Policy Memo: Preschool (PK) Meal Patterns and Share Table Guidance

To: Preschool Parents, Guardians, and Program Staff

From: School District Nutrition Services

Subject: Fueling Our Youngest Learners & Reducing Food Waste

The school district is committed to serving students while acting in compliance with applicable regulations and laws. These regulations can be complicated and where possible, we exercise the discretion afforded to us as a local school district to avoid waste.

It is important to understand that preschool meals served through the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) differ slightly from meals served through the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program for students in grades k-12. This meal pattern is uniquely designed to meet the nutritional and developmental needs of young children. Because children ages 1 to 5 are growing rapidly, their meal patterns, serving sizes, and beverage options differ slightly from those of our older K-12 students.

Below is an overview of the preschool dietary guidelines and how our schools safely manage uneaten food using a "Share Table".

1. Preschool Meal Pattern Highlights

- **Strict Milk Guidelines**: Children in the J4K Program are served unflavored low-fat (1%) or fat-free (skim) milk only. Flavored milks (like chocolate) are not permitted in the standard preschool pattern.
- **Juice Limitations**: While 100% juice is allowable, it can only be served once per day. If a preschooler is served juice at breakfast, they cannot be served juice at lunch.
- **Grains and Desserts**: At least one grain offered every day must be whole grain-rich. Traditional grain-based desserts (such as cakes, cookies, and cobblers) do not contribute toward daily grain requirements, though sweet crackers like animal crackers or graham crackers are allowed.
- **Sugar Controls**: To keep meals healthy, breakfast cereals must contain 6 grams or less of total sugar per dry ounce, and yogurt must contain 23 grams or less of sugar per 6 ounces (adjusting to an added sugar limit of 12 grams or less per 6 ounces by October 1, 2025).

2. Offer Versus Serve (OVS) & Co-Mingling

- **Standard Service**: Offer Versus Serve (OVS)—which allows students to decline certain meal components—**is not allowed for preschoolers**. Program operators must ensure the minimum serving size of every component is offered to each student to support healthy growth.

- **The "Co-Mingling" Exception**: OVS is only permitted for preschool students if they are "co-mingled"—meaning operational constraints force them to eat in the same place at the same time as older K-5 students, making it difficult to distinguish age groups or alter service sizes.
- **Why We Avoid Co-Mingling**: Whenever possible, our district staggers meal times or serves breakfast in the classroom to keep preschoolers separate. Eating separately allows staff to closely supervise children to assist with packaging, monitor behaviors that increase choking risks, minimize overwhelming distractions caused by older kids, and encourage independent, family-style dining.

3. Maintaining a Safe Preschool "Share Table"

To combat food waste, our schools feature a Share Table where children can place unconsumed food and beverage items that they choose not to eat or drink, allowing peers to take extra helpings at no additional cost. Because food safety is a top priority for our little ones, strict rules apply:

- **Acceptable Share Items**: Unopened, pre-packaged, shelf-stable items (such as granola bars, cereal packs, and crackers) ; wrapped fruits or thick-skinned fruits (like bananas, oranges, and washed apples) if the peel is perfectly intact ; and unopened, pre-packaged perishable items (like milk or string cheese) *only* if a proper temperature control mechanism is actively in place.
- **Strictly Prohibited Items**: Unpackaged items (like an unlidded salad bowl) ; packages that have been opened or compromised (like an open bag of baby carrots) ; items that can be opened and easily resealed ; and any food brought from home.
- **Adult Restrictions**: School staff and adults are strictly prohibited from consuming items left on the Share Table.
- **Temperature and Time Limits**: Perishable items must be immediately moved to a refrigerator or cooler maintained at 41°F or colder to be safely re-served at the next meal. Alternatively, if time is tracked as a public health control, unopened items must be shared within 4 hours of service or completely discarded.
- **Staffing and monitoring**- Based on staffing schedules, the district must designate personnel to ensure compliance with these restrictions.