



How to help your school meal program find more money

By Dana Woldow

In an era of skyrocketing costs for food, labor and benefits (especially health care costs) many school districts find that the money they get from the government to cover the cost of free and reduced price meals is not enough to cover the cost of providing those meals. Even in relatively well to do communities, where students not qualified for subsidized meals can afford to pay \$3 or more for a school lunch, school meal programs often run in the red, or use the sale of high calorie, low nutrient junk food to help underwrite the cost of free lunches. When parents object to the presence of junk food at school, or ask why the cafeteria meals can't be of better quality, they are told that the department must sell junk to break even, or that the nutrition department is already in the red, so no additional costly upgrades can be considered. What's a parent to do?

There are two main strategies to help your nutrition department move closer to financial solvency: bring in more revenue, and cut expenses. While there are many consultants who charge six figures to do detailed studies for school districts on how they can pursue these two strategies, much of it is just common sense solutions which parents and advocates can work towards for free. Here are some low or no cost suggestions for how to do each.

Ways to bring in more revenue

1. Get more students qualified for free or reduced price meals. The single largest source of revenue for most student nutrition departments is the reimbursement they receive for each free or reduced price meal they serve to a qualified student. In every school, there are always at least a few students whose families have not filled out the free meal application. Sometimes the culture of the school is that middle class families are not asked to fill out the form, as they will not qualify. This creates a stigma around filling out the form, because children who do return the form are forced to self-identify as poor in front of their classmates. Make it the culture in your school and your school district that EVERY family is expected to return a meal application. When everyone fills out the form, there is no stigma for anyone; plus, there will always be an increase in the number of students who qualify, and that can drive higher participation and more revenue. See [How to make friends with your nutrition services director](#) for more on this.

2. Encourage more students to eat in the cafeteria. Start a campaign at your school to get every student to eat at least one day a week in the cafeteria; you can use a "Try it, you'll like it!" approach.

► Send a flyer home to the parents outlining the advantages of having their child eat school meals at least sometimes – no lunch boxes to pack, a chance to try new foods, the opportunity for kids to have a hot midday meal instead of a cold sandwich now and then. Emphasize the healthy

components of your cafeteria lunch – is there fresh fruit? A salad bar? A ban on trans fat or fried foods? "Baked not fried" is the new mantra of many food service operations.

- ▶ See if the cafeteria can display the food more attractively. Studies have shown that students react favorably to no-cost strategies like using appealing names on cafeteria signage (calling vegetables "crunchy carrots" or "zippy zucchini", or designating a lunch line for cold foods only as "Energy Express"), and offering fresh fruit in baskets or bowls, not the cardboard box in which it was shipped.

- ▶ Ask the principal to offer a small prize (like 10 minutes of extra recess) for the class that gets the highest percentage of students to eat in the cafeteria during a set period (two weeks, perhaps, or a month).

3. Identify the barriers to participation. What is keeping students from eating in the cafeteria? Some typical reasons students or parents give are:

- ▶ The lunch period is too short and the lines are too long, or there aren't enough seats in the caf for everyone. Maybe your school needs to think about staggering the times when kids go to lunch, or implementing an additional lunch period.

- ▶ Some elementary schools have had success with sending the kids out to [recess before lunch](#) rather than after. Often kids are so eager to get outside to play that they won't go to the caf because it takes too long. Once recess is over, there is no incentive to fast forward through lunch, and the cafeteria may seem more attractive to these students.

- ▶ Other reasons sometimes mentioned are that the cafeteria staff yell at the kids, the caf is dirty or smelly, or that food runs out before everyone is served. These are all issues which your student nutrition director can and should correct. There is no excuse for unprofessional behavior either by those serving in the cafeteria or those charged with keeping it clean. Running out of food costs the cafeteria money in lost sales, so it should not happen on a regular basis.

- ▶ Parents may have misconceptions about the school meal program; sometimes they think the cafeteria meals are "just for poor kids" and believe that if their child buys a lunch, then some low income child will go without their meal; this of course is not true. If your school has improved the quality of the meals, are parents aware of it? If your school breakfast used to be sugary cereal and strawberry milk, but is now low sugar cereal, fresh fruit, and plain milk, make sure the parents know about it.

- ▶ To discover whether these, or any other barriers, are keeping students from eating school meals in your district, survey the parents and older students to find out what they think. Some of the best ideas for improving the school food experience come from the students who are, after all, the customers.

4. Combat the stigma associated with eating school meals. Too many older children are embarrassed to go to the cafeteria because they feel it is a public admission that they are poor, and must rely on free food or starve. This stigma keeps students from receiving the meals to

which they are entitled, and which they need to stay healthy and learn, and also discourages paying students from wanting to eat school meals, so that it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy that "only the poor kids eat in the caf."

► Help turn this around by asking teachers to eat in the cafeteria at least one day a week, and invite the whole class to join them. Younger students (up to about 6th grade) love to have out of class time with their teacher, and many will eagerly go to the cafeteria for a chance to have lunch with a beloved teacher.

► Don't let it be acceptable at your school for students to make fun of those eating in the caf; this is really a form of bullying and should not be tolerated. Make sure the children at your school understand from their first day of Kindergarten that making fun of the food which others are going to eat hurts feelings, and is just mean.

5. Bring the meals right to the kids. The quickest way to increase participation in the school breakfast program is to do a Breakfast in the Classroom or Grab n Go, where students pick up their meal at the front door, or from a cart in the hallway, or even from the cafeteria, but take it to class to eat during the first 15 minutes. Read more about in-class breakfast [here](#).

6. If your high schools have open campus at lunchtime, consider asking the Board of Education to close them. Cafeteria lunch sales skyrocket when campuses are closed, and high participation at the high school level can bring in a lot more money which can then be used to pay for better food at every school. The open campus is a relatively recent invention; for most of the 20th century, students were not allowed to leave school property during the school day, and the open campus has brought its own problems, including the safety of students who leave school, increased absenteeism when students go out to lunch and don't come back, and security issues when there is a constant flow of bodies in and out of the school doors.

Ways to cut expenses

1. Encourage the school district to follow up with families who owe money to the cafeteria.

Does your school district allow children who are not qualified for free meals, but who have no money to pay for their lunch, to get the meal anyway and "charge" the cost? Many school districts see this as a more humane response than turning a hungry child away, or serving them a "meal of shame" such as cold cereal or a cheese sandwich. However, the cost of this kinder, gentler option can run into 5 or 6 figures very quickly, and can place an enormous strain on the school nutrition department budget. In addition to making sure that every child fills out a meal application, it may become necessary for your school district to follow up with the families of those students whose charges exceed a certain amount. Some school districts allow a student to charge three meals and then call the home to inform the parents that they must start sending a lunch from home, as no additional charges will be allowed. This can be a politically sensitive issue, and the school board may need to see that there are parents who support the idea that, at a time when school districts are having to raise class size and lay off teachers, families who don't qualify for government subsidized meals can't be allowed to run up unlimited meal charges because that negatively impacts the quality of the food served to those students whose families do qualify.

2. Help reduce the amount of "unclaimed" meals your district is wasting every day.

Unclaimed meals are meals which the district pays for, but which are not eaten by students, and so no money is collected to cover their cost.

- ▶ Meals may be wasted because a class goes on a field trip and is away from school during lunch period, but the teacher fails to notify the cafeteria in advance; the cafeteria then prepares meals for students who never show up, and at the end of the meal period, the food is discarded. Once heated up, meals may not be saved for another day.

- ▶ Other meals may be unclaimed because they were eaten by adults (teachers or other school staff) who didn't pay for them, or by younger siblings or parents who accompanied a student to school in the morning and joined the student in the cafeteria for a "free" breakfast. While school cafeterias can and do offer meals to staff or families who are willing to pay for them, meals served to non-students cannot be claimed for government reimbursement. Just because a student qualifies for free meals does not mean that his parents or 3 year old sibling get free meals too.

- ▶ Yet another cause of unclaimed meals is class or school wide pizza parties or other food-centered celebrations taking place at lunchtime, again with insufficient notice to the cafeteria staff to be able to adjust meal counts downward. Most teachers, and even administrators, don't understand that the cafeteria is legally required to prepare and have available at least some meals for low income students every day, even if other food is being offered at no charge for those students (for example, a school wide free pizza party at lunchtime to celebrate an increase in test scores.) The cafeteria cannot just close down for the day; labor costs remain the same whether students show up for lunch or not, and there will always be the cost of those required meals which must be on hand to accommodate any student who chooses the cafeteria over the pizza party. Parties at lunchtime can be addressed and discouraged, or even prohibited, in the district's required Wellness Policy.

- ▶ Finally, bake sales or other sales of competitive food at lunchtime draw business away from the cafeteria and cost the nutrition program money, since their fixed costs, like labor and overhead, remain the same whether students eat lunch in the caf or not. If bake sales or other food sales are allowed at all, they should be after school only, so as not to compete with the cafeteria.

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