



## Sustainable School Food Toolkit Waste Prevention



From milk cartons to food packaging, tons of avoidable plastic, cardboard, and aluminum waste are generated in school cafeterias across the nation on an average day. It all adds up to thousands of dollars in annual waste management costs per school and increased carbon emissions from transporting the waste to landfills, where it can cause groundwater contamination and result in habitat loss for local wildlife. Even a simple change in packaging can significantly divert food waste from the waste stream.

### Try This Best Practice

**Milk dispensers**, also known as steel cows, provide a less wasteful alternative to milk cartons. Avoiding wasteful individual packaging, dispensers operate with bulk milk sacks and reusable cups, allowing students to pour themselves the amount they will drink. Despite the initial cost of installation, many school districts that have switched to milk dispensers have saved thousands of dollars and created a lighter and cleaner waste stream (no soggy half-filled milk cartons) for custodians to manage. As an added nutritional benefit, evidence suggests that students tend to drink more milk when they self-serve.

### Did You Know?

Every day about [30 million students](#) eat meals that are subsidized by the National School Lunch Program...and every day students waste nearly 30% of the milk they are offered in cartons. Many schools worry that if they do not give each child a carton of milk, they will not be adhering to the requirements of the program. However, a meal must include a selection of three of the following - milk, meat, alternative proteins, grains, fruits, and vegetables. While it *must* include a serving of either fruits or vegetables, milk is not a requirement to meet these standards. It only needs to be an option. For milk to meet NSLP regulations, students must take 8 ounces.

### Success Story

In an audit of five schools near Vancouver, WA, [Clark County Public Health](#) examined the amount of waste produced by milk cartons versus dispensers. After making the switch, each school demonstrated a large reduction in carton waste, **with four out of five schools eliminating carton waste altogether**. As an added benefit, all five schools reduced their wasted milk by about [70% per day](#). Since producing milk is water and energy intensive, those gallons of milk saved equate to less fresh water expended and fewer carbon emissions released into the environment.

If you have questions or want more information about how to adopt this practice at your school or district, contact Sally Fisher at [sally.fisher@clark.wa.gov](mailto:sally.fisher@clark.wa.gov) with Clark County Green Schools.

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### Resources for Taking Action!

1. [Clark County Green Schools- Tackling Milk Waste in Cafeterias](#): This story depicts the successful use of milk dispensers in Clark County schools.
2. [Should we say goodbye to the school lunch milk carton?](#): An overview of successful case studies in Pacific Northwest schools.
3. [Offer vs Serve](#): OSPI CNS School Nutrition Reference Sheet
4. Farm-to-school activities help [reduce plate waste](#), since students try, like, and eat more food items when they know their farmer or grow food themselves. See farm-to-school resources under the "Climate-Friendly Meals" section below.