Food Safety

Food safety starts long before meals are prepared and served. For fruits and vegetables, it begins with the preparation of the soil, the seeds that are used, and everything placed on or around the plant while it is growing, harvested, and stored. Beyond production and processing, food storage and temperature control and delivery affect food safety, as well as your procedures for handling food once it arrives at your school. The final responsibility for the safety of the food entering your school rests with you.

Food supplies in the United States are the safest in the world. To learn about how our Federal, State, and local agencies provide a food safety system go to **www.foodsafety.gov**. Here you can find a variety of information about current laws and practices designed to ensure the safety of the country's food supply.

Irradiation

Irradiation is one of many processes that can be used to prevent foodborne illness. Irradiated food products have been exposed to radiant energy—such as gamma rays, electron beams, or x rays—in amounts approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). This process is not a substitute for good growing and manufacturing practices. In 1986, fruit and vegetable irradiation was approved for insect control and to increase shelf life. Irradiation of herbs and spices was approved in 1986 for the purpose of sterilization.

The Radura

Food irradiation can reduce the risk of foodborne illness by destroying harmful bacteria, parasites, insects, and fungi. Irradiation does not destroy all pathogens, but does reduce their number. A distinctive logo developed for use on food packaging identifies the product as irradiated. The symbol is called the "radura" and is used internationally.

For additional information on irradiation, visit USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) Web site at **www.fsis.usda.gov/oa/topics/irrmenu.htm.**

Screening Vendors

For your own program, ordering appropriate amounts of products and using approved suppliers are the initial steps in the food safety process. First, closely track your inventory and your sales so that you order only what you need. Then carefully consider suppliers. Choosing a supplier that can deliver safe food is the ultimate goal. See Appendix 3, "Review the Potential Distributor Vendor." Before accepting any deliveries from a supplier, make sure that the food purchased comes from approved sources. Also, check suppliers to see whether they meet or exceed the food safety standards you follow in your school. Be sure to address this issue when you purchase from local farmers and farmers markets.

Here are some guidelines to consider when you are selecting a supplier:

- Make sure suppliers are getting their products from licensed, reputable sources. Check with your regulatory agency to find out if your suppliers have had any food safety problems or health code violations. Ask other operators about their experiences with a particular supplier.
- If possible, inspect your supplier's warehouse or plant from time to time. See if it is clean and well run. This may be done at the district level if purchasing is done centrally.
- Ask your suppliers if they have a HACCP program in place. If they supply fresh produce, ask whether they have a Good Agricultural Practices Plan.

  If not, ask what precautions or procedures they take to ensure product safety.
- Find out if your supplier's employees are trained in food safety.

- Check the condition of the supplier's delivery trucks. Are they clean and well maintained? Do they hold refrigerated or frozen products at the proper temperatures? Are raw products separated from processed food and fresh produce?
- Check your supplier's shipments for consistent product quality. Inspect deliveries for unsafe packaging. Broken boxes, leaky packages, or dented cans are signs of careless handling.
- Ask suppliers to deliver products when your staff has time to receive them properly.
- Inspect each product for temperature, quality, and freshness as it arrives.
- Use all your senses to check for freshness—look, smell, feel, and even taste the product. Make sure the item meets your purchase specifications. Randomly examine the entire contents of a box rather than just the items on the top. Check product dates.
- As part of your receiving practices, check that refrigerated items arrive at proper temperatures, usually between 32°F and 40°F.
- If a product does not meet your standards of freshness, refuse to accept it.

Think about your past experiences with suppliers.

- Have they been generally good or bad? How might the less-than-satisfactory experiences be improved?
- Many school systems have limited access to suppliers, but this information can help you work with available suppliers to improve their operation and the quality of the products you receive from them.

You may want to add separate food safety requirements as a "Special Instructions" section on your Invitation for Bids or Request for Proposals. The recommended language is on page 24.

Food Safety—Special Instructions

- The school food authority (SFA) reserves the right to inspect potential vendor's receiving, storage, staging areas, and delivery vehicles.
- All frozen, chilled, and dry foods shall be maintained at the appropriate temperature during receiving, storage, staging, and delivery. All foods delivered shall be free from evidence of temperature abuse.
- Potential vendors must maintain clean, pest-free storage areas and delivery vehicles.
- The school (SFA) reserves the right to request information about potential vendor's pest control in food storage areas and delivery vehicles. **All** chemicals used shall be certified as safe for use around food.
- In accordance with Federal law **all** food containers shall contain the name and address of the manufacturer/processor or the distributor.
- The potential distributor shall provide the school (SFA) with its procedures that assure it purchases food only from those manufacturers that comply with **all** Federal/State food safety laws and regulations.
- Product protection guarantees: For product safety, schools (SFAs) have "automatic" product protection recourse against suppliers. The supplier whose name and address appear on the package is the responsible party. Suppliers are expected to take immediate action to correct any situation in which product integrity is violated.
- The potential distributor shall follow procedures of a First-In, First-Out (FIFO) stock rotation system.
- Dented cans, boxes with leaks, or other damaged product shall not be delivered to the school (SFA).
- If requested, vendors shall supply instructions on how to read the code date on delivered products.
- Distributors must receive and deliver **all** products to schools in accordance with the Sanitary Food Transportation Act of 1990. Go to **www.fda.gov/opacom/laws/sftact.htm**.
- Ice used to cool food shall be made from water safe for drinking and shall not be in contact with food containers that could absorb water from melted ice.

Storing Foods

Proper storage methods can lengthen a product's shelf life. They can also prompt you to use the items received first before using new arrivals. Rotating your stock in this fashion helps reduce spoilage.

- Mark each item with the date it was received. You can use magic markers, grease pencils, different color stamps, or a date stamp—whatever works best for your operation.
- Use the First-In, First-Out (FIFO) storage method. Shelve new items behind the stock you already have. Once items have been properly shelved, use items stored in the front first. This ensures that you use the lettuce that arrived on Monday before the lettuce you received on Wednesday.
- Pay special attention to fresh produce to ensure freshness. Discard any wilted or discolored product immediately.
- Manage inventory to use fresh product at its peak.
- Check and record refrigerator temperatures at least twice a day.
- Refrigeration units do not cool by cold temperatures alone. When placing foods in a refrigerator, allow sufficient space between packages for air circulation, and keep items away from the inside walls. Do not store foods directly on the floor of a walk-in cooler.
- Store cooked and ready-to-eat foods separately from raw meats, poultry, and seafood whenever possible.
- Store all raw and ready-to-eat fruits and vegetables above raw meats, poultry and seafood to prevent raw product juices from dripping onto food that will be eaten without further preparation.

Using Foods

Reducing spoilage takes constant vigilance. Build the following practices into your daily procedures for using food:

- Make sure employees always check the use-by or expiration date on products. Discard products if the use-by or expiration date has passed.
- Check inventory of most foods on a daily basis so that you will know how much shelf life they have left.
- If you realize that you have an excess amount of a particular item, develop a daily special that uses the product before it spoils.

- Check that cold foods are held at 41°F or below and hot foods are maintained at or above 140°F. The FDA Food Code indicates that potentially hazardous foods may be held between 41°F and 140°F for no longer than a total of 4 hours. After 4 hours, the product must be discarded.
- To deter bacterial growth, pre-cool hot items before storing them in a refrigerator by using chill blasters, cooling wands, and ice baths. If hot food must be cooled in the refrigerator, divide the food into small shallow batches to quicken the cooling process.
- Despite your best efforts, some items will start to go bad. If you are trying to determine whether something is usable, remember the classic adage—when in doubt, throw it out.

Serving health-smart meals begins with you, the purchaser.