

COVID-19

# THOUGHT STARTERS

ON REOPENING SCHOOLS  
FOR SY2020-21



## SCHOOL NUTRITION PROGRAMS:

*Asking the Right Questions to  
Prepare for the Next Normal*

*Made possible with support from Kellogg's Away From Home*

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# Change Is Coming: Be Ready for Anything

Memorial Day has come and gone, and summer is officially underway. Unfortunately, the start of this summer is not the hoped-for return to normal for school nutrition operations. Instead, it's the beginning of what some SNA members are predicting will be "the hardest year" of their careers. Most states and local school districts are contemplating dramatic changes in reopening schools for SY2020-21, changes designed to reduce the risk of infection outbreaks until a COVID-19 vaccine or effective treatment is available.

“*The decision to reopen schools is one of the most sensitive subjects on political agendas today and depends on the evolution of the pandemic.... The priority must be to safeguard the health and well-being of students, and to build trust.*”

Stefania Giannini  
UNESCO Assistant Director General  
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Ratcheting up the anxiety quotient for school nutrition professionals is the long, frustrating history of school administrators, boards and business officials failing to consider the complexities of school meal programs in any calculus about systemic changes to the academic environment. Indeed, in a comprehensive 100-page report prepared by a Midwest school boards association about reopening, nutrition services is addressed on only two pages, and it is conspicuously absent altogether in chapters about financial impacts and staff management. The takeaway? School food authorities, in partnership with state agency staff, *must* speak up and self-advocate—while also privately planning for the implications of several different scenarios that may be foisted upon them without their input.

This publication is designed to help school nutrition directors—with participation from their staff teams—to start thinking through the many implications of radical change. We're encouraged to hear reports of some school nutrition leaders being invited to participate on district and state taskforces about reopening. We also know that many directors have begun scenario-planning with their teams, so they can be ready for whatever decisions are handed down. Still, we know that there are many, many other school nutrition operators who don't know where to begin.

This paper offers some ideas on a wide range of operational and administrative topics to help you understand the full scope your individual planning should take. Considering the complexity of school meal programs and the incredible disparity in how school districts of different sizes and demographics manage these programs, this resource can't begin to cover all the bases. But it should be a helpful guide to get you thinking more fully about the topics that are included—as well as identifying many other "what else?" issues.

Meanwhile, be assured that SNA is also working on other fronts to support its members in this daunting effort. We're reaching out to USDA and Congress for a nimble response to the regulatory flexibility that likely will be required with very little notice. The Association's advocacy team is also working to gain additional funding to support school nutrition operations that are expected to see higher expenses and lower revenue.

In addition, SNA has organized the **Stronger Together: Back to School Series**, an on-line event scheduled across four days and designed to equip attendees in their efforts to develop an actionable back-to-school plan. Focused on strategic planning, the Series is moderated by Lowell Applebaum, FASAE, CAE, an expert in bringing teams together through experiential learning approaches. Other topics include menus, packaging, technology, equipment and engaging stakeholders. Zoom-based breakout rooms are on tap to facilitate networking and idea-sharing among participants. For details, prices and to register for the event, which begins June 8, visit [www.schoolnutrition.org/b2s](http://www.schoolnutrition.org/b2s).

As this has already been the “year of the pivot,” SNA stands ready to continue to develop new programs and publications—and provide ongoing advocacy—to respond to member needs as ever-changing circumstances dictate over the summer and into early fall. Leaders and staff share your concerns about the future of individual district operations, as well as the profession itself. We also share your dedication for doing whatever it takes to feed America’s children. We’ll get through this—together.

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## HOW TO USE THIS RESOURCE

- ✓ Form a department taskforce to discuss reopening scenarios. Depending on the overall size of your team, your group may be as small as 2-3 people or as many as 10. When assembling this group, seek representation from different operational areas, selecting staffers with a proven reputation for creative problem-solving. Consider inviting a few allies from outside your operation, such as a helpful vendor representative, the school nurse, a supportive teacher or principal or an influential member of the PTA.
- ✓ Distribute this resource to all members of the group. Ask them to identify additional topic areas not included in this paper.
- ✓ Set a schedule to discuss each topic—the ones in this paper and any others—as a group. Prior to each meeting, taskforce members should identify additional questions to be discussed in each category and distribute these to the whole group. At the meeting, try to keep your focus on solutions and/or the need for further research or clarification, rather than more questions.
- ✓ One taskforce member should agree to take notes and transcribe these into a master scenario-planning document or grid that tracks decisions and necessary next steps. Make sure everyone understands their follow-up responsibilities.
- ✓ Determine how and when you will transition from scenario-planning to implementation. For certain areas, you may want to start implementation while you’re still in the planning stages of other areas.
- ✓ Set and maintain an aggressive schedule for meetings and discussions. You have a lot to get done and the weeks will fly by!

# Claiming a Seat at the Table

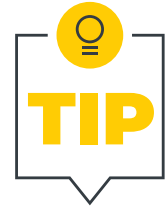
Make sure your concerns are heard before decisions are made.

**E**ffective and ongoing communication is a critical component to reopening schools in a safe, controlled manner. School nutrition operators must claim a seat at the table with other key school stakeholders to be part of the discussion on feasible models for foodservice during SY2020-21. “We are the experts in our field,” exclaims Donette Worthy, SNS, Director of Child Nutrition, Tuscaloosa County (Ala.) School System. “As the experts, we have to make sure we are voicing what needs to happen.”

Unfortunately, this kind of inclusivity is simply not a part of the administrative culture in many school districts. Too often, school nutrition experts are not consulted, but merely informed. This short-sighted approach is fraught with problems that inevitably fall on *your* shoulders to resolve. This is why you shouldn’t simply shrug your shoulders in resignation or voice your frustrations only on social media. Don’t wait in vain for an invitation that may never come. While it’s advisable to walk a careful tightrope between self-advocacy and alienating powerful decision-makers, there *are* proactive steps you can take to being heard.

To ensure that you’re a part of these conversations, identify both current and potential key allies throughout the district and cultivate those relationships *now*. If you don’t yet have the ear of the superintendent, your best allies may be found among the school health staff, a top school business official, certain school principals, family resource teachers or counselors or even an outspoken member of the parent-teacher organization. Do you know any of the members of the superintendent’s “cabinet”? Has a special task force been established to work out these problems? Find out who is serving on this group and reach out to any and all with whom you’ve enjoyed productive relationships.

If you’re not invited to the table, you want to make sure there’s someone *else* asking why the school nutrition department isn’t part of the discussion or advocating for getting your feedback before any decisions are reached. “You need to be loud, you need to be proud and you need to be outspoken about your program,” insists Dan Ellnor, Assistant Director, Nutrition Services Center, Jefferson County (Ky.) Public Schools.



You never know when an informal opportunity may arise to ensure school meal considerations are taken into account. Keep an outline of key talking points or facts on a notes app on your smartphone or write down some questions or concerns that you fear will be overlooked on an index card and have it available to pass along to someone with influence.

## BE THE EXPERT

During *all* discussions, formal and informal, about SY2020-21 reopening:

- ✓ Be prepared with key talking points, such as what your department has been doing since schools closed, lessons learned, your biggest concerns for the upcoming year and some pragmatic meal prep and service solutions based on initial discussions.



## THOUGHT STARTERS



What are the latest updates with regard to regulations, waivers, guidance and recommendations from USDA, state agencies, CDC, local health departments and other governmental bodies?

- Will regulatory waivers be required for you to provide meal service in a manner requested by district decision-makers?
- Are decision-makers aware of the consequences if planned actions do not comply with federal or state regulations?



Who makes the final decision when school will be in session and what schedule it will follow?



Who determines what model the school nutrition department will use to feed kids?



Is there flexibility in decisions about scheduling and the foodservice approach?

- Are changes to the schedule and/or the foodservice model possible or even probable as the school year progresses? Will the school nutrition team be expected to pivot? Will there be a process in place to make such changes with sufficient warning?
- What flexibility is there for the school nutrition operation to *initiate* changes to the model?



What financial resources are available to support the school nutrition operation?

- ✓ In small-group conversations, tailor your message take-aways to the individual to whom you're speaking with, whether it's the superintendent, school principals, head of custodial, the school board treasurer or some other stakeholder representative.
- ✓ Be fully present at the table, even if it doesn't seem like the information being discussed is pertinent to you. You may hear a statement that triggers a question that the foodservice team should answer or a consideration that you should raise. In the meantime, be patient, following the agenda and general flow of the conversation, rather than interrupting and insisting that every discussion come back around to your team's priorities.
- ✓ Be a staunch advocate for your program, but be willing to back up any concerns with data and solid reasoning.

## PERSISTENT BUT POLITE

Even if you're not invited to participate fully in the discussions, you can still make sure your priorities, points and positions are heard:

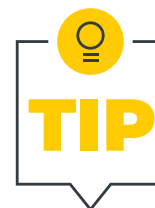
- ✓ Know your boss' schedule for talking to the superintendent, board members and other key stakeholders. Be proactive in supplying him or her with responses to questions that may arise in formal and informal meetings that won't include you.
- ✓ Develop an organized list of your team's key considerations and concerns before any such meetings happen. Keep the list top-line and succinct; don't make it so thorough that your boss is too overwhelmed to read the document.
- ✓ Send a weekly email that provides administrators and business officials with valuable metrics related to your school meal operation. Include brief updates regarding regulatory changes or new concerns about the supply chain, labor and other factors. If you've solved a problem in an innovative manner, point that out, too.



# Procurement Priorities

Fundamental principles to keep top of mind no matter what service model and menu mix you adopt.

Procurement for school meal programs is an extraordinarily complex undertaking in normal circumstances. Delving thoroughly into the many aspects of how school nutrition operators will need to adapt their procurement processes for the coming school year could reasonably require a multi-day workshop. In this brief overview, however, we'll stay focused on a few broad themes relevant to procurement considerations: **communication**, **flexibility** and **versatility**.



Vendor communication can and should be more than simple order and delivery updates. In these unusual times, you each can offer unique insights that sharpen the picture of what to expect. Vendors can share some of the innovative menu, equipment and supply solutions that other district customers are testing or reveal new stresses on the supply chain. You can keep them updated with how your summer meal service is going and any parent surveys you might conduct in anticipation of the changes for fall.

## COMMUNICATION

If you're not already talking with your distributors, brokers, manufacturers and local growers on a regular basis, make it a point to check in with them early and often. They want information, especially about meal count forecasts, and it's likely that you simply don't have any useful data right now. But don't let an information divide prevent you from keeping the lines of communication open. Even if conversations center only on hypotheticals, the sharing you'll do together with your vendors can be very revealing.

Be upfront with vendors about what you *do* know (based on emergency meal participation data this spring and changes in your summer program), as well as your best guesses (given your expertise as a school nutrition professional). Learn from the past, advises consultant JoAnne Robinett, SNS. For example, does your operation have experience with disaster feeding after a hurricane, flood or wildfire? Take a look at your records from the aftermath of that incident for potentially applicable datapoints.

Even if free/reduced-price meal applications are on the rise due to high unemployment rates, don't assume that you'll match or exceed participation numbers from last fall, especially if the service model is drastically changing. "Be reasonable. Don't cut yourself short, but don't assume you're going to do your same participation," advises Jodi Risse, Supervisor of Food and Nutrition Services, Anne Arundel County (Md.) Public Schools. "Having that conversation is important."

## VERSATILITY

Until you know the school schedule plan, as well as any requirements by your local or state governments regarding meal service specifics, you can't lock into a menu. One of your first steps should be to scenario plan for *multiple* approaches. Menus typically drive school meal decisions across numerous areas of the operation, but for SY2020-21, it's likely that other areas of the operation will drive the menu decision. Your scenario planning should take into account both ends of the spectrum when it comes to all the many factors that will impact the menu, including staffing fluctuations, preparation practices adjusted for social distancing, cooler and freezer space, dining areas

commandeered for classroom use, food delivery schedules, product delays and shortages, regulatory requirements and more.

One way to get a handle on managing your own and your vendors' expectations is to prioritize product versatility, especially at the start of the year. What items can be used in a variety of ways, no matter the approach for prep and service? Wendy Weyer, SNS, Director of Nutrition Services, Bellevue (Wash.) School District, recommends creating a menu for the first month of the school year that can be served in classrooms or in cafeterias or as take-home meals or meal kits for partial-day or partial-week schedules. While you may pride yourself on your scratch-made meals—and you know your customers will quickly grow tired of shelf-stable, pre-portioned items—hold off initially on menuing dishes that are labor-intensive. Your labor might need to go to classroom delivery responsibilities instead of intense food prep.

## FLEXIBILITY

"Darwin said that the species that survive are not the strongest, they're the most adaptable," muses Sally Spero, SNS, Director of Child Nutrition, Lakeside Union (Calif.) School District. "In procurement, that might be what we should be thinking about." For example, even though there's a lot of pragmatism in basing initial menus on individually wrapped (IW) items (and, indeed, IW may become a requirement or best practice), a greater demand for these may make them difficult to get in the quantities and timelines you need. Instead, you may have to turn to creating IW packaging yourself—and that requires more disposable packaging products and equipment. With many restaurants still limited to takeout rather than dine-in service, foodservice packaging are other items that could be in short supply.

Wherever possible, write flexibility into your bid specs. Donette Worthy says her contract allows her to bring in up to 10% of new products. Again, it goes back to having a solid, communicative relationship with vendors.

The most important aspect of procurement flexibility is readiness to pivot to a backup plan at any time. "We all think that the food will just be there—well, it may not be," Weyer cautions. Many districts reported encountering shortages when operating curbside feeding programs this spring. Be prepared to encounter potential difficulties obtaining USDA Foods, both bulk and processed, as the government is also vulnerable to supply chain disruptions. Similarly, your procurement plan should reflect the need to pivot if schools change their scheduling plans or an infection outbreak among students or staff leads to sudden school closures.



## THOUGHT STARTERS

What foods are readily available either through local sources or plentiful national supply?



What's the *minimum* lead time manufacturers and the distributors need to ensure adequate supply?



Are there expected supply chain disruptions for certain product categories?



How will you handle shortages if they occur?



What procurement processes can you tighten up in response to this crisis?

- Can you reduce and/or limit the variety of choices in the same menu category, such as pizza or French toast sticks?
- If you are part of a purchasing cooperative or other group buying organization, what steps can you take to streamline the process for you, the other members and your vendor partners?



What does your state agency have to say about USDA Foods?



Will you and your vendors need to make adjustments to delivery schedules?



What products (food, supplies, equipment, technology) are completely new for your operation this year? Do you know how to spec these properly?



# Mastering Multiple Modes of Meal Service

Explore the implications of three of the most-discussed options for reopening.

To facilitate social distancing among students, some health experts have advised limiting children's travel around the school campus and vastly reducing opportunities for large congregate groups. In these models, cafeterias are kept closed, with meals being served and consumed in classrooms.

Some recommendations go so far as eliminating food-service altogether, either requiring parents send meals to school with their kids or using a partial-day schedule that does not include a nutrition break. Such models show no regard to the children from food-insecure households who rely on school meals, nor on managing a host of other pragmatic realities, such as accommodating the majority of current brown-baggers who purchase milk or another beverage in the cafeteria. In addition, these approaches undercut the value of nutritious school meals and snacks that help *all* children meet both wellness and education benchmarks.

This paper presumes that most U.S. public schools *will* continue to offer some kind of foodservice. The continuity of foodservice made available through curbside and delivered meals during Spring 2020 closures demonstrated both a need by the community and a capability of school meal operations to find a workable solution.

Early reopening conversations have focused on staggered schedule models in which students are in schools fewer than five days a week, or only on alternate weeks and/or in schools for partial days. In these models, schools are still open five days (or more) and for conventional school hours (or longer) in order to accommodate smaller groups of children at any given time. School nutrition services may be asked to provide meals in multiple formats (in-person and for take-home) and to operate long days in order to accommodate breakfast and lunch service (as well as snack/supper for after-school care or for eligible students for eat-at-home).

## DID YOU KNOW ?

As of early May, 128 countries had not yet announced when schools would reopen. Schools across Europe and Asia that were preparing to reopen were emphasizing:

- Half-day classes
- Infection-control measures
- Physical distancing in classrooms and during breaks
- Facemask mandates
- Closing of common areas such as libraries, gyms, art classrooms and cafeterias
- No gym or music classes

For the purposes of this thought starters exercise, we will look at considerations for three meal service models:

- ✓ Classroom Service/Classroom Dining
- ✓ Cafeteria Service/Classroom Dining
- ✓ Take-Home Meals

Each of these models should be considered for both breakfast and lunch, as well as for how they might work for different school/grade levels. Note that some discussions *are* considering in-cafeteria service *and* dining, but with the stipulation that there is sufficient space for social distancing along the serving line, cashier stations and at tables. This could be possible in buildings with smaller enrollments and/or those that are adopting a cohort approach to keeping controlled groups of students together for all activities. Students also could be assigned designated seats in the cafeteria.

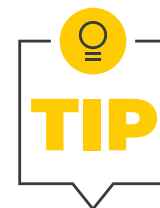
Remember, there is not one model that will work best for all school districts—or even for all schools within the district. “It is going to look very different; there is no way around that,” says Mary-Catherine Talton, SNS, Director of School Nutrition, Wilson County (N.C.) Schools. “We’re going to try because at the end of the day, our goal should always be to feed the students, so that means meeting them where they’re at.”

## *Classroom Delivery With Classroom Dining*

### WHAT IT MAY LOOK LIKE

**B**reakfast in the classroom provides a blueprint for managing meals delivered and consumed in the classroom, so if you’ve already been offering this meal service option, you might be ahead of the curve when it comes to how to manage meal orders, special diet accommodations, participation documentation, meal delivery and trash disposal for breakfast *and* lunch. Be advised, however, that you will need to account for the implications of serving two meals this way, being mindful of everything from managing multiple menu options, allowing sufficient delivery time (as well as breaks between meals) and double the trash.

For breakfast service, you may be able to provide prepackaged grab ‘n’ go meals at school entryways that students take to their classes. For lunch, depending on the configuration of your building, rather than delivering orders to each classroom, you may be able to establish multiple points of service in areas close to classrooms, such as intersecting hallways, the gymnasium, outside the school library and lobbies. Students can, in small groups at designated times, pick up their meals from these nearby locations and return to the classrooms.



Be mindful of avoiding a sameness to meals. In some communities, families reported that they stopped accessing the curbside meals in the spring because their children complained there was insufficient variety of the prepackaged, IW items. Participation will be more important than ever to support baseline operating costs. Keep this in mind as you plan your cycle menus.

## MENU MATTERS

You likely will need a more simplified menu—along with a shorter menu cycle—at least for the initial weeks of reopening, while you focus on other logistics. A limited number of entrée and side options will also be necessary to reduce complexity. Some directors are considering the model they used for emergency meals: one hot entrée and one cold entrée daily. Fruit and vegetable options packaged individually will have to be limited, as well. For secondary schools, Sara Gasiorowski, SNS, Child Nutrition Director, Metropolitan School District of Wayne Township, Indianapolis, is looking at four daily entrees: one cold, one hot sandwich and two hot “fan-favorites.”

Maximizing use of USDA Foods—especially for entrées—is another financial must. While a la carte items have been a crucial revenue generator, they will be very difficult to manage in this model. If a school has a sophisticated order system and the manpower to prep, package and label individual meal requests, a la carte may be able to be accommodated.

Don't forget that federal requirements for the National School Lunch Program include providing water access. If the school does not have water bottle fountains, the school nutrition department may be required to buy bottled water to replace communal water pitchers.

## ORDER, PREP & SERVING LOGISTICS

Since this service model will preclude batch cooking and restocking serving lines during meal periods, and since you won't be able to rely on production records from previous back-to-school seasons, you will have to think about how the team will prep sufficient numbers of each meal option and how to deliver appropriate quantities to each classroom or point-of-service area.

One option is to analyze your past data and put together a best guesstimate. You can work with children (and their teachers) to manage expectations that they may not get their preferred meal in the classroom every time. Teachers may have to alternate the order that students pick up meal options to ensure the same child isn't always at the end of the line.



## THOUGHT STARTERS



Are there regulatory waivers you need to implement your plan?



Will you need to train teachers to assist with participation counts? What technology is necessary—and available—to ensure proper counting and claiming?



Do you have sufficient meal transport equipment and supplies? Will you need to purchase more? What funds will be used for these purchases?



Do you have sufficient meal packaging supplies? Will this be a line item in your budget?



Where and how will students wash their hands before/after meals? How will students clean and sanitize their desks after eating?



Will students be eating meals during instructional time or will there be a designated break?



Will additional staff or volunteers be needed to distribute the food to classrooms in a timely manner?



How will transport equipment, leftover meals and paperwork be returned to the cafeteria after meal service?



Without share tables, is there any safe way to collect unused prepackaged items and keep these from the trash?



How will all these changes affect staffing and schedules?

You can also use low- and high-tech options for placing meal orders. Some districts already use a Google Forms document to take orders for field trips, special diets, catering requests and adult meals. Can this be expanded for use by all classroom cohorts? Check with K-12 technology vendors about the availability of ordering apps. If tech is not an option, you can create an old-fashioned paper document for meal orders that is provided to classrooms, distributed to students, collected by the teacher and delivered to the foodservice team.

If you are providing a meal order option, know that timing will be a critical element. Orders may need to be placed the day or evening before in order to give your team sufficient time to prep. In addition, teachers (and/or parents) may need training to help assist younger children.

Classroom delivery will require a complex system to track ordered meals as you prep and pack. You may need a label maker to identify meals for specific customers. Even if you keep it simple, you may need to separate different entrées into different transport packs. Will you be packing all the components of a meal into a component tray? Do you have a tray sealer? Or will you be putting each menu component in its own packaging? If you are using bulk foods or preparing menu items from recipes, you will need to provide the packaging—and the labor to manage it.

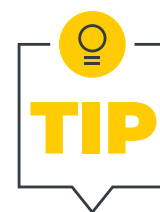
Another consideration is how meals will be delivered to classrooms. In many breakfast in the classroom settings, student volunteers are designated to transport meals from the cafeteria to the class. Will students be permitted to do this? Do you have enough staff on hand to deliver meals, while also prepping for the next service? You may need to coordinate support from adult staff and volunteers, such as para-educators, former lunchroom monitors, custodians and others.

## *Cafeteria Service With Classroom Dining*

### WHAT IT MAY LOOK LIKE

Students purchasing or selecting a school meal are dismissed from the classroom to visit the cafeteria and go through the serving line. Once they have selected a meal and any additional items, the student returns to the classroom with their food to eat. This model allows for the continuation of a la carte sales, which are important to the bottom line for many school nutrition operations.

This model also could be combined with kiosk grab 'n' go sales at locations outside of the cafeteria; these might serve reimbursable meals or only offer a la carte items. Students would still be required to visit such points of sale in small groups and maintain physical distance when waiting in line.



Be sure to involve the public health department as you develop your plans for providing meal service. Understand the differences between recommendations and requirements.

## MENU MATTERS

This model of service requires several of the same menu considerations as the classroom delivery model. One significant difference? Items that can be easily transported by children, especially without spills. "Rice bowls, no. Chicken sandwich, yes," suggests Sally Spero.

Service and packaging are intricately related to your menu decisions in the approach. What menu items on the line will require servers to scoop or place into, say, a multi-compartment clamshell, closeable package? And if you don't opt to use this style of packaging, how will students manage to carry multiple individually packaged items? You likely will need to provide take-out bags at cashier stations.

Are all these packaged items durable for student transport—both spill- and leak-resistant? Do they stand up to heat? How do the performance factors of your packaging dictate the menu items you are considering? What are the implications on classroom trash, as well as the overall school/district efforts to prioritize compostable or recyclable packaging? And, of course, every such decision comes, literally, at a cost.

Self-service items will be off-limits, which means no salad and food bars. However, if you have sufficient staff, you *could* offer customizable meal builds, with students identifying the different ingredients they would like staff to use to assemble deli sandwiches, salads, pasta bowls and so on. In fact, this may even be easier to facilitate with students coming to the cafeteria in significantly smaller groups. Still, it's unlikely to be something you offer right at the start of the new year.

## PREP & SERVING LOGISTICS

If students are coming to the cafeteria to select meals, it's likely that you can batch cook and manage your production yields as you would normally. As noted above, self-serve or communal items, like bulk condiment dispensers, run counter to most safety recommendations. A cashier may be charged with distributing condiments, as well as utensils and napkins.

Guides to help students to maintain physical distancing will be essential. You can follow the lead of grocery stores and foodservice takeout stations in applying appropriate signage and floor markings to indicate how far students must remain from one another and employees. Determine how easy this will be to facilitate at mobile locations. In addition, it's likely that you will need to apply additional sneeze guards along the serving line and at cashier stations.



## THOUGHT STARTERS



Are there regulatory waivers you need to implement your plan?



How far away is the cafeteria from most classrooms? Does it necessitate travel up and down stairs? Elevators? How much time will be added to meal periods to accommodate small groups traveling to and from classrooms and the cafeteria?



Do you have sufficient meal packaging supplies? Or will you continue to use reusable trays and/or utensils that must be returned to the cafeteria for cleaning? How will this be managed? Will you provide carts or a bus tub to classrooms or hallway areas?



If you establish points of service from mobile kiosks that use hot/cold food wells and pay stations, are there electrical outlets nearby to power these? How about Wi-Fi?



If more time is required to accommodate student visits to the cafeteria or mobile kiosks, how will this affect the school day schedule? How will it affect staff work schedules?



Can you expect some resistance and a lack of cooperation from teachers? How will you facilitate solutions?



Speaking of cashier stations, you may need to make adjustments in your POS technology. Can you continue to use PIN pads safely? What are the best practices of retail businesses that continue to use touch-pad or touch-screen systems? Will you transition to a student ID card and barcode scanner? If the school is on CEP, can you use a simple clicker?

## Take-Home Meals

### WHAT IT MAY LOOK LIKE

**Y**our district may consider adopting a staggered school schedule where students alternate the days they come to school. For example, half may come on Mondays and Wednesdays and the other half may come on Tuesdays and Thursdays. A similar approach would divide students by time of day: “morning kids” and “afternoon kids.”

Any type of divided schedule will require you to send some meals home. This is another layer of complexity with serious implications for menu, staffing, production, participation, service and administration.

The first decision is to determine who receives such meals. Will you make take-home meals available to all students, the way that most districts did with curbside feeding operations in the spring? Or will they be available only for low-income students? If they are available to all, how will you manage students who opt to refuse this meal opportunity? Will you require families to place orders in advance? Daily? Weekly? One semester at a time?

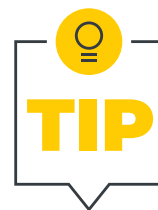
### MENU MATTERS

Your curbside meal service this spring is a great foundation for what worked and what didn’t when it came to take-home meals. However, it was determined on the basis that *all* meals were eaten at home. While some school districts provided meals daily, many others transitioned to sending multiple meals home with each pickup. This facilitated the option of “meal kits,” which featured more bulk food ingredients that could be used to prepare several different meals.

What kind of menu changes will be required if students are picking up meals only for that day (partial-school day schedule) or only for the next day (alternate-day schedule)? What type of cycle menu will you need to adopt? How will you manage the challenge of keeping meals interesting?

### ADMINISTRATIVE, PREP & SERVICE LOGISTICS

Curbside feeding was largely facilitated by allowing schools to serve meals through the Summer Food Service Program (with additional waivers applied). USDA will need to provide guidance to school food authorities about how the split between take-home and in-school meals can be served and claimed for



Be sure your take-home meals plan takes into account logistics required for getting meals to students who are absent from school and unable to collect meals for the next day. Also, determine whether you will provide delivered meals to low-income children who are quarantined at home and consider how this will work.

reimbursement. As previously noted, you will need to devise a new system or adapt a current one to track participation.

You likely will need to divide your prep staff into two teams: One team would be responsible for prepping and serving meals for in-school dining, while the other is charged with prepping, packing and serving meals for take-home. Many school site kitchens don't have the facility space to manage one of these tasks, never mind both. So your plan must incorporate logistics and time for delivering one or both meals from a central kitchen to individual schools.

This presumes that you will send meals home with students when they leave school for the day. How will students transport these meals if they are riding a bus? If they are walking or biking home? What if they are participating in after-school care programs? Where will meals be kept (safely) for students who leave at different times of day?

Is there instead the expectation that families will pick up meals curbside on their non-school days? When, where and how would this be scheduled? Similarly, would school nutrition teams ride bus routes to drop off meals to families? Would this work best for morning runs (dropping meals for students not attending school) or afternoon runs (helping to facilitate meals going home with students not returning the next day)?



## THOUGHT STARTERS



What regulatory guidance and waivers do you need for your plan?



Do you have sufficient prep space for managing two types of breakfasts and two types of lunch all at roughly the same time?



Do you have sufficient labor to manage preparation for both in-school and take-home meals? Breakfast and lunch?



What extra equipment (racks, insulated bags, carts) will you need to facilitate this blended meal service? Can you find creative solutions that don't leave you with excess equipment you can't use once the crisis has passed and schools return to conventional schedules?



What types of training and marketing materials can your team develop to help communicate the complexity of the plan to students, parents and school stakeholders?

# Staffing Strategies & Tackling Training

Success hinges on how you'll manage your team.

To manage the complex models of meal prep and service that you may need to adopt for SY2020-21, you will need your team to understand and accept that this is a period of great change, and everyone must pull together without negativity or resistance. The first step is building awareness about the staffing challenges you already anticipate—while encouraging flexibility for meeting those challenges you've yet to identify.

## SAMPLE STAFFING CONSIDERATIONS

In Sara Gasiorowski's plan, she recognizes that many of her staffers are working parents. They may not be available to work if their children are home for e-learning days. Similarly, if a child tests positive for the virus—or his or her class is quarantined—that working parent is also quarantined at home for several days. Your labor model may need to rely on a deep pool of substitutes who are qualified to work in a wide variety of roles.

If fewer children are in school buildings each day, will you need correspondingly fewer staff members on hand? Or will you need just as many (or more) in order to prep/serve same-day meals, while also prep/serving take-home meals? This is difficult to anticipate—how will you tweak a staffing plan throughout the initial months of the school year to adapt?

It's common for school nutrition programs to do a lot of hiring (and training) after the start of the school year. But you may not want to wait that long to begin, especially if you need to adapt your typical hiring process, either conducting interviews and tests remotely or putting into place changes that allow for safe in-person assessment steps.

Everything has a financial implication. Will you have to change your policies and budgets to pay for staff to be home if they have been quarantined? Do staff work under a union or other negotiated agreement? Are there contracts for workers at a certain position- or staff-level? How might these needs be tailored for SY2020-21?

## TRAINING

In all likelihood, this is not the year you will be bringing the entire district staff together prior to the start of the school year for a multi-day inservice event. However, that training is still vital to the success of your operation—arguably more today than ever before, as very little will be business as usual.

Some school foodservice departments have more than a passing acquaintance with online learning platforms, using them, for example, for requirements for civil rights and food-handling training. Webinars offered by SNA and the Institute for Child Nutrition also have grown in popularity and familiarity. In the spring, some districts turned to Zoom for their monthly manager meetings or other group conversations. Look into the options provided by such platforms as Zoom, Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, Google Hangouts and GoToMeetings.

But will your *entire* team be able to meet their minimum training requirements via technology solutions? What kind of past success have you had in this regard when it comes to staff who are not tech-savvy, who have English literacy problems or who do not have stable access to the internet or devices that support training? “You want to meet them where they’re at, and you don’t



## THOUGHT STARTERS

How can site supervisors perform their responsibilities without visiting multiple kitchens in a single day, increasing the risk for virus spread?

Is there a space large enough to hold in-person training while allowing for appropriate social distancing?

Will you need to provide food-handling training to volunteers who may be helping with food delivery, such as classroom teachers, para-professionals or school bus drivers? How about meal orders and counts from teachers?

What topics absolutely must be covered, and what can be minimized for this year?

- How will you get buy-in from these groups to perform their roles and participate in training? Will you need school administrators to intercede on your behalf?
- How will you deliver the training to these individuals?

Are there ways to conduct team-building during training, without risking safety protocols?

Do all department employees have an internet-connected device? If not, can you get one to them?

What technology is required to facilitate regular staff meetings throughout the year?

How will you adapt current on-the-job training processes for new hires?

Have you consulted with your IT department for their suggestions?

Are there existing online curriculums that you can use for staff training?

How will you communicate significant changes in protocols and processes to staff? For example, sites that are totally or partially closed for quarantine; ways to handle supply chain shortages; or new administrative/regulatory requirements? What are the most efficient ways to ensure this communication is relayed?

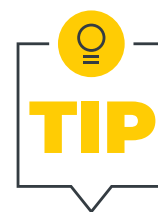
want them to feel ashamed for not being able to participate,” urges Ashley Ritz, Director of Nutrition Services and Wellness, Canton (Ohio) Local Schools. For example, some staff may be able to access virtual training sessions if you create a set of easy-to-follow instructions.

Some digital technology may be too sophisticated for your budget or your team, but don’t overlook “old-school” tech, such as videos uploaded to a YouTube channel. Many school nutrition teams developed simple videos to show families how to heat menu items sent home with emergency meals. This same principle can be used to assist with training your team.

The bottom line is that you may need to scale back the fun of a typical back-to-school inservice event, but creative approaches to redesigning typical training *will* be necessary. How much can you convey through written material packets—with a heavy emphasis on illustrations to address language and literacy barriers? Can you organize small-group training sessions, dividing people into different rooms where they can participate in lectures or discussions while remaining physically separate?

Mary-Catherine Talton suggests dividing staff into grade clusters, such as elementary school employees one day and middle school employees the next day, especially since feeding scenarios may differ among school levels. Spread training over multiple days, or schedule one group in the morning and one in the afternoon. Similarly, you can divide training by technological skill level/access:

- ✓ **In-person sessions** for the staff who aren’t able to access technology.
- ✓ **Recorded training** for those who are able to watch videos sent via email or uploaded to the internet.
- ✓ **Virtual meetings** for employees who have access to and comfort with using technology.
- ✓ Congregate small numbers of employees in locations big enough for social distancing and set up a screen for **small groups** to participate in **virtual training at the same time** as groups at other locations.



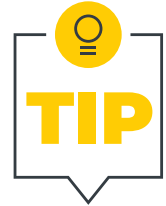
If you haven’t already cross-trained staff members to take on different roles and responsibilities, this is the time to do it! It’s likely to be an all-hands-on-deck kind of year, and your team needs to be prepared to step in if a coworker gets sick or needs to be quarantined.



# Monitoring Staff Health

Meeting the challenge of keeping your team—and your customers—safe.

**T**he CDC recommends that all foodservice employees adhere to basic safety protocols: Practice social distancing, wear facemasks and follow proper preventative hygiene, such as washing hands frequently and using hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol when soap and water are not available.



Ensure employees understand that they **must remain home** if they have **exposure** to the virus. Per the CDC, potential exposure means having close contact within 6 feet of an individual with a confirmed or suspected COVID-19 diagnosis. The timeframe for having contact with a person includes up to 48 hours before the individual became symptomatic or otherwise had a positive test. This requirement may be difficult to convey to staff, especially if they will not be paid while in quarantine.

## STANDARDS OF PRACTICE

Per existing FDA Food Code requirements, employees who are sick **should not come to work**. If an employee becomes ill or shows symptoms of an illness, the manager or supervisor should confirm the signs during a pre-work screening and follow established policies on when the ill employee is allowed to return to work. At a minimum, however, follow CDC guidelines for COVID-19 that say the employee should self-isolate for seven days from the onset of symptoms and be symptom-free for three days without medication.

There are also recommendations for quarantines up to 14 days; check with your public health department and/or district policy for specifics. Sara Gasiorowski and her team are planning to use a “symptom tree” developed by CDC that offers a clear and visual reference about different symptoms and next steps. There are several other pragmatic practices to adopt:

- ✓ **You may be required to pre-screen your team for illness.** Each time an employee enters a school site, they must take their temperature and write it down in a logbook with the time and date. Keep in mind that CDC guidance states the minimum temperature that indicates a fever is 100°F.
- ✓ **Enlist the aid of health experts to help you devise procedures.** This might mean partnering with the school nurse for school-specific plans or working with the local health department for setting district-wide protocols.
- ✓ **Constantly emphasize the proper protocols for handwashing, glove-wearing and other safety steps.** “That’s going to be key for this—the constant re-emphasis of cross-contamination, mask-wearing and good personal hygiene,” advises Dan Ellnor.
- ✓ **Send safety reminders to staff regularly via email.** Jodi Risse is already sending emails almost every night that include information about handwashing, social distancing and other safety protocols. There are plenty of resources you can turn to for content; Risse incorporates information from SNA, the Institute of Child Nutrition and the CDC in her staff communications.



## THOUGHT STARTERS



Will staff be required to take temperatures upon arrival to work? Will this process repeat throughout the shift? Will staff that work at multiple sites—such as supervisors or delivery personnel—have to repeat this process at each site?



How will staff take their temperatures?

- Will a school nurse or other volunteer be available to do this? Will it be the responsibility of a site manager? Or will staff be self-accountable?
- Will you need to purchase a communal no-touch forehead thermometer?



What is the process if an employee shows up at work with a fever? Who will be notified? Will you provide the individual with written instructions on next steps?



How should an employee go about reporting if a *family* member is ill with COVID-19? Or if they have been informed of other exposure to the virus? How will you address this if you hear the information casually?



Will facemasks be added as a dress-code requirement? How will you address complaints about wearing these in a hot kitchen?



What if staff want to wear additional PPE, such as goggles or plastic face shields? Will that be allowed? What approval steps are required?



What enforcement measures can you put into place to ensure compliance? What changes do you need to make to your policies and/or staff employment contracts?

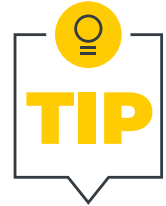
# Cleaning & Sanitizing

Going back to the basics is more important than ever before.

**S**chool nutrition staff may be ahead of the curve when it comes to cleaning and sanitizing procedures. “This is what we do for a living,” muses Donette Worthy. “The rest of the world would fail a ServSafe test, but we would not.”

As with monitoring staff health, the best practice is to follow the recommendations of public health authorities, including CDC and FDA, as well as the guidance of local experts, including the district’s custodial staff. Best practices include:

- ✓ Before reopening for SY2020-21, **thoroughly deep-clean and sanitize** your entire facilities, focusing on high-contact areas. (Check out *School Nutrition* magazine’s “Onsite Insights” column, “Prepping Your Kitchen for a Long Break” [April 2020], which includes tips on deep cleaning.)
- ✓ If students will be coming through the cafeteria to pick up meals, be prepared to **sanitize the serving line** between each group or class.
- ✓ If meals are delivered to classrooms, you will need to **sanitize transport equipment** (bags, racks, trays) upon their return to the kitchen.
- ✓ Identify the **disinfectant products** that can be used effectively against COVID-19. The Environmental Protection Agency has compiled a list of such products, found at [www.tinyurl.com/disinfectants-sna](http://www.tinyurl.com/disinfectants-sna). If EPA-approved disinfectants are not available, the CDC says alternative disinfectants (such as  $\frac{1}{3}$  cup of bleach added to 1 gallon of water) can be used.
- ✓ Always **wear gloves appropriate for the chemicals** being used when you are cleaning and disinfecting. Additional PPE may be required.
- ✓ If you have **outdoor eating areas**, the CDC does *not* recommend disinfection. Instead, simply maintain existing cleaning routines there.



**Remember: Never mix bleach and other cleaning products together. This will create dangerous, toxic fumes. Always store and use disinfectants in a responsible and appropriate manner according to the label.**



## THOUGHT STARTERS



How should you go about procuring EPA-approved disinfectants?



Do employees understand the difference between regular cleaning and disinfecting?



How can your team partner with the school or district’s custodial staff?

# Social Distancing

It's vital your team understands this important practice.

It's likely that social distancing measures will still be necessary when schools reopen, and ensuring physical distance in a school environment is expected to be one of the most difficult challenges for students *and* staff. The CDC has emphasized that close-contact, person-to-person transmission of the virus is the *most* likely reason for its spread, so it's critical for the health and safety of both students and staff that recommendations are followed.

This applies to all facets of the school nutrition operation, from receiving deliveries to prepping food to serving students. Write these procedures into a formal policy, suggests Mary-Catherine Talton. "You will have a hard time enforcing something that is not in a policy," she notes. "You can't hold somebody accountable for something that you said out loud."

However, there may be some work situations in which it's simply not possible to keep employees 6 feet apart. For example, what if two team members are needed to lift a 50-lb. bag of flour? As Sally Spero, points out, it would be unsafe for one person to do it all on their own. Your procedures should emphasize common sense. If social distancing would increase the risk of injury, be sure other steps, like wearing facemasks, are being followed, and then separate as soon as the task is completed.

Regular reminders will be essential to help employees adopt social distancing as a new habit. Other suggestions follow:

- ✓ If students are eating in classrooms, can you use the cafeteria space as workstations for meal prep?
- ✓ Where possible, workstations should be staggered so employees can avoid standing directly opposite one another or next to each other. Can you reconfigure your prep areas? It may mean setting up and tearing down your makeshift work areas every day, but think out of the box about making use of different spaces and surfaces—safely.
- ✓ Stagger the worktimes of employees when possible, so that there are fewer team members working in a small kitchen at any given time.
- ✓ Consider physical barriers such as partitions or Plexiglass barriers at cashier stations.
- ✓ Explore new technologies that reduce person-to-person interaction, such as contactless payment systems.
- ✓ Use floor signage, tape and/or cones, to ensure students stay separate while waiting to be served.
- ✓ Limit the number of employees allowed in break rooms or storage areas at the same time.



## THOUGHT STARTERS



How can you make use of carts to transport ingredients and smallwares to transform unused spaces into temporary prep areas?



What type of training might be helpful to explain the value of social distancing to staff?



How can you make social distancing more “fun” to maintain team spirit and morale? Can you create small incentives to reward employees who demonstrate compliance most reliably or who come up with clever ideas to help facilitate social distancing?



**Remember, if physical distancing is impossible in small spaces, try to minimize the amount of time you share the space with others. Be sure all team members in tight areas are wearing face-masks and that they are being worn properly, covering both the mouth and the nose.**

# Service With a Smile

How can you maintain the signature spirit of school nutrition teams?

**D**espite all the changes that may have to be made to safely serve students, the school nutrition program can still be a positive, integral part of the school day. In every model of meal service, there are ways to celebrate special days and make food fun. "Make sure staff takes a positive spin," recommends Laura Lynn, SNS, Director of School Nutrition, Brantley County (Ga.) Schools. "There are changes, but we're still the same." Chris Kamradt, SNS, Spring Branch Independent School District, Texas, agrees: "We're here to serve. We're going to serve our community and our kids in the best way we possibly can."

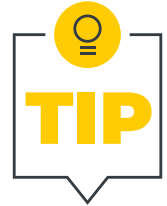
## CREATIVITY RULES

School nutrition teams showed impressive spirit and spunk during the stress of the sudden school closures and ramp-up of emergency meal distribution in Spring 2020. They organized and promoted theme costume days for staff and families alike. They wrote children notes and included surprise treats in meal bags. They coordinated special promotions for Easter, Star Wars Day, Cinco de Mayo and, of course, School Lunch Hero Day. They honored the graduating classes of each school level.

Team-building efforts were also on display. There were dance parties in the kitchen and cafeteria, coordinated T-shirts, celebrations of birthdays and anniversaries, social media posts boasting impressive meal counts and other acts of encouragement and collaboration.

When schools reopen for SY2020-21, make it a priority to maintain your signature spirit, even if you have less personal interaction with students or if they don't visit your brightly decorated cafeterias and kitchens. You can still:

- ✓ **Encourage staff to remain visible.** Find ways to interact, safely, with students as much as possible, even if limited by classroom meal deliveries. Conduct those deliveries in coordinated t-shirts, facemasks or silly hats. Create stickers with jokes or encouraging messages and place these on packaged meals. Develop and print cards with nutrition education facts that are distributed with meals.
- ✓ **Take advantage of social media,** especially if you attracted new followers during school closures. Highlight the good work that the staff is doing, and inform your community of any changes that you made in an effort to keep students and staff safe.
- ✓ Think of creative ways to **transform your most beloved cafeteria promotions and traditions** into other models of meal service. These can include providing themed menus, developing activity sheets distributed with meals and organizing lucky "tray" giveaways.



Even if you're not responsible for the social media posts for your own school nutrition department, you can discover great ideas by monitoring the posts of other school districts. In addition to joining the growing number of Facebook discussion groups, start following other districts' Facebook, Instagram and Twitter feeds to view their photos. *School Nutrition* magazine regularly includes these in its monthly "Things We Love" column, so be sure to keep reading that, as well!



- ✓ Can you occasionally **commandeer a display case or bulletin board** near the school entrance to decorate for promotions or with nutrition education messages? How about getting permission to use the school marquee once a quarter?
- ✓ Remember that simply having a presence in a student's life can make a genuine difference. **"It's about normalcy** and connection to that same staff member every day," reminds Jodi Risse. "Everything is so uncertain; we're the normalcy in a not-so-normal time."

*School Nutrition* magazine's annual *Promotion Calendar* is expected to be available later this summer. An exclusive SNA member benefit, it features numerous day-, week- and month-long celebration occasions, plus ideas to help you make the most of select events. Look for it on [SchoolNutrition.org](http://SchoolNutrition.org) in the Learning Center, under "Communications and Marketing," and share it with your school cafeteria teams.

## CELEBRATE YOUR TEAM

Don't overlook or minimize the importance of prioritizing team-building and maintaining morale throughout all levels of your operation. This is going to be a long and difficult year for everyone. Not only are there many operational challenges to master, but the economy is expected to be slow to rebound and unemployment may remain high, creating more financial stress among team members. Plus, there's the grim possibility, even where rates of infection have been low, that the virus will take lives in your community.

Make sure to encourage and thank your team for all they are doing. Schedule small team-building events once a month. Encourage and reward creativity and positive attitudes. And even when invoices are due, the delivery is late, the oven has broken down and menus need to be generated, keep acts of kindness and gratitude at the top of your to-do list every day.



## THOUGHT STARTERS



How can you keep leveraging social media to engage with parents in the community?



Have you regularly partnered with certain classroom teachers to collaborate on nutrition education activities? How might you continue these efforts through e-learning or other means?



Can you use manager meetings or create a staff group to brainstorm ways to reinvent your marketing and outreach activities?



What about doing the same for identifying team-building activities?



How can you make use of video and a YouTube channel to reach staff, students and families?

# Here for What's Next

From the moment COVID-19 hit, you stepped up. Thank you for being the backbone of our communities and helping feed millions of children and families. Now, as you move toward reopening, it's our turn to support you. We will help you provide nutritious meals to our kids – whether in the classroom or at home – so that no matter where these uncertain times take us, we will be ready for what's next together.



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AWAY FROM HOME

