

# Offer Versus Serve (OVS) in the National School Lunch Program

OVS is a concept that applies to menu planning and the determination of reimbursable meals for grades K-12 in the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) National School Lunch Program (NSLP), School Breakfast Program (SBP), and Seamless Summer Option (SSO) of the NSLP. It allows students to decline a certain number of food components in the meal and select the foods they prefer to eat, while reducing food cost and waste. OVS must be implemented at lunch in senior high schools but is optional for all other grades. OVS is not allowed for preschoolers (ages 1-4) or the Afterschool Snack Program (ASP) of the NSLP.

## Overview of OVS at Lunch

OVS applies only to the daily meal pattern requirements. To implement OVS, school food authorities (SFAs) must offer all five food components in at least the full serving (minimum daily amount) for each grade group in the NSLP meal pattern. For a reimbursable lunch under OVS, students must select at least  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup of fruits or vegetables, and the full serving of at least two other food components.



- A **food component** is one of the five food groups that comprise the reimbursable lunch, including milk, fruits, vegetables, grains, and meat/meat alternates.
- A **food item** is a specific food offered within the five food components. It may contain one or more food components, or more than one serving of the same component. For example, a hamburger patty (meat/meat alternates component) on a whole-grain bun (grains component) is one food item that contains two food components. A selection of three different  $\frac{1}{2}$ -cup servings of fruit (such as peaches, applesauce, and pears) contains three food items from one food component (fruits).

Table 1 summarizes the daily NSLP meal pattern requirements for grades K-12 and the number of food components that students may decline under OVS.



# OVS in the NSLP

**Table 1. Summary of OVS requirements for lunch**

SFA must offer five components <sup>1</sup>	Student may decline
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Milk <sup>2</sup></li> <li>● Fruits <sup>3,4</sup></li> <li>● Vegetables <sup>4,5,6</sup></li> <li>● Grains <sup>7</sup></li> <li>● Meat/meat alternates <sup>8</sup></li> </ul> 	<p>One or two food components, but must take at least ½ cup of fruits or vegetables</p> 
<p><sup>1</sup> Each component must be at least the full serving (minimum daily amount) for each grade group in the NSLP meal pattern.</p> <p><sup>2</sup> SFAs must offer a variety (at least two different choices) of unflavored or flavored low-fat (1%) or fat-free milk. At least one choice must be unflavored low-fat or fat-free milk.</p> <p><sup>3</sup> The fruits component includes fresh, frozen, canned (in light syrup, water, or fruit juice), and dried fruits; and pasteurized full-strength fruit juice. Fruit juice cannot exceed half of the weekly amount of the fruits component offered at lunch.</p> <p><sup>4</sup> The juice limit includes juice that is fresh, frozen, or made from concentrate; frozen juice pops made from 100 percent juice; pureed fruits or vegetables in fruit or vegetable smoothies; and juice from canned fruit served in 100 percent juice, unless the canned fruit is drained or served as an extra food. For more information, see the Connecticut State Department of Education’s (CSDE) handout, <i>Crediting Juice for Grades K-12 in the NSLP and SBP</i>, and section 4 of the CSDE’s publication, <i>Menu Planning Guide for School Meals for Grades K-12</i>.</p> <p><sup>5</sup> The vegetables component includes fresh, frozen, canned, and rehydrated dried vegetables; and pasteurized full-strength vegetable juice. Vegetable juice cannot exceed half of the weekly amount of the vegetables component offered at lunch. A serving of cooked vegetables must be drained. For example, a serving of canned corn cannot include the water in which it is packed. Dried vegetables (such as potato flakes) credit when rehydrated only if the manufacturer’s product formulation statement (PFS) provides specific documentation on the amount of vegetables per serving.</p> <p><sup>6</sup> The NSLP meal pattern requires minimum weekly servings of five vegetable subgroups (dark green, red/orange, starchy, legumes, and other). Students are not required to select each subgroup, but SFAs must provide the opportunity for students to select each subgroup. For more information, see the CSDE’s handout, <i>Vegetable Subgroups in the NSLP</i>.</p> <p><sup>7</sup> All grains must be whole grain-rich (WGR) or enriched. At least 50 percent of all grains served at lunch must be WGR. For more information, see the CSDE’s handouts, <i>Whole Grain-rich Criteria for Grades K-12 in the NSLP and SBP</i> and <i>Crediting Enriched Grains in the NSLP and SBP</i>, and CSDE <a href="#">Operational Memo No. 11-19: Weekly Whole Grain-rich (WGR) Requirement for the NSLP and SBP Meal Patterns for Grades K-12</a>.</p> <p><sup>8</sup> The meat/meat alternates component must be served in a main dish, or in a main dish and only one other food item.</p>	

## OVS in the NSLP

For a lunch to be reimbursable under OVS, SFAs must meet the criteria below.

- **Menu planning:** Lunch menus must include five food components (milk, meat/meat alternates, vegetables, fruits, and grains). The planned serving for each food component must be at least the full serving (minimum daily amount) for each grade group in the NSLP meal pattern. The grains, fruits, and vegetables components may be offered in more than one food item. The meat/meat alternates component must be offered as a main dish, or a main dish and one other food item. Milk must be offered as the full 1-cup serving. For information on the NSLP meal patterns, visit the CSDE's [Meal Patterns for Grades K-12 in School Nutrition Programs](#) webpage and review section 1 of the CSDE's publication, [Menu Planning Guide for School Meals for Grades K-12](#).
- **Offering a component as two separate food items:** If the lunch menu offers the full serving (minimum daily amount) of a component as two separate food items, students must take both food items to credit as one component for OVS. For example, if the lunch menu for grades 9-12 provides the required 2 oz eq of meat/meat alternates from ½ cup of low-fat yogurt (1 oz eq) and 1 ounce of low-fat cheese (1 oz eq), students must select both food items to credit as the meat/meat alternates component for OVS. The yogurt or cheese stick alone do not credit because each serving is less than 2 oz eq. Table 2 shows some examples of offering the full component as two food items for grades K-5 and 6-8. Table 3 shows some examples of offering the full component as two food items for grades 9-12.
- **Larger amounts:** SFAs may serve larger amounts of any component if the weekly lunch menu does not exceed the USDA's dietary specifications (nutrition standards) for calories, saturated fat, trans fat, and sodium. For information on meeting the dietary specifications, review section 6 of the CSDE's publication, [Menu Planning Guide for School Meals for Grades K-12](#). **Note:** SFAs must serve additional grains on some days to meet the NSLP meal pattern's minimum weekly requirements for grades K-5 and 6-8. For more information, review section 4 of the CSDE's publication, [Menu Planning Guide for School Meals for Grades K-12](#).
- **Unit pricing:** Meals must be priced as a unit, i.e., students pay the same price regardless of whether they select three, four, or five food components. SFAs must establish one price for a complete reimbursable lunch in the paid meal category and one price for a complete reimbursable lunch in the reduced-price meal category. SFAs may set different unit prices (tiered pricing) for various combinations of foods offered as a reimbursable lunch. However, all students, including those eligible for free and reduced-price meals, must be allowed to select any reimbursable lunch. Lunches with a higher unit price must be available at no cost for all free-eligible students, and at no more than 40 cents for all reduced-eligible students.



## OVS in the NSLP

- **Identifying reimbursable meals:** SFAs should plan lunch menus to make it easy for students to select (and food service staff to identify) reimbursable meals. SFAs must post signage that clearly communicates the meal components for each menu choice, and indicates what students must select for a reimbursable meal. SFAs should also provide training for school food service staff on the NSLP meal pattern components, including how to recognize reimbursable meals under OVS. For guidance on signage and staff training, see the CSDE's publication, *Offer versus Serve Guide for School Meals*.

- **Required student selections:** Students must select at least three of the five food components offered, including at least  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup of fruits or vegetables and the full serving (minimum daily amount) of at least two other food components. Selections of less than  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup of fruits or vegetables do not credit as a component for OVS, unless they are combined with additional fruits or vegetables to provide at least  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup. To encourage selections of reimbursable meals, SFAs should offer all fruits and vegetables in  $\frac{1}{2}$ -cup servings.



- **Declining foods:** Students may decline any one or two of the required food components, except for at least  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup of fruits or vegetables. Students may take smaller portions of the declined food components. However, selections of less than the full serving cannot credit as a food component for OVS. For example, if a lunch menu for grades K-5 provides the required 1 oz eq of grains from  $\frac{1}{2}$  oz eq of brown rice and  $\frac{1}{2}$  oz eq whole-grain roll, students must select both items to credit as the full grains component for OVS. The brown rice or roll alone do not credit because each serving is less than 1 oz eq.
- **Selecting more than the full serving:** SFAs may allow students to select more than the full serving of any component. However, selections of additional servings from the same component credit as only one component for OVS. For example, a lunch for grades 9-12 provides 3 oz eq of grains from 1 cup of brown rice (2 oz eq) and a 1-ounce whole-grain roll (1 oz eq). If a student selects both food items, they credit as only one component (grains) for OVS. For a reimbursable meal, the student must also select at least  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup of fruits or vegetables and the full serving of at least one other component.

## OVS in the NSLP

<b>Table 2. Offering the full component as two food items for grades K-5 and 6-8</b>	
<b>Planned menu items (meal component and minimum daily amount)</b>	<b>Required student selection for full component (minimum daily amount)</b>
<b>Fruits (F): ½ cup</b> ¼ cup of peaches ¼ cup of grapes	Students must take both food items to credit as the full serving of F. Students could select ¼ cup of F if they also select at least ½ cup of V and the full serving of at least two components.
<b>Vegetables (V): ¾ cup</b> ½ cup of carrots ¼ cup of tomatoes	Students must take both food items to credit as the full serving of V. However, the carrots meet the OVS requirement for at least ½ cup of fruits or vegetables. Students could select ½ cup of carrots if they also select the full serving of at least two other components, one of which could be ½ cup of F. Students could select ¼ cup of tomatoes if they also select at least ¼ cup of F and the full serving of at least two other components.
<b>Meat/meat alternates (MMA): 1 ounce equivalent (oz eq)</b> 1 tablespoon of peanut butter (½ oz eq) ¼ cup of yogurt (½ oz eq)	Students must take both food items to credit as the full serving of MMA. Students could select either the peanut butter or yogurt alone if they also select at least ½ cup of F or V and the full serving of at least two other components.
<b>Grains (G): 1 oz eq</b> Two packages of whole-grain crackers (½ oz eq each)	Students must take both food items to credit as the full serving of G. Students could select one package of crackers if they also select at least ½ cup of F or V and the full serving of at least two other components.



# OVS in the NSLP

**Table 3. Offering the full component as two food items for grades 9-12**

Planned menu items (meal component and minimum daily amount)	Required student selection for full component (minimum daily amount)
<b>F: 1 cup</b> ½ cup of peaches ½ cup of grapes	Students must take both food items to credit as the full serving of F. However, each ½-cup serving meets the OVS requirement for at least ½ cup of fruits or vegetables. Students could select ½ cup of F if they also select the full serving of at least two components, one of which could be 1 cup of V. <sup>1</sup>
<b>V: 1 cup</b> ½ cup of green peppers ½ cup of tomatoes	Students must take both food items to credit as the full serving of V. However, each ½-cup serving meets the OVS requirement for at least ½ cup of fruits or vegetables. Students could select ½ cup of V if they also select the full serving of at least two components, one of which could be 1 cup of F. <sup>1</sup>
<b>MMA: 2 oz eq</b> ½ cup of low-fat yogurt (1 oz eq) 1 ounce low-fat cheese stick (1 oz eq)	Students must take both food items to credit as the full serving of MMA. Students could select either the yogurt or cheese alone if they also select at least ½ cup of F or V, and the full serving of at least two components.
<b>G: 2 oz eq</b> ½ cup of whole grain-rich pasta (1 oz eq) 1 ounce whole-grain roll (1 oz eq)	Students must take both food items to credit as the full serving of G. Students could select either the pasta or roll alone if they also select at least ½ cup of F or V and the full serving of at least two components.
<sup>1</sup> SFAs must provide clear signage informing students that they may select either one or two fruit servings and either one or two vegetable servings.	

## Examples of OVS at Lunch

Table 4 shows OVS examples at lunch for grades K-5 and 6-8. Table 5 shows OVS examples at lunch for 9-12. For additional guidance and more OVS examples, see the CSDE’s publication, *Offer versus Serve Guide for School Meals*.





# OVS in the NSLP

**Table 4. OVS examples at lunch for grades K-5 and 6-8**

<b>Planned lunch menu</b>		<b>Meal pattern components</b>		
Turkey (1 ounce) and low-fat cheese (1 ounce)		MMA, 2 oz eq		
Whole-wheat bread, 2 slices (1 ounce each)		G, 2 oz eq		
Broccoli florets, ¾ cup, with low-fat dip		V, ¾ cup		
Cantaloupe wedges, ½ cup		F, ½ cup		
Choice of low-fat (1%) or fat-free milk, 1 cup		M, 1 cup		
<b>Students must select at least three of the five food components offered, including at least ½ cup of fruits or vegetables, and the full serving of at least two other components.</b>				
Student selects	Food items	Full food components <i>Must be at least 2</i>	At least ½ cup of F or V <i>Must be "Yes"</i>	Reimbursable meal?
Turkey and cheese sandwich (MMA, G) Milk (M)	2	3	No	<b>No.</b> The meal contains three full components (MMA, G, and M) but is missing at least ½ cup of F or V.
Turkey and cheese sandwich (MMA, G) Cantaloupe (F)	2	3	Yes	<b>Yes.</b> The meal contains three full components (MMA, G, and F).
Turkey and cheese sandwich (MMA, G) Broccoli (V)	2	3	Yes	<b>Yes.</b> The meal contains three full components (MMA, G, and V).
Broccoli (V) Cantaloupe (F) Milk (M)	3	3	Yes	<b>Yes.</b> The meal contains three full components (V, F, and M).
Turkey and cheese sandwich (MMA, G) Broccoli (V) Milk (M)	3	4	Yes	<b>Yes.</b> The meal contains four full components (MMA, G, V, and M).
Turkey and cheese sandwich (MMA, G) Cantaloupe (F) Milk (M)	3	4	Yes	<b>Yes.</b> The meal contains four full components (MMA, G, F, and M).

## OVS in the NSLP

**Table 5. OVS examples at lunch for grades 9-12**

<b>Planned lunch menu</b>		<b>Meal pattern components</b>		
Turkey (1 ounce) and low-fat cheese (1 ounce)		MMA, 2 oz eq		
Whole-wheat bread, 2 ounces		G, 2 oz eq		
Broccoli florets, 1 cup, with low-fat dip		V, 1 cup		
Cantaloupe wedges, 1 cup		F, 1 cup		
Choice of low-fat (1%) or fat-free milk, 1 cup		M, 1 cup		
<b>Students must select at least three of the five food components offered, including at least ½ cup of fruits or vegetables, and the full serving of at least two other components.</b>				
Student selects	Food items	Full food components <i>Must be at least 2</i>	At least ½ cup of F or V <i>Must be "Yes"</i>	Reimbursable meal?
Turkey and cheese sandwich (MMA, G) Milk (M)	2	3	No	<b>No.</b> The meal contains three full components (MMA, G, and M) but is missing at least ½ cup of F or V. <sup>1</sup>
Turkey and cheese sandwich (MMA, G) Cantaloupe (F)	2	3	Yes	<b>Yes.</b> The meal contains three full components (MMA, G, and F).
Turkey and cheese sandwich (MMA, G) Broccoli (V)	2	3	Yes	<b>Yes.</b> The meal contains three full components (MMA, G, and V).
Broccoli (V) Cantaloupe (F) Milk (M)	3	3	Yes	<b>Yes.</b> The meal contains three full components (V, F, and M).
Turkey and cheese sandwich (MMA, G) Broccoli (V) Milk (M)	3	4	Yes	<b>Yes.</b> The meal contains four full components (MMA, G, V, and M).
Turkey and cheese sandwich (MMA, G) Cantaloupe (F) Milk (M)	3	4	Yes	<b>Yes.</b> The meal contains four full components (MMA, G, F, and M).



# OVS in the NSLP

## Resources

Crediting Foods for Grades K-12 in School Nutrition Programs (CSDE):

<https://portal.ct.gov/SDE/Nutrition/Crediting-Foods-in-School-Nutrition-Programs>

Lunch Meal Pattern Components Poster: [https://portal.ct.gov/SDE/Nutrition//-](https://portal.ct.gov/SDE/Nutrition//-/media/SDE/Nutrition/NSLP/OVS/lunchpostercomp.pdf)

[/media/SDE/Nutrition/NSLP/OVS/lunchpostercomp.pdf](https://portal.ct.gov/SDE/Nutrition//-/media/SDE/Nutrition/NSLP/OVS/lunchpostercomp.pdf)

Lunch Offer versus Serve Poster: [https://portal.ct.gov/SDE/Nutrition//-](https://portal.ct.gov/SDE/Nutrition//-/media/SDE/Nutrition/NSLP/OVS/lunchposterOVS.pdf)

[/media/SDE/Nutrition/NSLP/OVS/lunchposterOVS.pdf](https://portal.ct.gov/SDE/Nutrition//-/media/SDE/Nutrition/NSLP/OVS/lunchposterOVS.pdf)

Meal or No Meal Activity: Lunch (from *What's for Lunch? Meeting the Meal Pattern Requirements for the National School Lunch Program*) (CSDE):

<https://portal.ct.gov/SDE/Nutrition/Meal-Pattern-Training-Materials/Documents>

Meal Patterns for Grades K-12 in School Nutrition Programs (CSDE):

<https://portal.ct.gov/SDE/Nutrition/Meal-Patterns-School-Nutrition-Programs>

Menu Planning Guide for School Meals for Grades K-12 in the NSLP and SBP:

<https://portal.ct.gov/SDE/Nutrition/Menu-Planning-Guide-for-School-Meals>

National School Lunch Program (CSDE):

<https://portal.ct.gov/SDE/Nutrition/National-School-Lunch-Program>

Offer versus Serve for Grades K-12 in School Nutrition Programs (CSDE):

<https://portal.ct.gov/SDE/Nutrition/Offer-versus-Serve-for-School-Nutrition-Programs>

Offer versus Serve Guidance for the NSLP and SBP (USDA):

<https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/cn/SP41-2015av2.pdf>

Offer versus Serve Guide for School Meals:

<https://portal.ct.gov/SDE/Nutrition//-/media/SDE/Nutrition/NSLP/OVS/OVSguide.pdf>

Offer versus Serve in the National School Lunch Program: [https://portal.ct.gov/SDE/Nutrition//-](https://portal.ct.gov/SDE/Nutrition//-/media/SDE/Nutrition/NSLP/OVS/OVSNsLP.pdf)

[/media/SDE/Nutrition/NSLP/OVS/OVSNsLP.pdf](https://portal.ct.gov/SDE/Nutrition//-/media/SDE/Nutrition/NSLP/OVS/OVSNsLP.pdf)

Offer versus Serve in the School Breakfast Program:

<https://portal.ct.gov/SDE/Nutrition//-/media/SDE/Nutrition/NSLP/OVS/OVSSBP.pdf>

Offer versus Serve Poster for Lunch:

<https://portal.ct.gov/SDE/Nutrition//-/media/SDE/Nutrition/NSLP/OVS/OVSPoster.pdf>

Offer versus Serve Tip Sheet for School Food Service Managers: National School Lunch Program (USDA): [http://https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/resource-](http://https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/resource-files/OVS%20Lunch%20tip%20sheet.pdf)

[files/OVS%20Lunch%20tip%20sheet.pdf](http://https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/resource-files/OVS%20Lunch%20tip%20sheet.pdf)

Program Guidance for School Nutrition Programs (CSDE):

<https://portal.ct.gov/SDE/Nutrition/Program-Guidance-School-Nutrition-Programs>

## OVS in the NSLP



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For more information, review the CSDE's publication, *Offer versus Serve Guide for School Meals*, and visit the CSDE's [OVS](#) webpage, or contact the [school nutrition programs staff](#) in the CSDE Bureau of Health/Nutrition, Family Services and Adult Education, 450 Columbus Boulevard, Suite 504, Hartford, CT 06103-1841.

This document is available at <https://portal.ct.gov/SDE/Nutrition//-/media/SDE/Nutrition/NSLP/OVS/OVSNSLP.pdf>.

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