DRAFT Practices and Strategies to Reduce Cafeteria Food Waste in School Districts

Food waste in school cafeterias represents both an environmental and financial loss. A 2019 study by the World Wildlife Fund showed that U.S. schools discard over **530,000 tons of food annually**【11】. Reducing cafeteria waste conserves resources, saves money, and teaches students sustainability habits they can carry into adulthood.

The following strategies for reducing food waste are drawn from Sustainable Jersey's Sustainable Cafeterias Forum, held on October 9, 2025, and supporting research from national and state programs, nonprofits, academic, and industry sources.

---

1. Baseline Assessment & Measurement

Establishing a baseline and tracking progress are the foundations of any food-waste reduction effort.

Key steps:

- Conduct a **food-waste audit** by sorting and weighing plate, prep, and share-table waste. Regularly repeat to track trends (e.g. at the start and mid-point of each school year)【1】
- Measure: total pounds wasted, cost of disposal, composted and donated pounds.
- Identify "hot spots" (fruits, vegetables, milk, entrée waste). Research shows fruits and vegetables are about **50% of plate waste** in schools【2】. Sustainable Jersey's pilot study with Rutgers found that milk was the single most wasted item from school lunches.
- Use the data to guide menu and purchasing adjustments.

Tip: Student participation in waste audits ("food-waste warriors") reinforces learning and builds ownership.

Why it matters: Quantification enables realistic goals, targeted interventions, and proof of progress.

---

2. Menu Planning, Procurement & Portion Control

Optimizing what and how food is served minimizes unconsumed items.

Recommended practices:

- **Use student feedback and taste tests** to improve menu acceptance (highlighted by Camden City and Long Branch school districts).
- Implement **Offer Versus Serve (OVS)**l—students can decline certain components rather than being required to take all five meal elements【3】.
- Adjust portion sizes and allow "half-portions" or choice between entrée sizes【2】.
- Offer self-serve salad bars to reduce waste and promote consumption of fruit and vegetables (highlighted by Patrick Kenneally, Chef Ann Foundation).
- Buy only what you need—**review inventory weekly** and track usage to prevent over-ordering or spoilage. Improve forecasting and avoid over-ordering to match actual consumption【2】.
- Promote **scratch cooking and fresh, plant-forward menus**—they're more appealing, reduce packaging, and allow local sourcing (Chef Ann Foundation's model). Scratch cooking also makes it easier to meet USDA school nutrition standards for lower sugar and sodium content【10】.

Example: Camden City Schools successfully reduced food waste by combining menu feedback sessions with student taste tests and "Try Day Friday" events.

---

3. Cafeteria Operations & Logistics

Physical setup, schedule, and serving practices strongly influence food consumption and waste.

Strategies:

- **Extend lunch periods** and, where possible, schedule **recess before lunch**—both are proven to reduce waste【4】.
- Use **behavioral nudges** (per Smarter Lunchroom Movement): place fruit and vegetables first, improve presentation, and use attractive signage【5】.
- Install **share tables** for unopened, safe items to be reused or donated.
- **Co-locate trash, recycling, and compost bins** with clear visual labels.
- **Train kitchen staff** on First In, First Out (FIFO) inventory rotation, portion control, batch cooking, and storage temperature management to avoid over production and spoilage.
- **Engage cafeteria staff** in initiative from the start to get their buy-in. Include them in education about the why behind new practices, and consult them for their input. Making staff feel valued and giving them a sense of purpose can help keep them onboard in a competitive labor market.
- **Encourage feedback loops** between servers and kitchen staff to report what is being discarded most often. Also get feedback from students through surveys or interviews after their meal.

Example: Long Branch Public Schools cut daily food waste by half after improving food sorting, composting, and scheduling structured lunch shifts.

4. Food Recovery, Diversion & Composting

Some surplus is inevitable, but it should never go to waste. Whatever remains should be diverted from landfill.

Actions:

- **Recover whole and unopened food** (milk, fruit, packaged items) for share tables/refrigerators or to donate to local food pantries—protected under the federal **Good Samaritan Food Donation Act** and the **Food Donation Improvement Act,** signed into law in January 2023**.** (https://chlpi.org/news-and-events/news-and-commentary/food-law-and-policy/food-donation-improvement-act-signed-into-law/)【9】.
- **Compost food scraps** either on-site (using small composters) or off-site through local haulers. Student-run composting programs, like Long Branch's, can supply soil amendment for gardens.
- **Track recovered and composted weights** as part of performance metrics and to encourage community pride.

Example: Long Branch's composting program produces compost for school gardens that grow 2,000 pounds of vegetables annually for students to take home.

5. Student Engagement, Education & Culture

A culture shift is essential for lasting change.

Components:

- Create student "**Food-Waste Warriors**" or ambassadors for peer education and to guide peers during lunch sorting (e.g., Long Branch)【8】.
- Integrate waste-reduction lessons into **STEM, health, and social studies classes**, linking cafeteria actions with academics (as modeled in forum examples).
- Use **visual dashboards and posters** to show daily or weekly waste amounts, making progress visible【6】.
- Gamify the effort with —hold class competitions or campaigns with schoolwide waste-reduction goals【7】.
- Involve families and local farmers through events, newsletters and social media.

Example: Camden City's "Three C's" framework—Cafeteria, Classroom, and Community—links hands-on food education with cafeteria change and local farm partnerships.

6. Policy, Administration & Procurement Alignment

Long-term change requires supportive policy and administrative leadership.

Recommendations:

- Make waste reduction and sustainability part of the **district's strategic plan**.
- Adopt district policies supporting **share tables, composting, and waste audits** as ongoing practices. Enact schedule and policy reforms—e.g., longer lunch, recess before lunch, and share-table policies—should be board-approved and standardized.
    - **Procurement policy alignment:** Ensure district procurement policies reflect the principles from the procurement references (fair/open competition + sustainability/values alignment).
- Adopt **value-based procurement** —selecting vendors who reflect district sustainability goals rather than only lowest cost (advocated by Hillsdale SD). Include **sustainability clauses** in food service contracts—such as local sourcing, recyclable packaging, and food-recovery expectations (See sample clauses below).
    - **Solicitation/contract language:** Write contract specifications that include sustainability criteria (e.g., "vendor shall provide produce sourced within X miles," "vendor will report on packaging reduction efforts," "vendor shall support food donation/composting infrastructure").
    - **Vendor selection & oversight:** Incorporate performance metrics (waste diversion, packaging reduction, local purchasing percentages) into vendor contracts and renewal/discussion phases.
    - **Training & capacity building:** Train food service directors, procurement staff, and administrators on how to implement such contracts effectively.
    - Link procurement to waste reduction goals: By aligning procurement with sustainability, you can more directly reduce food waste (e.g., choosing vendors who supply minimally processed items or local produce = more appealing foods = less waste).
- Allocate funds for sustainability infrastructure such as dish washers, refrigerators, composting equipment, tracking tools) and staff training.
- Require periodic vendor reporting on packaging and surplus management.

7. Continuous Improvement & Scaling

Sustainability should evolve over time with data and experience.

Mechanisms:

- Use waste audit results to adjust menus and procurement each semester.

- Pilot new ideas (bulk milk dispensers, salad bars, share tables) in one school, then scale district-wide.
- Share successes in inter-district networks and through Sustainable Jersey for Schools certification.
- Celebrate progress publicly.
- Reinvest cost savings from reduced disposal and over-ordering into further sustainability projects.

Benefits and Incentives

Benefits:

- **Cost savings:** lower disposal fees and purchasing efficiencies.
- **Environmental gains:** reduced greenhouse-gas emissions and water use. U.S. school cafeterias generate an estimated **530,000 tons of food waste per year**【5】.
- **Educational outcomes:** real-world sustainability learning opportunities.
- **Community impact:** supports local farms, combats food insecurity, and builds sustainable behavioral norms.
- **Compliance and recognition:** aligns with state waste-diversion mandates and Sustainable Jersey certification.

Quick-Start Checklist for School Districts

1. Form a cross-functional team (food services, facilities, teachers, students, admin).
2. Conduct a 3-day cafeteria food-waste audit and survey of students.
3. Set measurable goals (e.g., 25 % plate-waste reduction in one year).
4. Pilot two or three interventions: share tables, OVS education, portion control.
5. Record weekly waste data; display trends for staff/students.
6. Partner with local composting or food-rescue organizations.
7. Adjust menus and procurement using feedback and audit results.
8. Publicize progress to sustain enthusiasm.
9. Expand to more schools and institutionalize in policy.

Common Challenges and Mitigation

Challenge	Solution
Limited staff capacity	Start small; use student helpers; integrate tasks into existing routines.

Challenge	Solution
Budget constraints	Highlight disposal cost savings; pursue grants; phase in investments.
Student habits	Peer modeling, gamification, and classroom tie-ins.
Logistics (compost/donation)	Partner with local agencies; begin with pilot programs.
Procurement rigidity	Adjust vendor contracts during renewal cycles.
Measuring waste	Use simplified audit forms or mobile tracking apps; rotate audit weeks.

References

1. Sustainable Food Waste Group. *"7 Best Practices for Managing School Food Waste and Reducing Costs."* Sustainable Food Waste Group, 2023. Link
2. Shapiro, D. *"Food Waste in School Cafeterias."* Shapiro Enterprises, 2024. Link
3. U.S. Department of Agriculture. *"Food Loss and Waste Reduction: Schools."* USDA, 2024. Link
4. No Kid Hungry. *"Strategies to Reduce Food Waste in School Meal Programs."* Best Practices Report, 2023. Link
5. School Nutrition Association. *"Strategies to Address Food Waste in K-12 Schools: A Narrative Review."* Journal of Child Nutrition & Management, Spring 2024. Link
6. Let's Go Compost. *"How to Implement a Student-Led Cafeteria Campaign to Reduce Food Waste."* Let's Go Compost Blog, 2023. Link
7. Bui et al. *"Visual Data and Gamification to Influence Student Waste Behavior."* arXiv preprint 2307.12882 (2023). Link
8. World Wildlife Fund. "Be a Food Waste Warrior." Link
9. NRDC. "*Liability Protections and Safe Food Donation.*" September 29, 2023. Link
10. Healthy School Recipes. "*Hot Topics in School Nutrition: Key Trends, Challenges, and Opportunities,"* 2025. Link
11. World Wildlife Fund. "Food waste warriors, A deep dive into food waste in US schools." November 7, 2019. Link

References with Focus on Procurement and Contracting

- The Common Market. *"Advancing School Food Procurement: Driving Values-Based Purchasing through Competitive Solicitations."* This report explores how school districts can incorporate values-based criteria (local sourcing, sustainability, equity) into their food service solicitations/contracting,V.1, November 2022. Link
    - **Take-aways:** Use solicitation language to reflect sustainability goals; move beyond lowest cost to "best value"; include local producer participation.
- Center for Science in the Public Interest. *"Government Food Purchasing and Service: Implementing Best Practices."* This toolkit covers best practices for institutional procurement, including sample solicitation language for cafeteria/food-service operations, July 11, 2025. Link

    - **Take-aways:** How to craft contracts that specify quality, sustainability, vendor performance metrics; how to manage food service vendor contracts.
- Food and Nutrition Service (U.S. USDA). *"Best Practices for Contracting with Food Service Management Companies (FSMCs)."* This policy memo gives procurement/contracting tips specifically for school meal programs, April 21, 2023. Link
    - **Take-aways:** Guidance on contract terms, oversight, supply-chain disruptions, vendor performance monitoring.
- Urban School Food Alliance. *"Growing Local Procurement in Schools: Best Practices."* A resource dedicated to how school food service procurement can support local, minimally processed foods, which ties directly to waste-reduction and supply chain sustainability. Link
    - **Take-aways:** Encourage districts to include "local/minimally processed" in procurement specs so that menus are more appealing and food waste can be reduced.
- School Nutrition Association. *"Procurement Do's & Don'ts."* A handbook providing straightforward guidance on procurement processes for school food service programs, December, 2022. Link
    - **Take-aways:** Ensures procurement is fair, open & competitive, but also transparent and ethically managed — a necessary foundation before layering in sustainability criteria.

Model Procurement & Contract Specification Clauses

(For School Food Service Management Companies, Vendors, and Suppliers)

15 sample clauses and specification statements that school districts can adapt for RFPs, bid documents, or service contracts related to food service management and supply procurement.

These are drawn and paraphrased from the sources noted below (USDA FNS, The Common Market, CSPI, Urban School Food Alliance, and the School Nutrition Association), as well as model practices from the Sustainable Cafeterias Forum.

---

1. Purpose and Guiding Principles

"The School District is committed to providing nutritious, appealing, and environmentally sustainable meals. All vendors and food service management companies (FSMCs) shall support this mission by integrating food-waste reduction, sustainable sourcing, and responsible packaging practices into all operations."

---

2. Value-Based Evaluation

"Awards will be based on **best value**, not solely lowest price. Proposals will be evaluated on sustainability criteria, including waste-reduction practices, food recovery, recyclable/compostable packaging, and support for local or regional producers."

---

3. Local & Regional Sourcing

"Vendor shall make best efforts to source at least **X% of fresh produce and dairy** from farms or distributors located within **150 miles** of the district. Vendors must identify local items on monthly invoices and provide traceability documentation upon request."

Reference: The Common Market (2022), Urban School Food Alliance (2023).

---

4. Minimally Processed Foods

"Preference will be given to suppliers providing minimally processed, scratch-cook–ready ingredients (e.g., whole produce, unbreaded proteins) to reduce packaging waste and improve nutritional quality."

References: 7 & 8

---

5. Packaging and Single-Use Materials

"Vendors shall minimize single-use plastics and excessive packaging. Compostable, recyclable, or reusable packaging shall be used wherever practicable. Vendors must report quarterly on packaging types and waste-reduction initiatives."

Reference: CSPI (2021); Sustainable Food Waste Group (2023).

---

6. Food Waste Prevention and Recovery Plan

"Vendor must provide a **Food Waste Prevention and Recovery Plan** outlining methods for forecasting, batch cooking, donation of surplus food (in compliance with the Good Samaritan Food Donation Act), and composting of unavoidable waste."

7. Share Table & Donation Compliance

“Vendor shall cooperate with the district in operating share tables and/or donation programs for unopened, safe food. All operations shall comply with USDA FNS guidance and state health codes.”

Reference: USDA FNS “Best Practices for Contracting with FSMCs” (2023).

---

8. Reporting and Accountability

“The contractor shall submit quarterly sustainability reports including:

- Pounds of food purchased and wasted
- Packaging waste reduction activities
- Local sourcing percentages
- Donation and composting volumes”

---

9. Menu Flexibility and Student Feedback

“Vendor shall collaborate with students, teachers, and food service staff to conduct **taste tests** and feedback sessions at least twice annually. Menu adjustments shall reflect student preferences to reduce plate waste.”

---

10. Training and Education

“Vendor shall provide annual staff training on:

- Offer Versus Serve (OVS) practices
- Waste reduction and safe food donation
- Composting and recycling procedures.”

---

11. Menu Transparency and Labeling

“All menu items shall identify local, scratch-made, and plant-forward options using a standardized labeling system displayed on menu boards and online menus.”

Reference: Urban School Food Alliance (2023).

---

12. Equipment and Infrastructure Support

“Vendor shall assist the district in identifying and implementing infrastructure to reduce waste, such as bulk milk dispensers, salad bars, or reusable serviceware systems, subject to district approval.”

---

13. Composting Collaboration

“Vendor shall collaborate with the district to implement on-site composting or contract with a certified compost hauler. Vendor shall ensure separation of organic waste from landfill-bound waste at preparation sites.”

---

14. Performance Metrics and Incentives

“Contract renewals and extensions may include performance-based incentives tied to verified reductions in cafeteria food waste and improvements in local sourcing and recycling rates.”

Reference: The Common Market (2022); School Nutrition Association (2023).

---

15. Continuous Improvement & Annual Review

“Each year, the vendor and district shall jointly review sustainability goals and identify at least two measurable improvements in waste reduction, local sourcing, or composting for the following year’s contract period.”

Supporting References

The Common Market. *Advancing School Food Procurement: Driving Values-Based Purchasing through Competitive Solicitations.* 2022. Link

Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI). *Government Food Purchasing and Service: Implementing Best Practices.* 2021. Link

USDA Food and Nutrition Service (FNS). *Best Practices for Contracting with Food Service Management Companies.* 2023. Link

Urban School Food Alliance. *Local Procurement Best Practices Guide.* 2023. Link

School Nutrition Association (SNA). *Procurement Do's & Don'ts.* 2023. Link

Sustainable Food Waste Group. *7 Best Practices for Managing School Food Waste and Reducing Costs.* 2023. Link

The Chef Ann Foundation. The Scratch Cooking in School Solution: A Policy Roadmap for Boosting Children's Health, Learning Outcomes, Environmental Sustainability, and Local Economies. April, 2025. Link

Massachusetts Farm to School & **Fine Farm to Institution**. Sample Language and Resources for Local Foods in Contracts and RFPs. Link