org/food-share-sign).

## Organization

If you expect a lot of food items to be shared, consider setting up separate containers for cold items such as milk and yogurt, hot prepared entrees such as pasta, and room temperature items like fruit.

Organizing shared foods in this way will:

- Control temperatures (see also food safety section),
- Help students select food, and
- Make cleanup and handling leftovers easier.

## 2. Instructing Students

Be thoughtful about introducing your students to the food share table, its purpose and rules. Helping students understand that they are expected to eat the food items they choose will encourage them to select more carefully while in the serving line and set aside items they don't intend to eat for the food share table.



### The Food Share Table Rules:

- Students place unwanted, sealed and unbitten items into the container.
- Students select items they intend to eat during the meal period or take to go.
- Items brought from home are not acceptable.



## 3. Monitoring the Food Share Table

Kitchen staff, with support from custodians and cafeteria monitors, will need to supervise the food share table—at a minimum in between each meal and at the end of the last meal service. If possible, check on the station periodically throughout the meal period.

While the food share table is helpful when students want items—such as milk or a piece of fruit—that they forgot to get or are no longer available, some students may use food share to fill up on items such as graham crackers rather than eating a balanced meal. Oversight by kitchen and cafeteria staff as well as adult volunteers can help reduce this behavior.

## 4. Clean-up and Handling Leftovers

At the end of the meal service, kitchen staff brings all items from the food share table into the kitchen for sorting and cleaning. Acceptable food items may be served again and claimed for meal reimbursement by the USDA.

### Room temperature items

Items like packaged crackers and pieces of fruit that are washed can be served at the next day's service.

### Individually packaged yogurt

Individually packaged items kept in the *Safe Temperature Zone*\* such as milk, yogurt and carrot packets may be served again and claimed for reimbursement.

### Hot or cold items

If these items have been outside the *Safe Temperature Zone*\* for less than two hours, they can be served again or donated if an approved food donation program exists at your school.

If the items have been outside the *Safe Temperature Zone*\* for more than two hours, they cannot be served again or donated. If your school has a compost collection program, keep compost clean by removing all plastic wrapping or non-compostable packaging before composting food.

\* See food safety section on page 4.



# What about Food Safety?



The California Retail Food Code, Section 113996, requires that all *Potentially Hazardous Foods*—such as milk, meals containing meats or cooked vegetables, or certain cut fruits such as melons—must be maintained under proper food holding temperatures to prevent the potential for rapid bacterial growth. Once food items leave their hot or cold environment, they are considered outside the *Safe Temperature Zone (STZ)*.

Food collected for Food Share is allowed to be outside of the STZ for no more than two hours. **Any food left out of the STZ after two hours (which includes time in both the serving line and Food Share) needs to be composted or discarded.**

Schools need to observe safe food handling procedures and customize their practices to meet food safety requirements. Items kept in the STZ zone such as milk,

yogurt, cheese sticks, etc. may be served again and claimed for reimbursement.

Keeping cold items in the STZ can be challenging, especially on hot days. Consider methods to keep cold items chilled, e.g. by using refrigerators, chest freezers, ice tubs or ice sheets. You may want to consider taking cold item temperatures with a thermometer in between lunch services.

Fruits with edible peels are allowed on share tables (as clarified by Environmental Health). Should a school have an outbreak of a gastrointestinal virus, put the food share program on hold as a precaution until approved to resume by Nutrition Services or your Environmental Health Department. Please consult your district’s kitchen procedures for additional guidance.

Type of Food	Safe temperature zone (STZ)	Allowable time outside of the STZ	Ways to control temperature
Cold food* e.g. milk	41° or lower	Up to 2 hours	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Set up a separate area for cold items on the food share table.</li> <li>Use ice buckets or ice sheets.</li> </ul>
Hot food e.g. pasta dish	135° or higher	Up to 2 hours	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Set up a separate area for hot items on the food share table.</li> </ul>
Room-temp. food e.g. apple, crackers	N/A	N/A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No temperature concern.</li> <li>Ready to serve again after cleaning.</li> </ul>

\*Exception: Individually packed food items such as yogurts and carrot packets can be served again.

## More Information & Resources

For links to the resources below and more information visit [www.StopWaste.org/smart-kitchen-initiative](http://www.StopWaste.org/smart-kitchen-initiative)

California Department of Education’s  
Food Share Mandate  
[www.cde.ca.gov/ls/nu/sn/mbcnp032018.asp](http://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/nu/sn/mbcnp032018.asp)

USDA Guidance for Food Share in Child Nutrition Programs  
[www.fns.usda.gov/use-share-tables-child-nutrition-programs](http://www.fns.usda.gov/use-share-tables-child-nutrition-programs)

Food Share Table Sign for Download  
[www.StopWaste.org/school\\_resources](http://www.StopWaste.org/school_resources)

Take it to Go!, California Dept of Education  
[www.cde.ca.gov/ls/nu/sn/mbcnp052015.asp](http://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/nu/sn/mbcnp052015.asp)

## Questions?

For questions about setting up a food share table at your school, or if you’d like to customize this guide for your school district, contact:

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