

FOOD



WHAT IS SCHOOL FOOD?

Schools are a key food provider in communities around the country. The federal government subsidizes the cost of school meals through the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and the School Breakfast Program (SBP). Both programs allow students to receive free or reduced-price meals if their family income is below a certain threshold. During the 2018–19 school year, the programs served nearly 4.9 billion school lunches and over 2.4 billion school breakfasts.^{1,2} In 2019, 74% of lunches served through NSLP and 85% of breakfasts served through SBP were free or reduced-price.^{3,4}

The COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted how much students and their families depend on schools to provide a critical source of nutrition. In making decisions about school closures at the start of the pandemic, school leaders and policymakers emphasized reliance on school meals as a major concern. Once closures began and the economic crisis increased food insecurity, many schools provided free food to students and their families.⁵

With so many families relying on school meals, it is important to have healthy, sustainable food in our schools. Access to nutritious food is particularly critical for the health of children and youth living in poverty, who face disproportionately worse health outcomes and healthcare access.⁶ The pandemic underscores the need to support student health so students can continue to learn and grow.



CONNECTION TO CLIMATE CHANGE

Schools are major consumers of food products. Policies and programs that make the process of buying and serving school food more sustainable have the potential to make a big impact on sustainability goals. Intentionally sourcing and using food sustainably also presents applied, hands-on learning opportunities for students.

Additionally, reducing food waste from schools can benefit the environment. Schools alone produce an estimated 530,000 tons of food waste per year, and food that sits in landfills produces methane, a potent greenhouse gas.⁷ Researchers have estimated the cost associated with wasted food in schools to be \$1.24 billion.⁸ Importantly, research suggests that healthier school food does not impact food waste in schools.⁹

State Policies



Local Food in Schools

Thirty-four states and DC have at least one policy or program in place to incentivize or otherwise encourage the use of locally-sourced food in schools, as identified by the National Farm to School Network. This includes general funding, state-run grant programs for schools or districts, state-wide farm-to-school programs, and local preference or incentives for school food purchasing.¹⁰

Local preference in purchasing decisions is the most common policy or program—found in 24 states and DC. One program in Michigan incentivized local food procurement for schools by reimbursing schools an additional 10 cents for locally sourced food. Eighteen states have state-run farm-to-school programs, many of which are cross-sector collaborations between departments of education and agriculture. To encourage local food procurement, some states have grant programs that include opportunities for schools to purchase kitchen equipment that will allow them to prepare and serve fresh produce.



School Gardens

Seventeen states and DC have state-sponsored or coordinated school garden programs, which allow students to learn about the science of sustainable growing practices. Many schools serve the produce from their gardens as part of school meals. While states often have restrictions on food served in schools, some states have explicit policies permitting school garden produce to be exempt from those restrictions.



Surplus Food

Fourteen states have policies, programs, or resources explicitly allowing or encouraging schools to divert surplus food through share tables, food donation, or recovery programs. Share tables are an option for students to contribute their unopened food items to a central location so other students can take them. Food donation or recovery policies or programs allow schools to donate excess food to non-profit organizations such as food banks. Each of these reduce food waste by ensuring excess food can be eaten instead of thrown away.



Composting

Five states and DC have composting policies or programs at the state level. At least two other states (CA, IN) allow or encourage composting as part of broader school garden or recycling programs. Even if schools implement food waste reduction practices such as share tables or food recovery, some food waste is still expected.¹¹ Composting is a sustainable way to make use of inedible food that schools would otherwise send to landfills.

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BRIGHT SPOTS

- Minneapolis Public Schools (MN) recently developed a three-year Food Waste Plan of Action to prevent wasted food, redistribute food surpluses, and recycle food scraps.¹² The plan is based on the EPA's Food Recovery Hierarchy tool and was developed through a collaboration between the district and the National Resources Defense Council.¹³
- Oakland Unified School District (CA) has a goal of establishing a garden at every school in the district.¹⁴ The school board has an extensive policy describing the role of building and grounds staff in supporting school gardens and outdoor classrooms.¹⁵ The district also has a Memorandum of Understanding form for schools whose garden education is provided by outside organizations. OUSD is also a leader in school waste reduction.¹⁶ The district requires share tables in every school and has a sustainability specialist who focuses on food waste reduction. In the initial stages of their effort, OUSD was able to prevent more than 50% of their waste from reaching a landfill.¹⁷
- Austin Independent School District (TX) has worked with the Good Food Purchasing program to purchase local, sustainable food to serve in schools.^{18,19} The program is run by the Center for Good Food Purchasing to help schools and other institutions align their food procurement with the Center's standards on local economies, nutrition, a valued workforce, environmental sustainability and animal welfare. Austin ISD has taken several steps to improve their performance in all five categories.²⁰ The district has released bids for food products like organic milk and grass-fed beef to improve sustainability and animal welfare, and each school provides daily salad bars, plant-based meal options, and locally and sustainably grown ingredients.



Photo by Allison Shelley for American Education: Images of Teachers and Students in Action.

SUSTAINABLE FOOD PRACTICES

DOES STATE HAVE POLICY OR PROGRAM RELATED TO SUSTAINABLE FOOD USE IN SCHOOLS?

States A – M	Explicitly allows, encourages, or requires schools to divert surplus food	Composting	School gardens	Policies or programs supporting local food in schools [^]		
				Appropriations, grant program, or other revenue streams	State-wide farm to school program within state agency	Local preference for school food purchasing
Alabama	X				X	X
Alaska			X		X*	X*
Arizona			X			
Arkansas						X
California	X*		X	X		X
Colorado				X		X
Connecticut				X	X	X
DC		X	X	X	X	X
Delaware						
Florida					X	X
Georgia						X
Hawaii		X*	X	X	X	X
Idaho						
Illinois			X	X	X	X
Indiana	X					
Iowa				X		
Kansas						
Kentucky				X		X
Louisiana			X		X	
Maine	X					X
Maryland	X				X	X
Massachusetts				X*		X
Michigan				X		X
Minnesota	X**			X		
Mississippi			X			
Missouri			X	X	X	X
Montana				X		X

Remaining states on following page

States N – W

Nebraska			X			
Nevada	X		X			
New Hampshire	X					
New Jersey	X		X	X	X	
New Mexico	X			X		X
New York				X	X	X
North Carolina						X
North Dakota						
Ohio						
Oklahoma			X		X	
Oregon			X	X	X	
Pennsylvania				X	X	
Rhode Island		X				
South Carolina						
South Dakota						
Tennessee						X
Texas	X			X		X
Utah						
Vermont	X	X	X	X	X	
Virginia						
Washington	X	X	X	X	X	X
West Virginia	X		X	X	X	
Wisconsin		X	X	X		
Wyoming				X		
TOTALS	14	6	18	24	18	24
PERCENT	27%	12%	35%	47%	35%	47%

Note: Percentages are out of 51 (includes DC) * Funding may not be ongoing ** State agency has guidance but predominantly from federal information
 ^Local food policy and program data from National Farm to School Network Policy Handbook
<http://www.farmtoschool.org/Resources/State%20Farm%20to%20School%20Policy%20Handbook.pdf>



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