



TIPS FOR PARTNERING WITH SCHOOL NUTRITION STAFF

Before reaching out, remember to...

- ✓ Come in as a **partner**
- ✓ **Listen** first, especially to concerns. Make sure they feel heard and validated.
- ✓ Be **flexible**. One size doesn't fit all.
- ✓ Approach in a way that will **support** and extend their capacity.
- ✓ Gain **trust** before pushing an agenda.
- ✓ Keep in mind the existing criticism and negativity around school meals.
- ✓ Keep in mind that programs operate very differently from school to school.
- ✓ **Encourage innovation!** Don't be afraid to test new ideas from excited school stakeholders.
- ✓ **Learn** – every new experience will develop your operational knowledge of school meals.
- ✓ Show that you are interested and **invested**. Offer technical assistance, grant support, or connect them to new partners.
- ✓ Use simple terms. Don't jump into regulations, acronyms and jargon.
- ✓ Be forward thinking about **sustainability**.
- ✓ Beware of media; positive press coverage may inadvertently perpetuate negative stereotypes of school meals.
- ✓ **Celebrate** each victory, no matter how small!



“I’m here to help you because you’re here to help kids.”

DO YOUR HOMEWORK

Learn as much as possible before meeting with stakeholders.

1. First find out...

- Who is the school nutrition director (SND)? What is their background? Don't assume their education or experience level.
- How involved is the SND with School Nutrition Association (SNA)? If they are very involved, they can even amplify your message, especially if they're well-respected within SNA.
- What is the size of the district?
- What is the school environment like?
- Is there hostility? Difficult principal-teacher relationships? Union issues? Be sensitive to those.
- Research relevant stats and figures about the school that will impact your strategy (e.g. % F/R, participation rates)

2. Get on their schedules and prepare your strategy.

Tailor your messages to the information you've gathered. Have examples ready of schools with similar demographics and challenges finding success.

Having trouble getting connected?

- Meet busy stakeholders where they are
- Find conferences you're both attending, or plan to join one that you know they are attending, and start the conversation there!
- Don't just call on a whim – get on their schedules. Respect how busy they are.

COMMUNICATE STRATEGICALLY

Listen. Gain trust. Show that you're an invested partner.

1. **Give a brief background about who you are** – a partner with a shared goal of feeding kids.
2. **Shift the conversation to them and listen carefully.** Leading questions might be:
 - “How are things going at your school?”
 - “What's working well?”
 - “Tell me about some of the challenges you face.”
3. **Tailor your messages to their challenges.**
 - *Money.* Talk about the financial benefits of increased participation.
 - *Resources.* Discuss existing assets and opportunities.
 - Give a menu of options that might work to overcome their challenges, rather than one prescribed solution.
 - Gently dispel myths.
 - Remind them that you're there to support.
 - Connect them with partners who can support them.
 - Say, “I've seen it done in other districts, and if you'd like any references, I'd be happy to give them to you.”
4. **Help them strategize** and work through opportunity costs. Suggest a pilot if stakeholders aren't convinced. Find a few teachers who to run the pilot at an upcoming teachers' meeting.
5. **Keep sustainability in mind.** Don't settle for cheap equipment or difficult staffing arrangements just to get something off the ground that won't last.
6. **Follow-up.** Be on site as much as possible. Call when you cannot support in-person.

And some DON'TS...

Don't do anything without collaborating with the SND.

Don't be overly prescriptive.

Don't use the word *mandate*.

Don't barrel your way in. Take your time!