



Pictured above (L-R) Gavin Lee, Senior at Fort Wayne Community Schools, IN; Student and Cafeteria staff, Burke County School District, GA

Student Involvement in School Breakfast

Student involvement can directly help improve breakfast participation and create long-lasting relationships between students and school nutrition professionals. Incorporating youth voices can shape food service initiatives to promote healthier food and create more inclusive meal options.

This resource contains best and promising practices that schools and districts can test out and incorporate what resonates with them to connect with students and improve breakfast participation.

Getting Students Involved

Engage students in the decision-making process and find ways to engage them and collaborate with them whenever possible, such as:

- *Utilize student government* - Reach out to student leaders, request to attend student government meetings, and offer an open invitation to discuss their needs with you to improve the school breakfast program. For example, students should be incorporated into the meal planning and feedback processes, including menu ideas and meal promotion.
- *Practice open and honest communication* - Reach out to students in an honest and open way. Share your goals, e.g., better meal participation, and ask for suggestions on how to achieve them. Put out suggestion boxes. Ask students for feedback via in-person interactions during breakfast or via simple surveys (asking students what they like and what they don't want). Add the information you seek to a flier or poster and put one in each classroom. Recruit teachers to encourage students to share feedback with school nutrition staffers. Avoid email communication with students, as it's not preferable for students, nor is it as effective as social media or in-person communication.
- *Avoid causing stigma* - How breakfast is marketed can make or break participation. Even if breakfast is being offered free to students, the phrase "free breakfast" can be stigmatizing. Using alternative phrasing, such as "no-cost breakfast," can encourage students to participate more. However, it is important to ask students what phrasing most resonates with them. For instance, breakfast may need to be replaced with "morning fuel" or another fun phrase.

- *Follow up with students* - Keep communicating with students about why their input is valuable and how their feedback will be utilized. For example, if students suggested more scratch cooking and you added some scratch or speed scratch items to the menu, let them know! Once this trust has been built, the students will be more likely to share information freely.
- *Build relationships with students* - Talk to students regularly. This builds trust and safety for the students to share ideas and opinions. Make an effort to get to know the students and showcase how valuable their voices are.
- *Use social media as a connection tool* - Most students have access to social media, particularly Instagram and Tik Tok. Use these platforms to connect with students and promote meals and new items. Keep in mind that using social media in rural communities can be tricky because of weak internet connections and lack of access. Sometimes, paper messaging about breakfast can be more reliable.



Fancy blue corn cupcakes adapted from The Fancy Navajo recipe shared by Shannon Reina, Food Services Manager Salt River Schools, AZ; <https://thefancynavajo.com/2017/02/19/fancy-blue-corn-cupcakes/>

“Taste testing is a great way to pilot new meals and build relationships with students. If you have taste testing events, make sure school directors are there so students and school meals professionals can get to know each other. In my district they piloted smoothies. Once they knew students really liked them, they were added to the menu.” Jada Curd, former student at Burke County School District, GA

Taste Testing

Not only is taste testing a best practice, but it is also one of the most popular ways to get feedback from students. Be open to all types of feedback and alter the menu to accommodate student preferences, which can make a positive difference!

Increase Choices

Students enjoy a variety of menu options, including culturally diverse items. Giving students a choice and decision-making power can be a game changer. Offer some options, whether for types of sauces, protein options, or carbohydrate choices.

“What would help students be more involved is options; let the students have the freedom of more choices.” Gavin Lee, Senior at Fort Wayne School, IN

Students are the customers of school breakfast. Regular engagement and open communication to elicit feedback and stay connected are vital, and this can ultimately positively affect the breakfast program.

Visit us at <https://bestpractices.nokidhungry.org/programs/school-breakfast> for more resources.