



Food waste at schools leads to share tables

By Rebekah Folkert

School cafeterias are a significant contributor to food waste. The problem of food waste brought national attention when the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) put into place new nutrition requirements and regulations for breakfast and lunch served in school cafeterias. Opponents of the new policies argue the requirements increase the amount of food children take and then discard, thus increasing food waste. Research indicates food waste initially increased, but now has decreased to levels that are similar to what they were pre-regulation. Regardless, schools continue to search for ways to reduce lunch waste in school cafeterias.

An estimated 30-40 percent of the food supply in the United States becomes food waste. This equals to about 245.4 million tons, costing the nation approximately 162 billion dollars in wasted food each year. Decreasing food waste could lead to lower food costs, improved environmental quality and improved food equity. Food waste can come by consumer shopping and eating habits, households preparing more food than consumed, food not being used before spoilage and food safety. In the United States, where food safety rules are more thorough than other countries, millions of pounds of food are thrown away each year because of food safety concerns. Food is often thrown away based on a "best by" or "use by date" that was arbitrarily set by manufacturers. This number is determined based on food quality, not food safety; resulting in school cafeterias and parents alike throwing away food at the expiration date believing it is no longer safe.

Research shows young children throw away a higher percentage of the food they take in school cafeterias. Given the millions of children in school, reducing food waste in school cafeterias could result in a sizable reduction of waste on a national level. Reducing food waste begins in the planning and distributing stages by making the portion size children receive smaller. A hot

lunch given to students should have age-appropriate portions to decrease the amount of food waste. Other interventions include teaching students how to take smaller portions and allowing students to decline foods they will not eat or redistributing unwanted food to places where it can be used, such as local food pantries or other areas in the school. This not only reduces food waste but also helps children who are in need of food.

Many school systems that work to reduce food waste in their buildings look to the USDA's recommendation to use share tables. A share table is a common space in an elementary school cafeteria where children can share food they do not want to eat, instead of throwing it away. Yet, often school food service directors perceive food safety as a barrier to effectively implement share tables. Some school districts are concerned about using share tables because they fear it will not follow Food Code guidelines since requirements limit what can be reserved to shelf stable, sealed packages. Additionally, many of these items, such as chips or cookies, are not healthy and do not improve the problem of food insecurity. School administrators express frustration at the significant limits the Food Code places on the amount of food that can be shared. In other counties, some school districts report decreases in share table use once the local health department enforces that section of the Food Code. For a share table to be successful, the local health department must give guidance about their enforcement of the Food Code.

A part of my role at the Ottawa County Department of Public Health is to teach food safety, so I had the interest to study the effects of share tables on food waste in elementary school cafeterias. This research project was a part of obtaining a masters in public health where I examined share table use as an intervention to food waste. I gathered and compared data on food waste and share table use from three elementary schools in Ottawa County; one with no share table, one with a new share table and one with an established share table.



The results of this study showed much less food waste per student in schools that use share tables. Furthermore, the results showed greater interaction with the share table in the elementary school where the share table had been established for many years. Ottawa Food (a coalition dedicated to eliminating hunger, encouraging healthy eating and increasing the sourcing of local food) is using this study to promote share tables in Ottawa County schools. (Learn more at www.OttawaFood.org.) However, the data can be used for any school system that is working to reduce food waste in their cafeteria. When health departments work with school districts to create effective steps for share table use, food waste and student hunger can be reduced.



The food shown here is from the share table at Jamestown Elementary School. Items that can be donated and shared include whole, uncut fruit with a peel (e.g., bananas and oranges), milk, string cheese, yogurt and snacks sealed in individual packages (e.g., chips, cookies and muffins).

Childhood HUNGER

exists in Ottawa County with an estimated 7,690 children not getting the food they need