



center for BEST
PRACTICES



OPTIMIZING SUMMER AND AFTERSCHOOL MEAL SERVICE

The Summer and Afterschool Meals Programs are crucial supports to children and families struggling with hunger. When school is out, these programs provide the nutritious food children need to grow and learn.

INCREASE PARTICIPATION AND REDUCE FOOD WASTE

While there are many successful meal program sponsors and sites, others may be underperforming or unwilling to operate the Summer or Afterschool Meals Programs for a variety of reasons. The perception of meal quality on the part of children or site operators is one possibility. A lack of excitement about available meals can limit participation or lead to food waste, which can be discouraging, messy, and costly. **This resource provides tips and resources to optimize the quality and presentation of meals in order to build buy-in among potential sites, increase participation, and minimize food waste.**

Step One: Know Your Audience

With Summer and Afterschool Meals, kids and families are your customers. It is vital to have a customer service mentality: **What do children and families want?** When and why are they most likely to choose to participate in your meal program? What are their concerns with the types or variety of foods offered? What would enhance their experience?

The following best practices have been shown to maximize participation and reduce food waste:

- **Survey Participants**

If you are unsure about what children and families like, do not hesitate to ask! While not every idea can be readily implemented, their feedback can tell you which changes or investments would provide the biggest 'bang for your buck'. Surveys can be informal conversations or written surveys and anything in between.

- **Conduct Taste Tests**

If you are eager to introduce new food items but concerned about food waste, taste tests can help to gauge interest, address concerns, and lay the groundwork for successfully integrating a new item into your menu. Provide small sample sizes of the new item and give kids the opportunity to provide feedback. By making children a part of the process and giving them a voice, they are more likely to try new foods and give you the input needed to move forward with menu updates and enhancements.

- **Accommodate Cultural or Regional Food Preferences**

Many communities have specific food preferences based on their cultural or religious backgrounds. In addition to surveying children and families, you can learn more by working with local community members, like school nutrition professionals or social service providers. Provide accommodations as needed, such as a substitute for pork. If possible, tailor the menu at each site to the preferences of that community.

- **Implement Offer Versus Serve (OVS)**

With Offer Versus Serve (OVS), children may decline some of the food items offered in a reimbursable meal. It is especially attractive for older children who are used to making their own choices. OVS can help to reduce waste while maintaining reimbursement, especially if you can store unserved food for later use.

- **Time Meals for Maximum Participation**

During the summer, older kids are more likely to be awake and ready to eat breakfast later in the morning. Serving supper in the late afternoon or evening instead of lunch means that parents are more likely to be available for transportation and supervision, plus sites avoid midday heat. Afterschool Meals sites often have the highest participation when serving meals at the beginning of the program or right at the final bell.

Hot Meals Are A Hit in Maryland!

The Director of Student Wellness Initiatives for Montgomery County (Maryland) Public Schools, Marla Caplon, decided to change a school-based Summer Meals site from cold to hot meals. Marla said that participation increased overnight from 100 to 600 meals per day. The site averaged around 800 meals per day last year. The reimbursements for the added meals cover the staff time needed for preparation and serving.

Step Two: Know Your Capacity

Improvements in meal service and related investments in staff and facilities occur within the overall context of a sponsor's capacity. Some sponsors are directly responsible for changes while others may work with vendors.

Sponsors seeking to optimize meal service at one or more sites must consider the following:

- **Does your kitchen (or vendor kitchen) have the capacity and equipment for hot meals?**

If your central or satellite kitchens have only prepared cold meals in the past, you should evaluate the investments needed to successfully transition to preparing and transporting hot meals. Engage kitchen staff early and often to hear their ideas and concerns. Confer with your State Agency and experienced hot meal providers to learn best practices and applicable health regulations.

- **Does the food service staff have the expertise to prepare hot meals or utilize fresh, local produce?**

Hot meals, scratch cooking, and integration of fresh, local produce are all likely to increase participation if done successfully. These changes may require additional training for your staff. Contact your State Agency and State School Nutrition Association to learn about upcoming training opportunities.

- **Will you be able to cover additional costs associated with changes to meal service?**

Investments to optimize meal service are likely to pay for themselves over time through increased participation and decreased food waste. However, there is often an up-front cost, such as more staff time or new equipment, and the returns do not always come with the next reimbursement payment. It's important to

forecast expenses and anticipated returns to assess their feasibility and value. In some cases, grants can help to make up the difference, especially for one-time purchases like equipment.

Step Three: Know Your Food

Meals perceived as enticing and flavorful are likely to bolster program participation and retention over time. Beyond ensuring food safety, you also want meals to look and taste as fresh as possible at the point of service.

Sponsors and vendors seeking to maximize meal appeal should consider:

- **Is the food being handled and stored appropriately?**
Some food items may be held or frozen for later service with minimal difficulty while others degrade in taste or texture. A “soggy sandwich” is a common complaint at Summer Meals sites when served a few days after assembly, especially if frozen. Some foods dry out when held in a warmer without a cover.
- **Is quality maintained during transport?**
Leaks and spills during transport can ruin meals that looked perfect leaving the kitchen. Likewise, carelessly packing heavy items on top of lighter items, like bananas or bread, makes them less appetizing upon arrival. Pay careful attention to transport containers and packing to communicate value and care.
- **Are the meals visually appealing?**
The appearance of meals at the point of service matters as much as the variety of menu items or quality of ingredients. Pay attention to how colors, shapes, textures, and packaging can boost visual impact. Clear wrapping or lids can show off the options for the day. Talk to parents and children about the meals and solicit input from site staff who manage meal service each day.

Step Four: Know Your Sites

Successful changes to your menu or meal service require buy-in from site staff and may involve additional training, equipment, or other investments.

As your team decides on specific tactics to fully optimize meal service, consider the following:

- **Are sites accessible, comfortable, and appealing?**
Meals served through both Summer and Afterschool Programs must be consumed on site to be eligible for reimbursement. Identifying locations that are known and trusted by children and families is a great first step to getting kids to come and stay to eat. Ensuring that sites are well-marked and welcoming is helpful; clean and well-maintained is a must. There also needs to be adequate, comfortable seating and facilities for all participants. For Summer Meals sites, that also means shade or air conditioning in many cases.
- **Do sites have the equipment needed for your service model?**
Implementing hot meals in response to participant preference only works if sites have the ability to serve those meals appropriately. Depending on the meal delivery system and timing, sites may need additional equipment like warmers in order to maintain food quality and safety until meal time. Similarly, sites may need refrigerators or coolers to maintain cold foods, especially on hot summer days. Grants may be available if you need help providing equipment to sites in order to expand or increase participation.

- **Do site staff have the ability to implement offer versus serve (OVS) or the “traveling apple” rule?**
As mentioned earlier, OVS offers participants some flexibility in how many food items they select as part of a reimbursable meal. If site staff are new to this service model, you may need to invest time in training them to properly execute this option. The “traveling apple” rule allowing participants to take certain items off-site can also reduce food waste, but it too requires training and oversight to implement properly.
- **Could a mobile meal delivery model support more frequent meal service or improved quality?**
Mobile meal programs have the potential to serve meals to kids in hard-to-reach places. Mobile food trucks may allow for fresh food preparation in locations where kitchens are otherwise unavailable. However, a successful mobile program requires planning, coordination, and resources beyond USDA reimbursements. Your team must objectively assess your capacity to implement a mobile model, including the financial feasibility of mobile preparation or delivery. Mobile meals are an effective strategy to reach more children, but this only holds true if the program is financially sustainable over time.

Engaging Kids and Staff Fuels Growth in Denver

The City and County of Denver Office of Children’s Affairs began sponsoring Summer Meals in 2012, and following that success began sponsoring Afterschool Meals in the 2013-2014 school year. In collaboration with their vendor, Revolution Foods, they conducted formal and informal surveys to gather input and give kids choices for what goes on the menu. They also offer taste tests to kids and families at new sites and give samples of new items during site staff trainings. Susan Gallo, Ph.D., Director of Health Initiatives for the Office of Children’s Affairs, says that these measures make kids and staff feel invested in the program and more likely to promote the meals. The Office of Children’s Affairs has grown rapidly to be among the largest sponsors in Denver, serving nearly 800,000 meals since beginning operations through summer 2017.

CONCLUSION

Efforts to optimize meal service can increase participation over time as children and families develop trust in the value of your program. By making deliberate changes to improve processes around meal preparation, delivery, and service, sponsors can build a strong, positive image of Summer and Afterschool Meals across the community.

RESOURCES

- No Kid Hungry prototype [parent](#) and [child](#) Summer Meals surveys
- No Kid Hungry [Summer Meals Calculator](#) with budget and forecasting tools to project financial outcomes
- No Kid Hungry [Mobile Meals Playbook](#) for selecting, budgeting for, and implementing mobile models
- USDA [Turnip the Beet](#) recognition for high-quality Summer Meals
- USDA guidance on Offer Versus Serve (OVS) for [Summer](#) and [Afterschool](#) Meals Programs.
- USDA guidance on the “traveling apple” rule for [Summer](#) and [Afterschool](#) Meals Programs.
- FRAC [Summer Food](#) and [Afterschool Nutrition Standards of Excellence](#)
- FRAC [Fresh From the Farm](#): Using Local Foods in the Afterschool & Summer Nutrition Programs
- FRAC [A How-To Guide](#) for Summer Food Sponsors on Purchasing High-Quality Summer Meals