



# TIPS FOR LAUNCHING A SHARED SERVICES MODEL IN SCHOOL NUTRITION

The shared services model is a business model that enables resources to be leveraged across an entire organization resulting in lower costs.<sup>1</sup> The model has been used in the business world to deliver services to internal customers by consolidating, standardizing and automating processes.<sup>2</sup>

Within the school nutrition field, this model has been used by rural districts to increase purchasing power and share knowledge and best practices across communities. Coming together to support one another is the essence of this model.

This resource was informed by two School Nutrition Directors, Gay Anderson and Andrea Kruse, who led a shared services model in South Dakota. It includes their lessons learned and highlights tips for establishing and sustaining a shared services model. You can learn more about their shared services model, known as The Dakota 10, [in this case study](#).

## Getting Started

Begin by speaking with district leaders like superintendents, business managers and school board members to gather input and gauge interest. Highlight the benefits of a shared services model like cost savings, training opportunities and assistance with menu planning.

## Support & Communication

- **Reach out to other districts in your community and keep an open line of communication. Meet districts ‘where they are’ because shared partnerships can be a big change.**
  - When engaging other districts and considering who you’d like to work with, think about factors like geographic proximity and district size. For example, when creating a working cohort, it may be beneficial to include districts of similar size, or to ensure a distributor that you’re working with is able to travel to each district.
- **Gather information and get familiar with the districts you hope to work with.** Ask questions like:
  - Who is the main contact person?
  - What are the roles of people involved in this program?
  - Who will be most directly impacted by the changes that will be made?
  - Are they ready for a change?

1. Peeriosity. (2022). *What is shared services?* Peeriosity. Retrieved February 15, 2023, from <https://www.peeriosity.com/shared-services/articles/2017/08/what-is-shared-services/>

2. Gartner. (2022). *Shared Services Model*. Gartner. Retrieved February 15, 2023, from <https://www.gartner.com/en/finance/insights/shared-services-model>

- **Develop relationships early on with administrators, program leaders, school staff, school board members, and vendors/distributors.**
  - Provide all invested members with the information needed to make informed decisions, including the anticipated benefits of the shared services model. You can develop these relationships by meeting in person, connecting virtually, chatting by phone, or exchanging emails— however works best for you!
  - Building relationships is the most important part of forming a shared services model. Start conversations with decision-makers and bring in others as needed. If you are the one inspired to lead, bring in your own district leadership to understand what they will gain in the process.
- **Determine priorities and keep the end goal in mind.**
  - Change is hard, regardless of how open the administration or child nutrition teams are. Each district will be at a different stage in their ‘acceptance’ that change is coming.
  - Making menu changes can be a challenge. Start by working with the district to determine how current menu items can be adjusted. For example, if a district wants to use a homemade macaroni and cheese recipe that is too high in sodium to fit within guidelines, find ways to adjust the recipe such as using whole grain noodles, low-sodium cheese, etc. or work with your distributor to find a school-approved recipe or pre-made product.
- **Ask questions to assess what a district is comfortable with to begin, but make sure to have a mutual understanding of the end goal.**
  - If you need to start with small changes, like going from non-whole grain to whole grain, before making huge menu item changes, do that. This can help schools feel comfortable with the changes.
- **Create a timeline to get started.**
  - Planning for upcoming school years takes time, and it may take even longer to get all players on board.

At the onset of The Dakota 10, Gay Anderson and Andrea Kruse had conversations with business managers and kitchen managers to determine what the goal of the program was for districts. During the menu planning stages, kitchen managers and their staff would be most impacted, so discussions were had about ensuring they were in accordance with guidelines while still making sure they were comfortable with the changes being made.

## Training

The training component of a shared services model should ensure that schools are following guidelines. The Dakota 10 leaders found that participating districts had different levels of knowledge and found a variety of training modes to be beneficial. As a result, leaders provided multiple distinct methods of training such as video conferencing, in-person meetings, written resources, videos, and/or training days.

- Make sure school staff have the information they need to be successful.
- Plan and host administrative meetings to keep all decision-makers on the same page. Hosting monthly check-ins virtually or in-person to answer questions, touch base, and share new information can be valuable.
- Provide the necessary training to school district employees. Host a ‘training day’ to gather employees and train on important topics such as meal patterns, food safety, special diets, team building, and/or culinary skills.
- Use training opportunities to share new menu ideas, meet vendors/brokers, and make connections among districts.

## Procurement

Procuring using a buying group pools all district resources together, which enhances the process for all schools involved. Purchasing items in larger quantities can help districts save money.

- Gather information about what districts are currently using for purchasing. Determine which items school districts want to purchase to better understand what needs to be included on the bid.
  - Note: The “major sell” for a shared services model is cost savings.
- Communicate with local districts to create a buying group. This can help to increase collective buying power and decrease pricing compared to districts buying individually, resulting in major savings. Once a buying group has been formed, work with distributors to determine the footprint distribution would consider.
- Districts can still purchase their favorite products, but ‘big ticket’ items could be purchased at more favorable prices.

## How to Facilitate

Facilitation will be specific to each shared services model group based on their area and may vary. Below are some promising practices that have worked for The Dakota 10.

## Logistics

- Determine boundaries, guidelines, and plans. Will there be a fee to be involved in the group/program? Do you need to hire a position to lead the group/program? Based on their experience with The Dakota 10, Gay and Andrea recommend hiring someone to help manage all processes.
- To avoid surprises, meet with the administrators of all districts interested in participating in the group/program to discuss all scenarios to determine what will work best for all.

## Nutrition Components

- A registered dietician was hired when The Dakota 10 shared services group was started. Not all participating districts had access to a registered dietician, so this was a new benefit available to help with special diets, menu planning, wellness, etc.
- Adopt cycle menus to make the planning stage easier, and to positively impact financial stability, student menu approval and inventory control. *There is a section on Page 4 that highlights the benefits of cycle menus.*
- Create tools that assist districts with compliance, such as ensuring that USDA meal pattern guidelines are being consistently met.
- Help schools find products that will improve their meal quality. Improving the quality of meals will likely increase participation, which is great for the program.
- Encourage change! Encourage schools to try new menu items and share ideas they may have.
- Share information across districts. Don’t see this as districts losing individuality, but rather an opportunity to realize that with more participation, there is the potential for greater benefits like cost savings and program growth.
- Create a ‘hub’ with recipes that all participating schools have access to. This can increase the number of options and broaden the variety of foods that smaller schools offer students.
  - Here is the resource hub created by Brandon Valley for the Dakota 10 districts <https://sites.google.com/k12.sd.us/copyofdakota10dashboard2023/home>

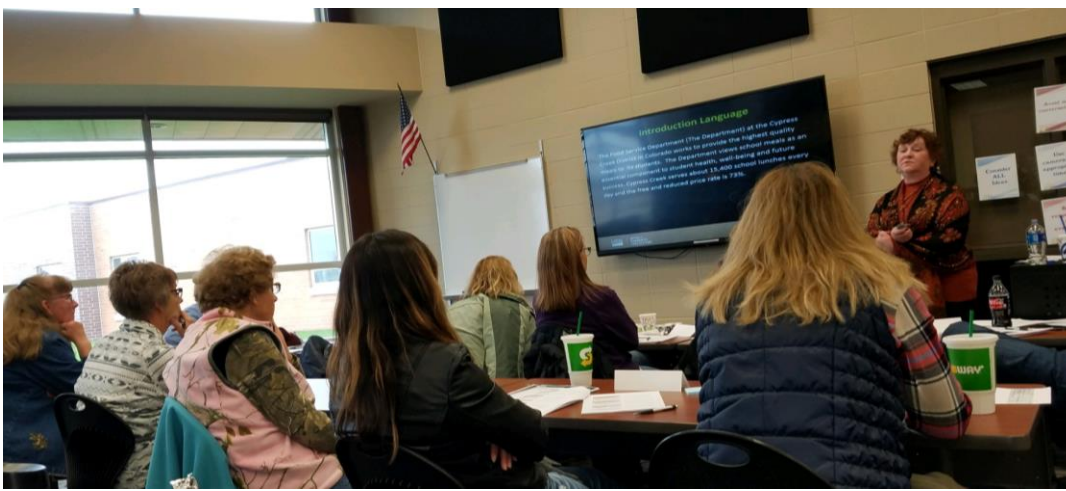


Photo of South Dakota FNS gathering.

## Menu Viewing Technology

- Contract foodservice technology that schools can use to share school menus with students and parents, provide nutritional information and plan menus.
- Work with distributors to get lower pricing. This works best when a larger number of schools are involved.
- Find a program that benefits district families and district staff. One easy to use and understand.
- Require training time.
  - Important note: Training on foodservice technology-based programs are critical and should not be forgotten. Levels of understanding will be different among all districts, so it was crucial to have multiple training opportunities (meetings, written materials, webinars, etc.).

## Benefits of Cycle Menus

- **Cost Control** - Creating a cycle menu can improve financial stability by controlling production issues and pre-costing menus. Repeating menu items every 4-6 weeks allows food service managers to have a good understanding of their food cost and will allow menu developers to tailor the menu to include readily available items. Items that continue to be affected by recurring production issues/manufacturing shortages can be temporarily removed from the menu cycle, so shortages are not consistently occurring.
- **Improved Efficiency** - There is repetition in preparation. With repeated menu items on a cycle menu, kitchen staff become familiar with the preparation techniques of menu items and therefore can save time in planning and preparation of food. This repetition also allows kitchens to develop stability in work schedules because work is anticipated.
- **Inventory Control** - Repeating menu items allow schools to keep only certain items and certain quantities of items on hand. Cycle menus are extremely valuable when forecasting orders and can streamline inventory control by developing a first in, first out control procedure. Cycle menus ensure the items will occur again, which allows the schools the opportunity to use leftover product, decreasing food waste.
- **Meeting Regulations** - Cycle menus can simplify the recognition of a reimbursable meal at the point of sale, which in turn ensures that districts are complying with state and federal SNP guidelines.
- **Student Approval** - It can take up to five times for students to exhibit approval of a new food item. Cycle menus guarantee that an item will be served again, giving food service managers the opportunity to cater the menus to their population. Staff can use key metrics to create successful menu combinations to increase participation.

The South Dakota 10 districts have saved money by leveraging resources and built lasting relationships through this process. To learn more about [the Dakota 10 Shared Services Model](#) and No Kid Hungry visit us: <http://bestpractices.nokidhungry.org/>