

# INCREASING PARTICIPATION THROUGH ALTERNATIVE MEAL SERVICE MODELS



Alternative meal service models, such as Grab n' Go and meals in the classroom, tend to be more convenient for students because they do a better job of adapting to kids' schedules and addressing meal barriers than more traditional serving models, such as meals served in the cafeteria. As a result, alternative meal service models can result in more students participating. Additionally, these alternative service models use portable equipment that enable schools to serve food with the same high-quality meal standards and variety as traditional cafeteria dining. Alternative meal service models can be utilized anytime to ensure students are able to access meals conveniently and efficiently during the school day.

## ALTERNATIVE MEAL SERVICE MODELS

These meal service models provide options that allow for adaptability and creativity to meet your food service needs:

- **Grab n' Go Stations:** These stations can be set up throughout the school. Students are able to pick up meals from the stations for breakfast or lunch and are able to eat in school designated areas such as the classroom, gym, courtyard, etc. Grab n' Go stations also help with creating additional lines for faster service to the students.
- **Grab n' Go Line Service:** This is Grab n' Go meal service from the cafeteria line. Students pick up their meals on trays, boats, or in bags from the cafeteria line and take to designated eating areas (other than the cafeteria).
- **Meals in the Classroom:** Meals are prepared in the cafeteria and then brought to the classroom to eat. Some schools incorporate student choice by allowing students to pre-order meals. This model was commonly utilized pre-pandemic via Breakfast in the Classroom. Because of safety protocols during COVID-19, Lunch in the Classroom has increased in popularity. School staff, teachers and students commonly help out with food distribution for these models. To learn more about meal service in the classroom and see guidance on equipment needs, view No Kid Hungry's [Equipment Tips For Meal Service During The 2021-2022 School Year](#).
- **Food Truck:** Students are served meals outside in a common area or courtyard via a food truck.



## HOW TO IMPLEMENT ALTERNATIVE MEAL SERVICE MODELS

With any meal service, the idea is to serve the highest quality food that you are able to. Many people think that Grab n' Go stations mean you will be serving cold sandwiches or cold/shelf stable food items. However, you can continue to prep food in the main cafeteria, and offer the same hot and cold food items when serving in an alternate way. Since you may not be serving on the serving line, portable equipment is key to having a successful program. The following items could enhance and support your alternative meal service program:

- **Grab n' Go Carts** - Food items are made and set up on the cart. Hot items can be placed on carts and replenished from portable warmers. Cold items can be placed on ice bricks. Make sure to consider any storage/space constraints and the quantity of students you intend to serve when choosing carts to purchase.

- **Insulated Bags/Boxes** – Use these to keep correct food temperature at meal stations or when delivered to the classroom.
- **Sheet Pan Racks** - Use sheet pan racks with insulated covers to help stack and transport food to the classroom or for grab n’ go stations replenishment.
- **Packaging Systems** - Consider using packaging systems to help prepackage some of the items you are serving. Some districts will package an entire meal ahead of time to make distribution more efficient.
- **Center for Best Practices** - For additional best practices and ideas that may help with your alternative meal service program, visit the Center for Best Practices [Implementing a Successful Program](#) page.

## KEEPING MEAL QUALITY IN CHECK

In any food service operation, meal quality is important. It can be difficult to address meal quality, especially given all of the logistical issues that the industry has been faced with throughout the pandemic. This list of promising practices can be a good place to start when seeking ways to improve meal quality:

- **Review menus** - Review your menus and see if they can be tweaked. Be flexible as some items may not hold well for alternative meal service. Decide whether your grab n’ go stations/alternative meal solutions offer the same items as if you offered them in the main cafeteria line. Be mindful to note that a difference in menu items could increase or decrease participation.
- **Survey Students and Offer Choice** - Consider surveying students to better understand what they are interested in eating. Inquire if you are offering items that the students will eat. Consider offering at least two main entrée choices to students, so that there is a choice they can act on. Students appreciate the ability to have a choice of food whenever it is feasible.
- **Determine Equipment Needs** - Determine what equipment is needed to serve all your menu options without compromising food quality. Figure out how many meals you plan on serving from the alternate locations. This will help you decide what type of equipment is necessary to support the quantity of meals you are serving.

For more information on meal quality, including supporting resources and examples from schools, check out Meal Quality: Adaptability, Creativity and Fun.

## ALTERNATIVE MODLES IN ACTION

**SPOTLIGHT:** Captain Leland Norton Elementary School, San Bernardino City Unified School District

**DELIVERY MODEL:** Meals in the Classroom

**THE PROCESS – LUNCH SERVICE:** Food service workers prepare and organize cold items the day before classroom delivery. Hot items are added to individual meal bags immediately before delivery. Milk is stored in a separate insulated bag. Students have one meal option for lunch. School administration and recreation aides deliver meals via bins or large bags to classrooms at appropriate times, as well as pick up any remaining food and equipment after lunch. Hallways contain trash cans on rollers to collect food waste. Student participation is collected via tally sheets, which are completed by the teachers and returned with equipment and extra food to the cafeteria. Student participation data is entered into the POS system for reimbursement submission. Note: this process also works well for breakfast in the classroom distribution.

## **SPOTLIGHT:** Charlottesville City Public Schools, Charlottesville City , VA

**DELIVERY MODEL:** Meals in the Classroom

**THE LEAD UP:** Upon returning to in-person classes following closures due to the pandemic, Principals wanted a way to keep students safely in classroom pods during the day. Therefore, all nine schools in the district opted to implement meals in the classroom.

### **THE PROCESS – LUNCH SERVICE:**

*Elementary:* Teachers in each classroom collect student meal preferences every morning via a google spreadsheet. Students choose from three meal choices every day: one hot entree, one meatless entrée, or one cold item. Food service staff accesses the orders, and prepare and package the meals. Meals are held in temperature controlled storage (warmers or coolers or insulated bags) until they are ready to be distributed to classrooms. Prepared items are then stacked in bins and delivered to classrooms by designated staff, including admin teams and lunch aides. Teachers distribute the reimbursable meals in the classroom with a “thank you bag” that has condiments, sporks and fruit in it. Food waste is essentially non-existent since students can pre-order the meal they want.

*Middle and High School:* Students come through the cafeteria line to receive lunch. All meals are prepackaged before lunch service. One of each meal offering is on display so that the students can see their options. Students grab their meal of choice and return to classrooms or designated areas to eat. The lunch line moves quickly because all of the meals are preassembled.

## **MEALS IN THE CLASSROOM TIPS**

- Hold conversations with all stakeholders involved in the process, i.e., administration, teachers, food services, custodians, etc. Gaining buy-in from all stakeholders will increase the likelihood of a smooth implementation, and solidify sustainability of the program. Specifically meet with principals to develop processes that work best for each school. Create a delivery plan that involves all staff contributing in some way.
- Ensure you have plenty of planning time to start a new meals program. Factor in procuring equipment, gaining stakeholder buy-in, and training necessary personnel.
- Be flexible with your menu. Some food items work well for cafeteria service, but will not hold up in a warmer to serve as a delivered meal. Consider limiting meal options, which may make for easier meal distribution. For instance, offering one reimbursable bagged meal for breakfast, whether it’s hot or cold, can reduce the staff time needed to prepare the meal, as well as simplify meal delivery.
- Keep lunch periods in tact, simply switch where students eat to the classroom.
- Utilize non-food service staff for classroom delivery so that food service staff can concentrate on meal prep.
- If doing a pilot, test it out for at least one month – It takes time to start new processes and troubleshoot any issues.
- Implementing meals in the classroom can increase meal access, which increases participation and therefore reimbursement dollars. Captain Leland Norton Elementary School, of which the District is 100% CEP, saw their breakfast participation jump from 28% pre-pandemic to 80% with Breakfast in the Classroom.
- Highlight the wins to stakeholders in and outside of school. Charlottesville City Public Schools saw an increase in their academic instructional time as a result of their alternative meal service models.