

# Meal Quality: Adaptability, Creativity and Fun

Meal quality is an integral component of any meal program. It can mean many different things, including serving culturally appropriate foods, offering a hot meal on cold days, and making sure the appearance of the meals are appealing to students. This resource shares promising practices from school nutrition teams across the nation that have utilized their creativity and ingenuity to master meal quality.



Tony is enjoying his Grab and Go meal.  
Photo credit: No Kid Hungry/Jordan Hay

## Promising Practices

### Focus on Customer Service and Inclusivity

Kids and families are the customers of the meal programs. Keeping them in mind throughout all aspects of the meal program will help to ensure their needs are being met. It's also important to provide meals that are culturally appropriate and appealing to the communities in the district. Offering taste tests, and surveying students and families can provide valuable insight regarding the likes and dislikes of the meals being offered.

#### Supporting Resources

- No Kid Hungry's [Let Your Community Shape Your Meals Program](#) provides discussion questions and stories that can serve as a resource for schools and nonprofit organizations looking to more meaningfully engage kids and families in program design and delivery.
- Alliance for a Healthier Generation's [Marketing and Customer Service Center](#) provides tips and resources to collect student and family feedback.
- [National PTA's Student and Family Perception Survey](#) is an example of a simple survey asking about meal quality.
- Online surveys can be a simple and effective way to collect feedback. This [Google Forms Survey](#) is an example of a parent survey that can be emailed out to families, or families can fill out the survey via an electronic tablet while picking up meals.
- No Kid Hungry's [Adapting School Nutrition During COVID-19](#) spotlights the Food Services team at Vaughn Next Century Learning Center and how they redesigned their school nutrition program by collaborating with families and the entire Vaughn staff.

**Cycle Menus:** Some districts find cycle menus to be helpful with customer service because they allow popular menu items to be served regularly and can incorporate a fun theme into the menu, such as "Taco Tuesday" or "Pizza Friday". Unpopular items can be swapped out of the menu rotation to better accommodate student preferences. Cycle menus also give students multiple opportunities to try foods, as it often takes several times for a child to be exposed to a food in order for them to try it and determine whether they like it.

## Promote Your Program

Celebrate and advertise your program through various channels, such as email, social media, newsletters, robo-calls, and the school newspaper. Promote your program regularly, especially every time there is a change, such as a menu or meal pick-up change. Visuals of your program, such as pictures and videos of food, or of children representative of your local community, can provide families extra incentive to participate in your meals program. Promote and celebrate that school meals are for every student. One example of inspiring social media in action is Joe Urban, Director of Food and Nutrition Services for Greenville County schools in South Carolina, who regularly showcases his teams' culinary creations via twitter [@SchoolFoodRocks](#)

## Make the Most of Take-Home Meals

If take-home meals are a part of your routine, be sure to test the recipes to ensure they can be frozen or stored in the fridge and reheated at home to still taste delicious. Provide families all the information they need, in multiple languages, about their take-home meals, including recipes, nutrition analysis, storage instructions, etc. Transporting the food is also key; invest in sturdy boxes to transport the food and use food containers that keep food items separate for better presentation and to make sure no food items get accidentally smashed during transit.

### Supporting Resources

- The School District of Palm Beach County in Florida provided [meal kits with storage instructions](#) to families, along with [recipe ideas](#) over winter break.
- Mission Consolidated Independent School District (Mission CISD) in Texas created [smoothie recipes](#) to send home to parents, as well as [storage and reheat instructions](#) for their curbside meals.
- Edmonds School District Food and Nutrition Service in Washington provides families with [videos](#) letting them know what foods are in their meal box for the week; and regularly provides food usage suggestions on social media (*see Broccoli instructions*).
- The Chef Ann Foundation offers information on [bulk meals](#), as well as [emergency feeding](#) support.



#### Oven-roasted frozen broccoli

- Preheat oven to 400°F.
- Add oil to baking sheet.
- Spread out broccoli florets on baking sheet, leaving adequate space for broccoli to become crisp
- Squirt lemon juice over broccoli and add spices of choice. We suggest salt, pepper, garlic and red pepper.
- Roast broccoli in oven for 20 minutes. Turn once and roast for an additional 10 minutes.
- Enjoy!

#### How Can I Make Broccoli Tasty?



Broccoli doesn't always get the best rep as a family favorite. We hope that our tips and tricks can make you rethink your stance on broccoli

#### How to enhance your broccoli:

- Try out different spices/seasonings
- Add to soups
- Sprinkle shredded cheese on top
- Dip into your favorite sauce
- Add into a stir-fry
- Use as a baked potato topping
- Add to your favorite pasta dish
- Add on top of pizza or inside pizza rolls
- Include in scrambled eggs or fritattas

Edmonds School District Food and Nutrition Service social media post

## Vary the Menu and Stay Inspired

Change up the menu regularly and adapt recipes to keep vibrancy in the program. This could mean working with local vendors to get the freshest items, or connecting with a buying co-op to gain access to a larger variety of products. If possible, add scratch cooking into your routine. Create seasonal items to add extra cheer to the program. Get inspired by what local restaurants or fast food restaurants are doing to appeal to their customers. Additionally, look to other school nutrition programs to see how they are serving meals and being creative with their dishes.



**District Spotlight** - As Mission CISD's Director of Child Nutrition Programs Rosy Woodrum says, "Get past what's easy. If you play it too safe, at some point you are going to lose the kids." Here are a few of the ways creativity has made its way into Mission CISD's program:

- ✓ They serve Chinese-inspired meals in fun take-out boxes to mimic take-out food (see picture). Students love it and it adds to the visual appeal of the meal.
- ✓ They add simple ingredients to ready-made items to add variety. For instance, they take a pre-made cheese pizza and add USDA ham, vegetables, and even pineapple, to create a creative and delicious lunch for students.
- ✓ They change the names of dishes to be more appealing to students, such as "Crazy Doritos," which is a Frito Pie made with baked Doritos nutritionally approved to be part of the school meals program, and "Peanut Butter Yummy", which is simply an Uncrustable peanut butter and jelly sandwich.



Mission CISD's Chinese-inspired meals

### Supporting Resources

- Project Bread's [Chefs in Schools Program](#) provides a Healthy School Meals Cookbook, as well as free online chefs' training classes.
- Alliance for a Healthier Generation's [Smart Food Planner](#) contains recipes for school breakfast and lunch, afterschool and summer meals and snacks; and, their [Procurement Center](#) provides tips and tools to help find and purchase the food you need.

## Attitude is Everything

Above all, have a positive attitude and make it fun!



**District Spotlight**- these two districts added fun to their curbside meal pickup:

- \* Bendle Public Schools' staff dressed up as a tiger to bring cheer to it's Michigan families picking up meals at their Meet Up & Eat Up program.
- \* Pittsburg Unified School District in California added a blender bike that makes fresh smoothies for families when picking up meals; and, offered free garden plants for families to take home with their meals.



Bendle Public Schools' Meet Up & Eat Up Program



Pittsburg Unified School District's Blender Bike & Plant Giveaway

Finally, here are several additional resources to support meal quality:

- ✓ No Kid Hungry's [Recipe & Food Skills Handouts](#) - offer a collection of recipes and handouts for kids and families picking up meal kits.
- ✓ Alliance for a Healthier Generation's [Smart food planner](#) - this resource provides recipes, and menu plans to offer support and inspire.
- ✓ Alliance for a Healthier Generation's [Action Center](#) - provides support on student engagement, surveys, taste tests, healthy meals, group purchasing, and more.

*\*\*may require login*

For more resources and information, visit No Kid Hungry's [Center for Best Practices](#) website.