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Share information about your nutrition program

Nutrition impacts academic performance as well as child wellbeing and health. School meal programs provide the majority of food for some children who rely on schools as a source of breakfast, lunch and snacks during the school day and, for many, during breaks with federally-funded breakfast and lunch programs and nonprofit programs that send backpack meals home on weekends.

Kids can't learn if they are hungry, and food insecurity is a persistent problem in our country. According to the United States Department of Agriculture, about 15% of children experienced food insecurity in 2020, which is defined by the USDA as a lack of consistent access to enough food for an active and healthy life. (<https://bit.ly/3B2JYM6>)

Communicating about school meal programs

The public often does not know about school nutrition programs. They may hear news stories about efforts to change nutritional requirements for "free lunch" programs, but they likely don't know what the requirements are or the efforts in their own districts to ensure that children are not hungry.

This information is helpful to share. Confidentiality laws do not allow districts to put a face to the programs, but the reasons behind the programs are easy to share. Districts should also inform parents and the community about the efforts to provide high-quality, nutritious food to all students. For some, school lunch may bring back unpleasant memories, but programs have changed, and school nutrition staff work hard to make high-quality, palatable school meals.

Information to help you get started communicating about nutrition

These efforts are a daily challenge, and we should tell people about the hard work behind these programs. In 2019, almost 30 million children in the United States ate lunches each school day as part of the National School Lunch Program (NSLP). During remote or hybrid learning, the number was reduced, but schools continued to try to serve students by offering a variety of meal options, including using school buses to drive food to students who were eligible for nutrition assistance in the form of free or reduced-price meals.

The NSLP is administered at the federal level by the Food and Nutrition Services department, part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Schools participating in the federally-sponsored program get cash subsidies and donated food from the U. S. Department of Agriculture for each meal they serve. However, districts must comply with federal guidelines in order to qualify.

The federal government requires that school lunches must meet nutrition requirements to receive federal funds. These requirements provide guidelines for sodium, fat, calories, fruits

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and vegetables, grains and meats. This doesn't mean that all meals meet these requirements. The government requires compliance for meal patterns for both daily and weekly nutritional value. Every meal does not have to comply, but the weekly cumulative meal value must. See the government policy memo for more information: <https://bit.ly/39YIneu>.

Who needs to know about nutrition and its effect on learning?

Parents, students, staff and community should understand the importance of good nutrition and the services of school meal programs. Determine how to communicate about your nutrition program after considering a few basic questions:

What do your parents, staff and students already know about it? Do they have more information than the upcoming monthly lunch menu?

Have you explained why the food appearing on the menus is being served as part of your breakfast, lunch and/or after-school snack programs?

How many of your students eat at school? Do you know how many of the students who qualify for and eat free- and reduced-priced-meals at school depend on those meals for their primary source of food each day? Does your community generally know about and support your efforts to feed students?

How have you changed your nutrition program in recent years to provide a more healthy meal plan?

What are you doing about nutrition outside the cafeteria? Have you integrated nutrition lessons into the curriculum? Are you educating parents about the importance of nutrition? Do families know where to access nutrition resources for their children when school is not in session?

Have you shared information about eligibility for free and reduced lunch with all families? Do you make efforts to destigmatize this program to ensure that recipients are not bullied or marginalized? Students who are ashamed, especially older students, will often skip meals rather than participate in the free meal program.

Tips for sharing nutrition requirements for your meal program

Be sure to include your school nutrition program in your list of possible news features. Recognize food service staff on your website or in publications, introduce parents to individuals in the district who create the menus, and explain their educational training and experience. Interview those employees about how they develop the menus.

Describe the federal program, and the quantities of food commodities you receive in the district. Give examples of how those are used in meal planning. Use a monthly menu and highlight those menu items created from NSLP commodities. Include the financial value of this federal assistance.

Explain the financial side of food preparation — how federal subsidies are used, how meal costs are determined and the federal guidelines used to determine who qualifies for free and reduced-price meals. Make sure parents know how to apply for free- and reduced-price meals.