Tips for Making Healthy Lunches for Less

Serving healthy school meals on a tight budget can be a challenge. The following tips were gathered from school food service professionals across the country to help make serving healthy foods more affordable. We recognize that school nutrition program costs and challenges vary from one community to the next, so while these tips may not work for everyone, we hope some will be useful at your school. For more resources on the new school meal standards, visit www.schoolfoods.org or contact nutritionpolicy@cspinet.org.

Menu Planning and Preparation

- Use less expensive healthy items.
  - Mix in less expensive items along side more expensive ones. The goal does not have to be for all students to take a less expensive item. If 20 percent of students choose a less expensive option, then you save money on 20 percent of the lunches served that day.
  - Switch from more expensive proteins, like chicken, beef, and pork, to beans one meal a week. Buy dried beans over canned for even more savings.
  - Market and test less expensive and less processed healthy items.
    - Some schools have found with good recipes or marketing they can swap out higher cost, more processed foods, like chicken nuggets and patties, for less expensive, less processed foods, like roast chicken.
- Incorporate more-costly items wisely.
  - When considering a new, slightly more expensive item, think about how many students will actually take it. If only a third of students are likely to try the new item, prepare that many portions. This way you are serving a new, healthy item, but not spending extra on waste.
  - Serve popular but expensive items less often.
  - Just because an item is popular does not mean it makes money. If the item is popular and expensive, like hamburgers, less “profit” per lunch will be generated. Take the total revenue (reimbursement rate X meals by category) and deduct the total cost per meal to determine how much “profit” that meal will generate.
- Increase school meal appeal.
  - Cook vegetables to preserve vibrant colors and textures, and vary the way you cut the fruits, vegetables, and sandwiches to provide more interesting or appealing presentations.
- Use catchy names, like “fire engine red tomatoes” in elementary schools or “southwest chipotle chicken” in upper grades.
- Have a basic salad bar, with both fruits and vegetables.
  - Cut down on staff preparation time by not dishing out individual portions.
  - Try placing the salad bar at the beginning of the line and allowing students to choose the fruits and vegetables they like.
  - Allowing students to choose which items they like, as well as how much they want to take, will help reduce waste; students are less likely to take fruits or vegetables they won’t eat.
  - Salad bars also are a great place to offer legume salads. Don’t expect that all students will love them right away. Give them a chance.
- Standardize recipes to ensure the right amount of each ingredient is in the meal. This will make ordering easier and ensure the item fits into the meal standard.
- Limit dessert. Make dessert a special occasion food, to save money and calories.
- Research milk options.
  - If certain options like flavored milk or plastic bottles are more expensive, consider offering unflavored milk (unless meal participation will be affected) or cardboard cartons.
- Use the same product multiple ways. Using a product in different recipes can cut down on inventory and reduce waste.
  - Avoid buying many different types of chicken products. Instead, change them up with new names and sides. For example, roast chicken can be rotisserie style, barbeque, teriyaki, or used on a salad.
  - Change up your sides. Roasted vegetables, for example, are inexpensive and versatile.
- Limit main ingredients to reduce waste and spoilage and save precious storage space.
- Chose fruits and vegetables that are in season when possible.
  - Purchase frozen, canned, and produce that stores well (apples, sweet potatoes, etc.) in the off season.
- Offer a la carte items that could be combined into a reimbursable meal.
  - Depending on what kids choose, cashiers could urge students to grab milk and fruit to have a reimbursable meal. It costs the student less money and the school could get the meal reimbursements.
- Manage waste.
  - Wedging fruit can provide a cost-savings benefit. Students can choose how much they want to take, which helps avoid having students throw out whole fruit.
Batch cooking is essential for food quality and cost control. Try not to cook all the food for the day at once. If a certain option doesn’t sell well in the first couple lunch periods, you may not need to prepare as much for later in the day.

- Keep good production records. This will help you determine how many servings to prepare in the future.
- Pay attention to serving size. Make sure you serve the correct serving size of each option. For example, use half-cup scoops for foods with a half-cup serving size.
- Stop using disposable utensils if possible. If you are concerned the kids will throw away utensils, place a bucket of soapy water right next to the trash.
  - Analyze the cost of real flatware. How many times does a real fork need to be used before it is cheaper than using a disposable one? One district found it was only 17 times!
- Reduce use of unnecessary paper and plastic products. Stop using paper boats, bags, plastic cups, and wraps around sandwiches. They add unnecessary cost to the meal that could be spent on food.
  - This also may appeal to students who are interested in environmental issues. Try marketing the changes using posters or materials that remind students that reducing waste is good for the environment.
- Offer a limited number of entrees in elementary schools.
  - Consider instituting a four-week menu cycle with a standard alternative offered every day, such as deli sandwiches, for students who do not like the main entrée item. Offering fewer options can reduce waste and allow for better estimates of how many servings to produce.
  - High schoolers expect options. However, for younger children, too many choices may slow down the lunch line, giving them less time to eat lunch.

**Purchasing and Inventory**

- Perfect purchasing practices.
  - Consider joining or starting a buying club with districts in your area. This will allow you to make bulk purchases and cut down on product and delivery costs.
    - If you don’t have adequate storage space at your school, share freezer/cooler space with nearby districts or other larger institutions (hospitals, workplaces, etc.).
  - Plan your menus in advance, and tailor your orders carefully to those menus.
• Check your delivery schedule.
  ▪ Purchasing an extra cooler may save money in the long run by reducing delivery charges.
• Be smart about USDA Foods.
  o Focus commodity purchases on items that are most expensive on the open market.
  o Do not spend extra for processing that is unnecessary (like breading) or can be done in house less expensively.
• Keep track of inventory.
  o Know what is on hand, and use it.
  o Increase the number of times you do inventory.
  o Make sure your orders are correct before the delivery people leave the school. Ask them not to deliver at meal time when staff will be distracted.
  o Before ordering new supplies, like serving spoons, check to see if another school in your district has extras.
• Use competitive bidding practices.
  o Develop bids that have sound bid conditions and product specifications that meet your nutritional goals. Use competition between multiple vendors to get the best nutrition for the best price.
  o Save time by using an online bid tool, such as Interflex’s BidAdvantage. This platform allows districts to update bid specs through the year and electronically submit bids to multiple vendors.
  o Consider selecting a prime vendor, such as a Group Purchasing Organization. This can save staff time by streamlining invoices and deliveries.

Staff

• Professionalize your staff to increase productivity.
  o Give staff the training, tools, and respect they need to do their job well.
    ▪ Find ways to build relationships between your staff and the students, so your staff feel more connected to the school and feel more ownership of their jobs.
  o Consider having two, or even three, shifts if the kitchen is crowded or staff regularly wait for equipment. Some staff can start early in the day and stay through lunch, and others could come in just before lunch and stay later in the afternoon.
Other

- Seek out a mentor.
  - If you are a new food service director or just think you could learn from another director, ask your state child nutrition program or state School Nutrition Association for a suggestion of a successful director.
- Market your program to students and staff to increase participation.
  - Use catchy or appealing names, conduct taste tests, have students vote on meal options, engage students to become ambassadors of the meal programs, hold recipe contests, etc.
- Analyze current paid meal and a la carte item prices to ensure they reflect the true cost of purchasing, preparing, and selling the item, including indirect costs.

Resources

USDA: Food Buying Guide, Menu Planning and Preparation Resources, and Other Resources
http://healthymeals.nal.usda.gov/

NFSMI: Financial Management Resources

NFSMI: Meal Pattern Guide

NFSMI: Purchasing Manual

SNA: Marketing and PR Tools

SNA: Meal Pattern Resources (for SNA members only)
www.schoolnutrition.org/mealpattern

USDA: Using USDA Foods
http://www.fns.usda.gov/fdd/foods/healthy/Professional.htm