STRATEGIES TO INCREASE MEAL PARTICIPATION

This resource features tried and true strategies to increase meals participation from FNS Directors across the nation, from hosting virtual meetings with families to playing jingles on your mobile meals route, like the ice cream truck, to signal meal pickup time!

Student Input & Meal Quality

"Get to know your customer – your students! Try collaborating with students and gathering input so there is mutual ownership of the school meal program. Together, you can build breakfast and lunch menus and increase meal participation."

Randy Milton, FNS Coordinator, Shepherd ISD, rural TX

Key Strategies

- ❑ Focus on cultural preferences that reflect community favorites.
- ❑ Consider asking students which recipes they like, via social media or conversation at meal pick-up sites.
- ❑ Build a reputation for high-quality, tasty meals.
- ❑ Incorporate local products and produce, where possible, and feature the local producers in your menu.

Using Culinary Skills

At Mission CISD in TX, FNS Director Rosy Woodrum has a strong commitment to keeping meals exciting and delicious. She has incorporated a variety of cuisines onto her menu, such as Cuban sandwiches and Chinese food in the to-go boxes typically seen at Chinese takeout restaurants. Students and families appreciate the meals for their high quality and diversity.

For more resources on serving meals during the coronavirus pandemic, visit our website: http://bestpractices.nokidhungry.org/coronavirus-response-recovery

Communication & Marketing

At Vaughn Next Century Learning Center in Los Angeles, the food services department works hand-in-hand with school administrators and teachers to incorporate messages about the school meals program into all communications with students and families. They have successfully implemented many of the strategies below, which you can read about in the case study, *Adapting School Nutrition During COVID-19*.

Key Strategies

Solicit input directly from families and students.

- ❑ Distribute surveys for families to share best times to pick up meals, food they would like to see more or less of, and preferred communication channels.
- ❑ Host a "Family Forum" or "Coffee with School Nutrition" via Zoom, in collaboration with other school leaders, to talk with families about the meals program, collect feedback, and address any concerns. Livestream to Facebook and provide a recording afterward to increase accessibility.
- ❑ Ensure that communications are in language(s) that families in your community are comfortable with. Consider asking community members for translation services and provide appropriate compensation.

Promote via social media and news outlets.

- ❑ Distribute flyers, set up robocalls, and send email communication to families.
- ❑ Promote your program by featuring flyers about your program in local newspapers.

Integrate meal program information into all school communication with families.

- ❑ Use staff meetings to encourage staff to remind families about meal availability.
- ❑ Consider asking teachers to check in with students who have not picked up meals, and ask teachers to share any feedback they hear about how to improve the meals program.
- ❑ Collaborate with teachers to incorporate nutrition into their lessons and feature the school meals program.

No Kid Hungry's School Meals Marketing Toolkit

This Customizable Letter to Families Announcing Free Meals for All Kids was created to help schools and districts notify families about the availability of free meals for all children age 18 and younger. No Kid Hungry also created this new School Meals Marketing Toolkit for schools to promote their meals, including social media posts and images, sample flyers and robocall scripts, and more.

Image retrieved 1/2021, from Mission CISD website

Leveraging Relationships with Community Partners

In rural Caroline County Public Schools, MD, Beth Brewster, FNS Director, works with community partners as part of their larger food security plan to improve equity and address the bigger issues dealing with hunger. She has done this, for example, by creating a Culinary Arts Center where students can become workforce ready and gain employment at the campus retail store and restaurants.

Key Strategies

- ❑ Build relationships with local businesses, e.g., grocery stores, laundromats, coffee shops, etc., which can help spread the word about your school meals program. Leave flyers and information about your program with them to pass out to families and to hang on bulletin boards. This is important especially in rural communities.
- ❑ Work with local farmers to incorporate local produce into the school meals program and promote the inclusion of local products to families. This helps to support local community by helping their economy, the school meals program, and can boost families' and students' satisfaction with the program.
- ❑ Leverage community partnerships to borrow equipment, and to share space and community assets, including volunteers. For example, in Caroline County, a local company loaned their trucks to the district to support meal delivery. Caroline County also partnered with the Parks and Recreation Dept. and Head Start programs to redeploy employees to the school nutrition program, given that their normal workload had been decreased due to the pandemic.

DC National Baptist Church Summer Meals Service, 2020

Parent & Family Networks

In McAllen, TX, the school nutrition department partnered with mothers in the community to get the word out about their district's meals program. Via their personal social media accounts, they post pictures of meals and promote the McAllen ISD meals program to their networks. Participation has increased, and the FNS director attributes this success to the network of social media "mom influencers."

- ❑ Find community networks to partner with to promote the meals program or create a new network.
- ❑ Train local leaders to promote the meal program via social media.
- ❑ Provide good food that looks appetizing to share on social media.
- ❑ Create a feedback mechanism so that, if people ask questions or share feedback on the social media posts, the creators can share that with the school nutrition department.

Think Outside the Box

In Southside ISD in San Antonio, TX, Janie Ramirez, Child Nutrition Director has figured out an innovative way to alert kids that their school meals have arrived. At the start of the school year, the school buses would go to neighborhoods to deliver school meals, but nobody showed to pick them up. Janie and her team brainstormed... how they could get kids to come out of their houses? Pretend to be the ice cream truck, was their idea! The school district installed a speaker to each of the 10 buses so that they could play the common melodies of an ice cream truck when arriving in students' neighborhoods. Since the change, participation jumped from 800 kids a day to 2,300.

Key Strategies

- ❑ Know your audience and what will encourage students and families to show up.
- ❑ Brainstorm with your full team on ways to overcome challenges – think outside the box!
- ❑ Have prizes and/or raffles for meal participation.
- ❑ Use social media to meet your audience where they are.
- ❑ Use fun packaging. Consider packaging you might see at restaurants.
- ❑ Work with the community to highlight local businesses (e.g. bakeries, local farmers and meat markets).
- ❑ Ask for and incorporate participant feedback on menus and delivery/pick up times.

Stay in Touch!

For more resources on serving meals during the coronavirus pandemic, visit No Kid Hungry Center for Best Practices website: http://bestpractices.nokidhungry.org/coronavirus-response-recovery

Willing to share what's been working well for your program and your community? We'd love to feature you! Send us an email at: bestpractices@strength.org