

Date: June 2, 2025

Memo code: SP 14-2025

Subject: Offer versus Serve Flexibilities for the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program

To: State Directors, Child Nutrition Programs, All States

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Child Nutrition Programs provide nutritionally balanced meals and snacks to America's children, contributing to their wellness, healthy growth, and development. Each school day, the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and the School Breakfast Program (SBP) serve around 30 million and 15 million students, respectively,¹ in approximately 100,000 schools nationwide.² About 80% of breakfasts and 70% of lunches served in schools are provided to students for free or at a reduced-price.³ Meals served through the NSLP and SBP are often the healthiest meals that children consume in a day.⁴ Given how many children are impacted, it is a priority of USDA to ensure that these programs work well for the students who eat school meals and the schools that administer them. For many children, school breakfast and lunch are the only nutritious meals they eat during the day – it is critically important that those meals are not only healthy but eaten. There's no reason access to school meals should be impeded by unnecessary red tape or food should be wasted.

Under the leadership of Secretary Brooke Rollins, USDA is prioritizing the clarification of statutory, regulatory, and administrative requirements of these two school-based programs. To clarify regulations for schools, improve children's participation in school meals, and limit food waste, USDA is issuing a reminder of the Offer versus Serve (OVS) flexibility. OVS is a

¹ Food and Nutrition Service. Child Nutrition Tables. April 11, 2025. Available at: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/child-nutrition-tables>.

² Economic Research Service. Child Nutrition Programs. February 11, 2025. Available at: <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/child-nutrition-programs>.

³ Food and Nutrition Service. Child Nutrition Tables. April 11, 2025. Available at: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/child-nutrition-tables>.

⁴ Liu J, Micha R, Li Y, Mozaffarian D. Trends in Food Sources and Diet Quality Among US Children and Adults, 2003-2018. JAMA. April 12, 2021. Available at: https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamanetworkopen/fullarticle/2778453?utm_source=For_The_Media&utm_medium=referral&utm_campaign=ftm_links&utm_term=040921.

provision in the NSLP and the SBP that allows students to decline some of the food offered. The goal of OVS is to reduce food waste and improve menu planning in the school meal programs by allowing students to decline food they do not intend to eat. OVS gives students more autonomy to select a meal that meets their preferences. USDA research has found that the use of OVS is associated with significantly lower levels of plate waste for overall calories, fruits, and vegetables.⁵ Currently, a fifth of all calories served in school lunches are wasted, meaning that not only food is wasted, but taxpayer resources as well. The money being spent on wasted food would be better used on offering higher-quality and innovative school meals.

USDA encourages schools to use the OVS flexibility at both lunch and breakfast for ALL grade levels to reduce food waste and enhance student choice.

As a reminder to school food service directors and administrators, the OVS requirements for school meals are as follows:

National School Lunch Program

At lunch, OVS is required for high schools, and optional but strongly encouraged for elementary and middle schools. Schools participating in OVS must offer students all five required meal components (fruits, vegetables, grains, meats/meat alternates, and fluid milk). Students must select at least three meal components, including ½ cup of fruits and/or vegetables ([7 CFR 210.10\(e\)](#)).

School Breakfast Program

At breakfast, OVS is optional but strongly encouraged for elementary, middle, and high schools. Schools participating in OVS must offer students at least four food items from all

⁵ U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service. School Nutrition and Meal Cost Study. April 2019. Available at: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/research/school-meals/nutrition-meal-cost-study>.

three required meal components (fruits and/or vegetables, grains and/or meats/meat alternates, and fluid milk). Students must select at least three food items, including ½ cup of fruits and/or vegetables ([7 CFR 220.8\(e\)](#)).

For OVS success, program operators can help students and staff understand the required components for a reimbursable meal by:

- Using posters and signs in service and dining areas.
- Ensuring servers and cashiers have reviewed the menu before each service.
- Serving fruit near the point of sale for students to easily add to their meal.
- Sharing menus with teachers and staff to review with students.
- Posting menus on the school's website and social media for students to discuss with parents and caregivers.

Visit the FNS website to access Team Nutrition resources, including tip sheets and posters:

1. Offer Versus Serve Materials: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/nslp/offer-versus-serve-posters>.
2. What You Can Do to Help Prevent Wasted Food: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/prevent-wasted-food>.

State agencies are reminded to distribute this information to Program operators immediately. Program operators should direct any questions regarding this memorandum to the appropriate State agency. State agencies should direct questions to the appropriate FNS Regional Office.

Original Signed

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