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How to make friends with your nutrition services director

By Dana Woldow

Fixing school food is a team sport, and there is no more important member of your team than the director of the nutrition services department. This individual (sometimes a man, but more frequently a woman) is the person who is most likely to be able to make the improvements happen, so getting her on your side is crucial. The best way to do that is to understand where she is coming from.

Why student nutrition directors are the way they are

School meal programs are governed by a stack of federal regulations as thick as a large urban telephone directory, and nutrition directors have to know them all and follow them all. They are working with impossibly tight funding; they may face high turnover of labor; they may be at the bottom of the food chain within their school district, viewed as little more than an annoying adjunct department vaguely linked with mystery meat, ladies in hairnets, and the persistent complaint that "school food sucks." While it may be tempting to view your nutrition director as the villain in the school food drama (and while it may even turn out that she IS the villain), don't start out at that position. Start by assuming that this person is someone who really does care about the kids and what they eat, who really does want to feed children in an atmosphere of nurturing and respect, but who has probably been beaten down by so many years of having to focus on the bottom line, and of hearing the criticisms of school food, that she may have almost lost the will to live, let alone to fix school food. Most of these folks have never had the support of a district parent, and would love to have someone to work with who actually understands and sympathizes with the challenges they face every day.

In general, student nutrition departments are unloved and unappreciated both by their school district colleagues and also by the parents and kids. Everyone says "school food sucks" but very few people understand that, within the current budget, it is almost impossible to serve better quality food, because it costs more. Student nutrition directors live in mortal fear of seeing participation go down; that reimbursement money is their life's blood and without it, their whole universe falls apart. This is why typically when you ask for any kind of improvement, the answer is some form of "no" – because change usually costs money, and that is probably money which the department doesn't have.

How to reach out to your student nutrition director

First, organize a group of like minded parents and others who care about better school food. Then, get in touch with your district's nutrition director and ask for a meeting; note that this meeting is just for you, not for the group. The nutrition director may inwardly roll her eyes and think "Great, another parent wants to tell me how to do my job," but she will probably agree to meet with you, especially if you mention that your group has numerous members and that you want to work with her, not against her.

Make it clear to your director right away that you understand her need to focus on the bottom line, and that your group is not expecting her to magically conjure up scratch cooked meals in a school district with no usable kitchens, or offer steak and lobster in the lunch line, or drive kids away by serving tofu surprise and mashed turnips. In fact, in your first meeting, you might not ask for any kind of improvements at all, but rather ask her simply " If it were entirely up to you, and you could change anything without regard to financial impact or regulations, what kind of a school food program would you like to see?" Her answer may very well surprise you, but just the fact that you have thought to ask her this (you may be the first person ever to ask) should help with getting her onto your side.

Encourage her to share all of the constraints that her program faces, so that you will be empowered with the knowledge you need to work towards sustainable changes. Be willing to listen and learn. Try not to get too focused on just one issue, but look at the system as a whole. When she is describing all of the barriers she faces, keep in mind that she is not trying to be a naysayer; the challenges she faces, including the often ridiculous regulations, the criminally low federal reimbursement for subsidized meals, the high cost of food, labor, utilities, and every other expense, are all very real. It takes a lot more than just "the will" to improve school food.

Explain that your group feels that it is terrible that she works so hard for the kids and gets so little public support for it, and that you want to change that - in fact you want to change the whole conversation around school food from "It sucks" to "It's getting better and we all need to pitch in and help, and not just blame nutrition services for everything." No matter what she tells you about how hard her job is, just nod and make sympathetic noises. She will probably be so stunned and happy to encounter someone who is willing to listen instead of criticize, that she will come away from the meeting feeling like you are one of the most intelligent parents she has ever met, even if you hardly said a word the whole time.

Be willing to do the hard work

There is no reason why you can't ask your nutrition director right away to start making some changes to improve the quality of your school meals; however, she is much more likely to be supportive of what you want after you have done something to show that you are supportive of her. Here are some things your group can do to help the director:

Help get more students qualified for government subsidized meals.

This money is the major revenue stream for student nutrition services, and any increase in qualified students can bring in more money, which can then be put towards paying for better quality (more expensive) food. Make it a priority for your school district that every single family must return a free meal application, even if the family already knows that they won't qualify for government subsidized meals; those families can write "not interested" on the form, but their child **MUST** return the form to their teacher.

In far too many school districts, there are students who would qualify for free meals, except for the fact that their family never fills out the form, either because they forget, or they don't understand that it is important, or (more often) the child is too embarrassed to self-identify as

poor in front of his classmates, and so he either doesn't give his parents the form or doesn't turn it in at school. In my own son's middle school, the procedure used to be that the teacher would just wave the forms around at the start of the year, shouting "Who wants a free lunch application?" What 13 year old wants to put up his hand and say, "Me, teacher! I'm poor! I want a free lunch form!" Is it any surprise that once we eliminated the "Who wants a form?" distribution method, and instead starting sending a form home with every single child, requiring everyone to return the form, the number of students qualifying for free meals in our district increased by almost 30%? It is important to make returning the form to school a universal requirement because that way, just the act of turning in the application does not automatically identify the child as poor in front of his peers.

Find out if schools are selling food in competition with the lunch program, and if they are, try to make them stop.

It is common in high schools especially for students to sell pizza or other quick food at lunchtime to their peers to raise money for school clubs or activities, but those sales draw students away from the cafeteria and cost your nutrition department money. Worse, it creates a stigma around cafeteria meals if only poor students eat them, while wealthier students grab a few slices of pizza from the student activities sale table. For some low income students, the shame they feel about going to the cafeteria is enough to keep them from eating lunch altogether, preferring hunger to embarrassment. You can see how this is a lose/lose situation – hungry students have a harder time learning, and when kids skip meals which would be paid for by the federal government, the cafeteria brings in less money to help offset its fixed expenses like labor and overhead. When cafeterias lose money, school districts have to dip into their general fund to make up the shortfall, and that takes money away from classrooms. So while students think they are "helping" their school raise money for activities by selling food competitively with the meal program, really they are hurting the schools by drawing patrons away from the cafeteria.

Make sure parents and the community have accurate information about the kind of food being offered at school.

If your director has already made positive changes, tell the world. Too many people think that if there is a story on the news about school cafeterias somewhere in the country serving junk, that means their own schools are serving junk too. If your school has already started to improve their offerings, make sure parents know about it.

Work together

Once you have demonstrated that you are willing and able to support the work done by your student nutrition director, she will likely be more willing to try to work cooperatively with you. Don't ask for too much at once, and keep in mind that she has to always keep an eye on her department's bottom line. Rather than asking her to make what could be a very expensive permanent change in the food at your school, ask her to do a pilot program for a few weeks; if the pilot is successful, it can be made permanent. Pilot programs test the waters in a way which is not financially ruinous for the department if they are not successful. For example, a switch from high sugar cereal to low sugar cereal at breakfast district wide is a disaster if the result is that breakfast participation drops by 50%. Making the switch for a few weeks, in a pilot program at one school, allows the opportunity to see what happens before going district wide, and also to try

innovative strategies for maintaining participation. You should expect to pilot any program change you propose before rolling it out district wide. The most successful pilots are designed by working closely and cooperatively with your nutrition director. When your group shows it supports the student nutrition department, the director should be willing to support your efforts by piloting some improvements.

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