



A SUMMER MEALS CASE STUDY

SEAFORD SCHOOL DISTRICT: “LEAPFROGGING” TO SUMMER MEALS SUCCESS

Background

Seaford School District is located in lower Sussex County, Delaware. The town of Seaford has a population of 9,000 people, and the school district has 3,500 students. The district has six schools – four elementary schools, a middle school, and a high school – and all are located within two miles of each other. Seaford School District operates the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) at each school to provide universally free school meals to all students.

Early Success

Seaford School District’s Nutrition Services department began operating the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) in 2016 with a non-traditional “mobile meals concept” to provide free meals to children and teens over the summer months while school is out. The Supervisor of Nutrition Services, Bill Mengel, started the program. He used his prior experience operating SFSP at another school district to design the mobile summer meals program in Seaford. Using surplus funds generated from operating CEP, Nutrition Services decided to purchase a food truck for summer 2016 to serve three summer meals sites. That year, Seaford School District served 8,600 meals – and they were ecstatic!

Program Expansion

With the goal of expanding the program to reach even more children in 2017, the district purchased two food vans and made plans to increase their number of sites. Nutrition Services conducted a community mapping exercise to identify blocks of unmet need and possible locations on or near those blocks that could host safe, trusted, and easily accessible summer meals sites. Child safety was a major concern in selecting sites. They identified churches, libraries, apartment complexes, trailer parks, public pools, and community centers. Staff also consulted with leaders at each location to bring them on board and to plan meal service around existing programming. Finally, Nutrition Services consulted with the Town of Seaford and the neighboring Town of Blades to obtain permission to operate and secure administrative buy-in and support. They planned to operate three sites as “drop and go” sites, i.e. the food vans would deliver meals to on-site supervisors and leave to support the food truck operations. Six other sites were serviced entirely by the food truck. In the summer of 2017, Seaford School District more than doubled the number of meals served, serving a total of 21,000 meals!



A SUMMER MEALS CASE STUDY

“Leapfrogging” to Streamline Meal Service

Even with that success, Nutrition Services knew they had room to improve. The food truck spent a lot of time running back and forth to the production kitchen to resupply meals, as a food truck can only physically hold so many meals at a time. Meal service ran from 10:15am until 2:15pm to accommodate all the extra transportation time required, but staff quickly realized that 10:15am was too early for lunch and 2:15pm was too late. The challenge facing Nutrition Services staff was how to navigate a narrow time window for meal service while still reaching a maximum number of children. At the same time, the success of the summer program had exposed layers of hunger and food insecurity, which led to the decision to expand to more sites within the Seaford community. A second food truck was added into the mobile meals “fleet,” which now included two food trucks and two food vans.

By this time, summer meals programming in Seaford had become a well-oiled operation, having adopted the “leapfrogging” strategy promoted by PepsiCo Food for Good. Under this new approach, food trucks go out into the community to serve meals Monday through Friday, with Nutrition Services staff using food vans to run meals from the production kitchen to the food trucks, resupplying meals as they run low. The food vans also run dirty pans and dishes back to the kitchen after dropping off food. This enables food trucks to stay out in the community for the entire meal service window, thus serving a higher volume of sites. With the exception of one school building that is open for four weeks of summer school, all summer meals sites are exclusively serviced by the food trucks; there are no longer any “drop and go” sites.

Leapfrogging food vans, which shuttle to and from the food trucks and production kitchen, also enable the program to serve high quality meals by employing batch-cooking methods of hot food items throughout the morning rather than preparing all meals at once. This allows the food trucks to serve freshly prepared meals all day in the community. Cold milk and juices remain cold within the onboard reach-in refrigerators, in addition to backup cold meals. Having the food vans shuttling back and forth from the production kitchen is especially important on Fridays, when the program serves locally-grown, fresh fruit sorbet from local farms, a fan favorite on any hot 95-degree day. Improved meal quality ensures that kids keep coming back for fresh meals all summer long. These improvements brought the Seaford School District’s summer meals program even more success in 2018, when more than 24,000 meals were served at 14 sites.

The leapfrogging method is also applied to site activities for the children. The scheduled first activity group will set up at one site, while a second activity group will leapfrog the first group to the next site to set up for the next group of children. When the first group is finished and the food truck moves on to second site, they will leapfrog the second group to the following (third) site. This leapfrogging continues all day.

Promoting the Program

Nutrition Services’ food trucks and food vans are wrapped identically. This promotes a favorable, positive branding concept easily recognized by the community while driving. This fresh branding has been critical to the program’s success. Seaford School District also promotes summer meals through the schools themselves, and they coordinate with community partners who provide summer activities so that the district can synchronize summer meals and summer fun.



A SUMMER MEALS CASE STUDY

Promoting activities alongside meals has proven successful as a strategy to increase daily participation in these programs.

The first year of operation built a foundation for the program and established trust within the community, which made operating and expanding the program during subsequent years even easier. Today, Seaford has no problem finding new summer meals sites because there is so much support for the program. Participation is high because kids and families know about it. In turn, the summer meals program has built a lot of community support for the school district itself.

Lessons Learned

Knowing the community that you serve and planning with them is critical to success. Nutrition Services not only planned their summer meals program using community mapping in consultation with community stakeholders, but they also solicited feedback from children, families, and community leaders, as well. This feedback was then used to build a better program. For example, while churches were safe and accessible places to operate summer meals sites, Nutrition Services learned that some families were uncomfortable sending their children to get summer meals at a church that their family does not attend. This insight was instrumental to shifting from serving “drop and go” sites to serving all sites directly via the food trucks. Now all of Seaford’s summer meals sites, including churches, are served by the food truck model – there are no longer “drop and go” sites.

Seaford School District’s summer meals program found success through innovation by starting small, planning with the community, and leveraging surplus funds from CEP to purchase high quality equipment and vehicles to run the program. Bill Mengel, Seaford School District’s Supervisor of Nutrition Services, recommends that any organization starting a mobile meals program start small, with three or four “can’t miss” locations, and really do a great job at serving those sites before expanding. This lays a solid foundation for the program. Additionally, strong community partnerships can help accelerate program expansion. Examples of partnership include working with the library to have a “bookmobile” ride-along with the summer food truck; inviting teachers and principals to lead simple activities with children; procuring fresh fruits, vegetables and sorbets from local farms; and working with apartment complexes to serve as summer meals sites. Community partners are not only an invaluable resource for building a strong summer meals program: they are key stakeholders whose buy-in is necessary to sustain progress over time. When thinking about the importance of strong community partnerships in drawing children to summer meals sites, Bill Mengel likes to quote the movie *Field of Dreams*: “Build it...they will come!”

In 2019, Seaford School District Nutrition Services will continue serving fresh, high-quality meals to children and teens over the summer and have their sights set on serving 25,000 meals!