

How to Build Your own Tray with Offer vs Serve (OVS)

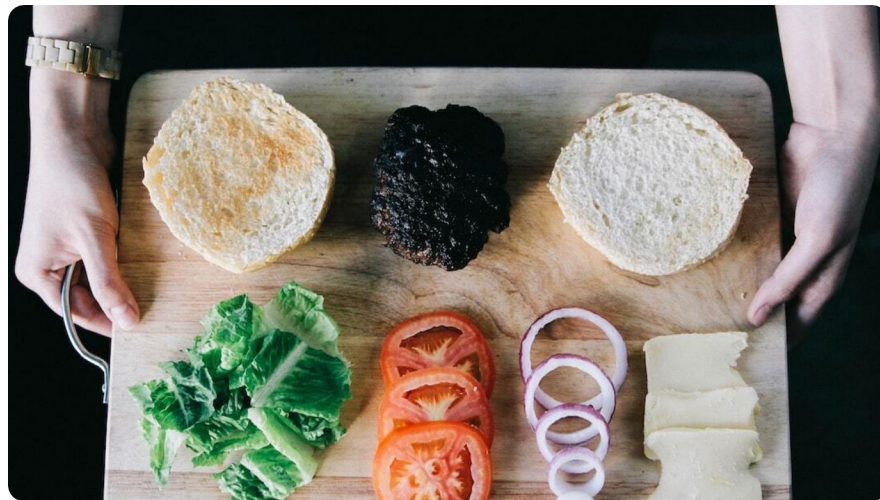
Coldwater Exempted Village Schools Cafeteria



Understanding 'Offer vs Serve' (OVS)

How School Lunch Choices Work

- **What is OVS?:** A USDA policy allowing students to decline some food components in school lunches to reduce waste and encourage choice.
 - **Kindergarten vs. Grade 1–12:** Younger students receive full trays; older students choose from the menu items offered.
 - **Purpose of OVS:** Empowers students with choices, promotes healthy eating, and minimizes food waste.
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- The goal of OVS is to reduce food waste and enhance the student experience by allowing choice while still upholding health standards. Understanding this process is essential to making informed and nutritious lunch choices.



The Five Food Groups

Foundation of a Healthy Tray



Proteins

Essential for growth and repair—includes meat, cheese, peanut butter, eggs, and yogurt.



Grains

Provide energy—examples are bread, noodles, and crackers.



Fruits & Vegetables

Must include at least one for a reimbursable meal—rich in nutrients and fiber.



Milk

Provides calcium and vitamin D—supports bone growth and maintenance.

- To build a proper lunch tray under OVS, students need to understand the five key food groups: Proteins, Grains, Fruits, Vegetables, and Milk. These are essential to providing balanced nutrition that supports growth, concentration, and health.

What Makes a Reimbursable Meal?

Key Rules for a Valid Tray



Minimum 3 Food Groups

Students must select at least three different food groups for the meal to qualify.



One Must Be Fruit or Vegetable

A fruit or a vegetable is required to meet USDA reimbursement rules.



Cost Incentive

Meals with fewer items cost more; complete trays are cheaper and nutritionally complete.

- To qualify as a reimbursable school lunch, a student must include at least three of the five food groups on their tray—and one of these must be a fruit or vegetable. This requirement ensures that students are getting a nutritious meal that aligns with USDA guidelines.
- While students may choose up to five components, taking just three still qualifies—as long as a fruit or veggie is among them. For instance, a sandwich (grain + protein), milk, and an apple covers three required groups.
- If students skip the fruit or veggie, the meal becomes non-reimbursable and costs more. So both health and wallet benefit when you “Eat a fruit or veggie every day!”

Step-by-Step: Building Your Tray

Making Smart Lunch Choices



- **Start with Main Item:** Usually a sandwich or hot entrée—includes both protein and grain.
 - **Select a Vegetable:** Choose between hot veggie of the day or celery/carrots combo.
 - **Pick a Fruit:** Options like apple, orange juice, or daily fruit offering.
 - **Add Milk (Optional):** Milk or juice—choose based on dietary preference.
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- Building your tray is a guided process where each choice ensures you're assembling a nutritious, reimbursable lunch. You begin by accepting or declining the main item, which typically covers both protein and grain components.
 - Next, you move to the vegetable station. Whether it's the veggie of the day or reliable options like carrots or celery, at least one vegetable helps meet the USDA requirement. Then, head to the fruit section—select from what's on the menu, fresh fruit, or even juice, which also counts.
 - Milk is available too, but not mandatory if you already have three valid food groups including a fruit or veggie. This process ensures both flexibility and adherence to nutrition standards.

Example Trays: What Works

Reimbursable Combinations



- **Full Tray (5 Groups):** Sandwich, fruit, vegetable, milk, and dessert. Complete and reimbursable.
- **Compact Tray (3 Groups):** Sandwich (protein/grain), fruit, and milk. Still reimbursable if fruit/veggie included.
- **Juice Counts as Fruit:** Juice can substitute for a fruit item to meet meal requirements.

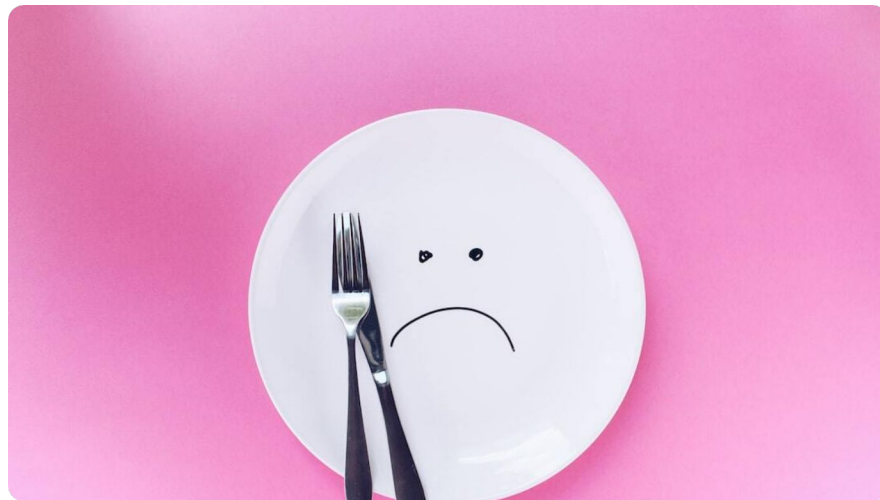


- There are many valid ways to build a reimbursable school lunch tray. A complete tray with all five food groups—such as a sandwich, carrot sticks, an apple, a carton of milk, and a cookie—is ideal and fully reimbursable. It provides variety, nutrition, and value.
- Even more compact trays can qualify. For example, a sandwich (which covers protein and grain), a juice (as fruit), and milk still meets the three-group requirement, as long as a fruit or veggie is present.
- Remember, juice is versatile and counts as a fruit. So a tray with a sandwich, juice, and one other component like a veggie or milk can be both compliant and satisfying.

Non-Reimbursable Trays: What to Avoid

Common Mistakes in Tray Selection

- **Missing Fruit or Vegetable:** No matter how many other items you have, it's not reimbursable without at least one fruit or veggie.
- **Only 2 Food Groups:** Two sandwiches and a milk? That's only two groups—meal is incomplete.
- **Higher Cost:** Incomplete meals cost more and miss the nutrition targets of a proper school lunch.
 - Understanding what doesn't qualify is just as important as knowing what does. A common mistake is selecting only two food components—such as a sandwich and milk. Even though it feels like a meal, it fails to meet the USDA's reimbursable criteria.
 - The key requirement: at least three different food groups must be included, and one must be a fruit or a vegetable. Forgetting this rule leads to a non-reimbursable tray, which not only provides less nutritional value but also costs more.
 - Help students remember the mantra: '3, 4 or 5 builds a tray—eat a fruit or veggie every day!' That simple rule saves money and supports better health.



Conclusion: Eat Smart Every Day

Remember the Tray Rules

- **Follow the 3, 4, or 5 Rule:** Always include at least three food groups—one must be a fruit or vegetable.
- **Plan Ahead:** Look at the menu before lunch to make quick, healthy choices.
- **Ask for Help:** Cafeteria staff are there to support you in building a healthy, reimbursable tray.



- As we wrap up, remember the core idea: healthy choices start with a well-balanced tray. The simple rule—take 3, 4, or 5 food groups, and always include a fruit or vegetable—ensures that your meal is nutritious and reimbursable.
- Planning ahead by reviewing the lunch menu can help you make fast and smart decisions in the cafeteria line. This also helps avoid holding up the line and reduces the chance of selecting a non-reimbursable meal.
- Finally, don't hesitate to ask for help. The cafeteria team is always ready to assist with your tray. Make the most of every lunch—fuel your body and mind with the right foods!