

A GUIDE TO BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH SCHOOL NUTRITION STAFF



center for BEST PRACTICES

Building relationships with school nutrition staff is vital to expanding access to school meals. This resource is intended to guide you in deciding when to approach school nutrition staff and which members of the staff to approach.

WHO'S WHO WITHIN SCHOOL NUTRITION

It is important to understand who makes up the school nutrition team so that you approach the right person. These are general roles and responsibilities within the school nutrition program:

School Nutrition Directors (also known as food service directors) oversee all aspects of the school nutrition program at the district-level. They are responsible for the management of the day-to-day operations in a district and for USDA regulatory compliance. Their responsibilities may include financial administration, menu planning, recipe development, catering operations, production facility management, training coordination and more. School Nutrition Directors are generally full-time, salaried employees who work year-round.

School Nutrition Managers (also known as school food service managers or cafeteria managers) work in a single school and generally report to the school nutrition director. In a larger school district, they might report to supervisory staff who support the director. They are responsible for following district-approved menus, procurement, food production, health and safety standards, meal service, record keeping, marketing and personnel management.



Food Service Workers (also known as school nutrition assistants or child nutrition assistants) are food service employees that work in a local cafeteria under the school nutrition manager. They are involved in routine operations of school nutrition programs like preparing and serving meals and processing transactions at the point of service. They are the front-line to ensuring that meals claimed for USDA reimbursement are in compliance. Food service workers typically have the most direct interaction with students.

Knowing who the key decision-maker is for your request is essential to approaching the right person. While a number of people may have input in decision-making, the school nutrition director is ultimately accountable. You should approach the school nutrition director before approaching a school nutrition manager. If it is a large school district, the director may have a leadership team that he or she may connect you with. This top down approach is important to ensuring that you respect the relationship between the director and his or her staff. Approaching the school nutrition manager or food service workers with something different from what they were assigned to do could create conflict between them and the school nutrition director; it could also potentially harm your relationship with the school nutrition director.

TIMING CAN BE EVERYTHING

It is not only important to know who to approach, but also when to approach them. You want to approach the right person at the right time. Note that school calendars vary somewhat by district and state. This timeline should be used as a guide; consult your state education agency or individual district or school calendars (generally available online) for the most locally relevant information. Be sure to pay attention to school breaks (spring, summer, winter, etc.) and testing periods as these can have a significant effect on when to approach school nutrition directors.

Approachability key: ■ = good time to approach ■ = okay time to approach ■ = bad time to approach

January	School in session Approachability: ■
February	School in session Approachability: ■
March	School in session Approachability: ■
April	School in session Approachability: ■
May	School in session/ Summer break begins Approachability: ■
June	School in session/ Summer break begins Approachability: ■
July	Summer break Approachability: ■
August	Summer break/ School in session Approachability: ■
September	School in session Approachability: ■
October	School in session Approachability: ■
November	School in session Approachability: ■
December	School in session Approachability: ■

JANUARY: This is generally a good time to approach the school nutrition director to discuss the current breakfast program and to suggest implementing a new breakfast model.

FEBRUARY – APRIL: During this time, schools are making decisions that affect the next school year such as securing bids and negotiating contracts. New contracts often must be issued before the end of the school year to be effective at the beginning of the next school year, and it can take 2-6 months to finalize bids. This is a good time to approach school nutrition directors to review the current breakfast program and brainstorm opportunities to maximize student participation, like Breakfast After the Bell, which can be piloted in the spring or implemented the next school year. This is also a good time to address if afterschool meals (suppers) should be added as an option during procurement or whether expansion plans need to be incorporated into contracts. In a district that does not currently participate in the afterschool meals program, this is a good time to explore the application process, which would allow the district to pilot afterschool meals in the spring or be ready to start at the beginning of the next school year. Related to the summer meals program, many state agencies have deadlines in April/May for program sponsors to submit applications. As a result, some school nutrition directors may be busy assembling the required paperwork and finalizing operational details. The administrative burden is lessened for returning sponsors, so be mindful of whether the school or district is new to the summer meals program or has new leadership.

MAY: Staff are beginning to focus on the summer meals program and finalizing menu planning for the next school year. Menus are typically distributed in May so that initial orders can be placed in June before cafeteria managers leave for the summer. This can be a busy planning time for school nutrition staff, but it can also be an opportune time for engaging them in conversations about plans for

the next school year. School nutrition directors at schools that do not operate a summer meals program may be particularly available during this time.

JUNE: There are many closing responsibilities for school nutrition directors as the school year comes to an end. Staff are generally very busy and this is not considered a good time for communication. While start dates vary by region, many summer meals programs begin operation in late May through mid-June. The first two to three weeks of operation for these programs are a very busy time for school nutrition directors as they manage new and existing meals sites. When engaging school nutrition directors that manage summer meals programs during this time, limit your conversation to ways that you can support their efforts to implement a successful summer meals program rather than trying to shift attention to other initiatives.

JULY: This is an approachable time for school nutrition directors because school is not in session. They may be busy if they are operating a summer meals program, but by this time the summer meals program is likely operating seamlessly.

AUGUST: School nutrition staff are preparing for the start of the school year and creating operational plans based on the previous year's data. There is some opportunity to approach school nutrition directors in early August, but late August should be considered a "do not disturb" time.

SEPTEMBER: From late August through early October, school nutrition directors are focused on the many responsibilities that come with the start of the school year, including processing applications and completing verification. This is a very busy time and most staff would prefer not to be approached with additional asks.

OCTOBER – NOVEMBER: Mid-October through November is considered the best time to approach school nutrition staff to discuss resource needs and breakfast model changes for the next school year. Some schools may also be open to implementing a new breakfast model during this time. Schools may also be willing to try new practices to maximize participation in an existing afterschool meals program while districts may be open to applying for the afterschool meals program with the goal of beginning rollout at select schools before the end of the school year.

DECEMBER: Earlier in the month (before the holidays) is a good time to connect with school nutrition staff.

ADDITIONAL TIPS

Keep in mind the complexities of school food service. School nutrition directors are in a constant balancing act—reconciling the previous year, managing the current year and planning the next year. Some additional tips for building relationships with school nutrition staff:

- **Be humble.** Approach as a partner, not as an expert.
- **Listen.** Always listen first. Ask how you can help them achieve their goals, then offer suggestions.
- **Be respectful of time.** Ask, "When would be best for us to talk?"
- **Be respectful of expertise.** Present options and let them make the decisions.