



Food Recovery - Share Tables & Donation

10 Points

20 Points

School

New Action September 2023

This action encourages schools to set up a share table and/or a food donation program to feed hungry students or community members with recovered excess food rather than throwing it out. A share table requires the school to set up a designated area in the cafeteria where students can place unwanted and unopened food and beverage items during their lunch period. A cooler bin or refrigerator would be needed if collecting dairy or other perishable items. The share table items should be made available to students at no cost during meal times, or as snacks during the school day, after-school activities, or sent home with students; or they should be donated to an external organization, such as a food pantry or soup kitchen. To earn points, the school must show that it ran an on-going share table (10 points) and/or donation program (10 points) in the current school year and promoted the program and its benefits to the school community. A school with both a share table program and a food donation program may earn 20 points.

Why is it important?

In the United States, 30-40 % of the food supply is wasted. Meanwhile, the USDA estimated that 38.3 million people lived in food insecure households in 2020. A food insecure household has limited or uncertain access to adequate food ([USDA](#)). The food that is being wasted each year could instead provide nourishment to those experiencing food insecurity. Students who are in food insecure homes often have lower performance rates in school and have a harder time achieving academic milestones ([American Youth Policy Forum, 2015](#)). Allocating excess food to students experiencing food insecurity at home can help improve student performance. A school food recovery program also provides an opportunity to engage students in real-world learning about food waste and food insecurity and gives students agency to address these problems in their own community.

Who should lead and be involved with this action?

The school's green team along with school administrators should be involved in developing a food recovery plan. Food service staff should be made aware of the plan as they will play an essential role in the kitchen. If food will be donated to external organizations, then the local health department should be consulted regarding food donation guidelines. To find the contact information for your local health officer use the Local Public Health Directory map found [here](#). The school will also need to contact local organizations, such as food pantries, that would accept donated food to find out what they would accept. Students can also be engaged in planning and implementing the food recovery program.

Timeframe

A share table program can be set up very quickly but may take one month or longer to establish and get running smoothly. The project leaders will need time to educate staff and students about share tables and their benefits. They will also need to communicate and plan with staff, students and any external partners to determine how best to run a share table program at the school and redistribute the collected food. Allow time to make adjustments to how the program is run once it is underway.

Project costs and resource needs

Schools will need:

- Staff and student time to establish and promote the program.
- A designated area in the cafeteria to set up the share table. Boxes, bins or crates can be used to collect food items at the share table.
- Coolers or refrigerators to store dairy and other perishable items.
- Signs about what types of items can be dropped off at the share table.
- For donations to an external organization, transportation of food to the organization will need to be arranged.

What to do, and how to do it ("How to")

This section provides guidance and recommendations for implementing the action. Throughout the process of completing this action, please keep the following requirements in mind:

- 1) The school must have operated a comprehensive, ongoing food recovery program (share table and/or donation) during the **current school year** (September to June).
- 2) The school must have promoted the food recovery program and its benefits to students, staff, and families.

In planning to take action to reduce school food waste, it is strongly recommended to first perform a waste audit to determine the amount and types of food waste generated in the school. See the [Waste Audit action](#) for guidance on completing an audit of cafeteria food waste.

A school does not need to follow this guidance exactly as long as it meets the requirements for earning points for this action.

- 1) Decide as a team what strategy will be taken for collected food. Food can be recovered to be used for classroom snacks, afterschool programs, given to students to take home at the end of the day, and donated to local non-profit organizations. If donating, contact local organizations to find out which food items they will accept and make arrangements either to drop off the food or to have it picked up by the organization.
- 2) If your team decides to donate any of the food collected, your local health inspector can be very helpful. Health inspectors should be aware of food donation guidelines and can help you understand which foods can be safely donated and how to properly store foods for donations. Rutgers Cooperative Extension provides [fact sheets and a free training course](#) about food donation for health inspectors. Wholesome, uneaten, and unopened foods can typically be recovered for donation. Both New Jersey state law and the [Bill Emerson Good Samaritan Food Act](#) (a federal law) offer liability protection to food donors acting in good faith. Harvard Law School published a [fact sheet](#) that summarizes the protections offered by these laws.
- 3) Set up your share table. Schools can set up a share table by designating a specific table for students to place their unwanted whole foods or beverages that were served in the cafeteria. The share table should be clearly identifiable in the cafeteria by using colorful signs and posters. These can be designed by students. Share tables are more likely to be utilized when placed in high traffic areas, such as near the end of the food service line or by the cashier. Foods that can be left at the share table include non-perishable or pre-packaged food items, fruits and vegetables that are wrapped or are whole and have a thick skin, and dairy products as long as there is a cooler or refrigerator at the share table. Food brought from home should not be allowed on the share table. Detailed guidelines on how to safely set up a share table are provided by the USDA and can be found [here](#).

From [USDA Guidelines for Share Tables](#):

School meal components recommended for sharing:

- Unopened pre-packaged items, such as a bag of baby carrots or sliced apples stored in a cooling bin.
- Whole pieces of fruit, such as apples or bananas.
- Unopened milk, if immediately stored in a cooling bin maintained at 41 degrees F or below.

School meal components NOT recommend for sharing:

- Unpackaged items, such as a salad bowl without a lid.
- Packaged items that can be opened and resealed.
- Open items, such as an opened or punctured bag of baby carrots or sliced apples.
- Perishable foods, when a temperature control mechanism is not in place

4) Students should be encouraged to visit the share table if they are still hungry after finishing their meal to take additional food or beverage items. Parents should be notified of the option to receive recovered food and school guidance counselors or social workers can help to identify students who may be experiencing food insecurity at home. These students should be prioritized to receive food collected at the share table.

5) Items remaining on the share table after the end of lunch service should be redistributed preferably within the school first (e.g. to classrooms for snacks, to after-school programs, offered to students at dismissal to take home). Then, the next preferred option would be to donate the excess food to external organizations.

6) If possible, collect data about how much and what types of food are being recovered. This information is not needed to earn points for this action, but it would be helpful for ensuring that the school's meal service is meeting students' needs and to help reduce waste. Data may be obtained through direct counts of food items on the share table or through visual estimates – e.g. numbers of bags or bins of food collected in a day or week.

What to submit to earn points for this action

In order to earn points for this action, the following documentation must be submitted as part of the online certification application in order to verify that the action requirements have been met. 10 points may be earned for a share table program; 10 points may be earned for a food donation program; a maximum of 20 points may be earned if a school has implemented both.

1) Description of Implementation: In the text box provided on the submission page for this action, indicate the type of comprehensive, ongoing food recovery program(s) (food share and/or donation program) that your school has implemented in the current school year.

2) Complete and upload the [Food Recovery Submission Form](#) to provide the following information for your share table and/or food donation program:

- Type of food recovery program
- Recovery process/set-up
- Redistribution/donation process
- Impact of program on school
- Promotion of program and benefits to the school community
- For donations only, list the organization(s) donations are going to

3) Optional: Upload copies of materials (such as posters, newsletter articles, social media posts) used to promote the food recovery program(s) and their benefits to students, staff and families. We encourage you to share materials that could serve as models for other schools.

Resubmission Requirements

To earn points again after an approval has expired, the complete submission requirements need to be met for the application year. Additionally, the last question on the submission form about changes to the program since the previous approval must be answered.

Approved Action Expiration Date

Approved actions will expire on August 31, 1 year after the certification application was submitted. For example, in a 2024 application the approval would expire on August 31, 2025.

IMPORTANT NOTES:

There is a limit of six uploaded documents per action and individual files must not exceed 50 MB. Excerpts of relevant information from large documents are recommended. All action documentation is available for public viewing after an action is approved. Action submissions should not include any information or documents that are not intended for public viewing. Please make note of this, especially if submitting photographs, videos, or the individual work of students. Efforts must be made to follow appropriate confidentiality policies of the school system.

Spotlight: What New Jersey schools are doing

Halsted Middle School in Newton had a share table in their cafeteria during the 2022-2023 school year. There is a designated area where students can place their uneaten or unopened food including milk, whole fruit, and packaged vegetables. Students got involved, making signs to help their fellow students properly

contribute to the share table. The food must be completely uneaten or unopened and anyone is able to take extra food during their lunch period. The lunch duty staff monitors the table and custodians put the food that is left after lunch in the refrigerator. At the end of the day, the afterschool staff packages leftover food in paper containers or foil and sends it home with students. Families are informed of this food distribution.

Resources

Sustainable Jersey for Schools: Reduce, Recover & Recycle Food Waste - Toolkit for PreK-12 Schools. See section on food recovery. <https://www.sustainablejerseyschools.com/resources/publications/#c3613>

USDA: "The Use of Share Tables in Child Nutrition Programs"
<https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/use-share-tables-child-nutrition-programs>

Bill Emerson Good Samaritan Food Act
<https://www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/documents/usda-good-samaritan-faqs.pdf>

New Jersey Food Donation Guide
<https://sites.rutgers.edu/food-waste/wp-content/uploads/sites/667/2022/02/NJ-Food-Donation-Guidance-pages.pdf>

New Jersey State Department of Agriculture Share Tables Fact Sheet
<https://www.nj.gov/agriculture/applic/forms/Form%20397%20Share%20Tables%20Fact%20Sheet.pdf>

Rutgers Cooperative Extension Food Waste Team: Health Inspectors & Food Donation
<https://sites.rutgers.edu/food-waste/food-donation/>

Rutgers: "School Food Waste Reduction Toolkit"
<https://njaes.rutgers.edu/school-food-waste/food-waste-summit-toolkit.pdf>

Food Rescue: K-12 Food Rescue Student Leaders Stories
<https://www.foodrescue.net/>

Resources to Find Food Donation Recipients

Ample Harvest: Find a Pantry to Donate Food
<https://ampleharvest.org/find-pantry/>

Rutgers Against Hunger: Local Food Pantries (listed by county)
<https://rah.rutgers.edu/resources/local-p>