School Meals Leader’s Guide: Introduction

The National PTA’s School Meals Leader’s Guide was created to help local PTAs partner with their school leaders, school nutrition team, families and students to support schools in serving healthy school meals.

The goals of the National PTA’s School Meals Leader Guide are to help local PTAs:

• **Empower** PTAs, families and students to start the conversation with school leaders and school nutrition staff to understand and support healthy school meals.

• **Partner** with school leaders, school nutrition staff, families and students to form a school meals team focused on understanding and supporting healthy school meals, school wellness policies, the school meal environment and/or the school nutrition team’s needs.

• **Assess** the school meals, school food environment, policies and school nutrition team’s needs to identify areas of improvement.

• **Create** a school meals action plan that outlines clear steps to support healthy school meals, improve the school food environment and school wellness policies and support the school nutrition team’s training and equipment needs.

• **Implement** the school meals action plan, evaluate its effectiveness and note areas for further involvement and support.

National PTA and School Meals

National PTA has been involved in school meals efforts for over 70 years, helping to establish the National School Lunch Program in 1946. National PTA continues to advocate for nutrition standards in school meals and snacks, increased access to school meals for all students, and family involvement in the development, implementation and evaluation of school wellness policies.

“Healthy students make better learners, and school meals are an opportunity for children to receive more than half of their daily nutrient needs. Ensuring children have access to nutritious foods in schools is critical to their success,” — Laura Bay, President of National PTA
National Standards for Family-School Partnerships

Experts have identified that family engagement in school meals efforts is necessary to help provide solutions and mobilize efforts, but establishing the collaborative partnership and identifying expected outcomes may remain unclear. In order to answer these questions, National PTA has generated a baseline of what high-quality family engagement in school meals may look like and the outcomes it should generate. Your school meals conversations, through high-quality family engagement and effective partnerships, should answer the following questions:

• How can we improve the way we welcome families and encourage their involvement in the school meals conversation?

• How can we inspire open communication and collaboration among families, the school nutrition team and school leaders as we work to support healthy school meals?

• How can we ensure our school meals efforts always focus on supporting student success through promotion of healthy behaviors, high-quality meals, and access to school meals?

• How are we speaking up for every child—especially migrant students and students with low socioeconomic means—in our school meals conversations and solutions to ensure every child feels welcome in the cafeteria and has access to high-quality school meals?

• How are we ensuring that each partner in our school meals efforts—families, school staff, school nutrition team and students—has equal power in the deciding solutions?

• How can we engage community leaders, farmers, relevant businesses and nonprofits and other partners to help create a community environment that promotes healthy behaviors and ensures access to food for all families?

For more information about PTA’s National Standards for Family-School Partnerships, go to PTA.org/NationalStandards.
The Importance of School Meals

Proper nutrition is linked to improved academic performance. Unfortunately, many students today are not receiving the nutrition they need at home. One in six adolescents are obese, while one in five face hunger on a daily basis. For many students participating in the school meals program, these meals provide up to 50% of their daily nutrient needs. Schools meals are a good source of the age-appropriate calories and nutrients necessary for students to grow properly and perform well in school. Additionally, schools are where children learn and reinforce their health behaviors that they will carry into adulthood. Therefore, it is important that the behaviors promoted in the school environment are positive, healthy ones.

Nutrition standards—set by the federal government—ensure students receive healthy foods, including whole grains, fruits and vegetables, low-fat milk and lean proteins, while limiting foods that are high in sodium, saturated fat and trans-fat. Additionally, the 2010 Smart Snacks Standards work to improve the school food environment by promoting healthy snack options and limiting unhealthy ones.

For more information on the nutrition standards for school meals and Smart Snacks, go to PTA.org/schoolmeals.
The Possibilities

Although many schools are successfully managing the current nutrition standards, some schools are still facing challenges. Schools may encounter difficulties finding products that satisfy the nutrition standards and students' tastes, meeting school nutrition staff training needs, funding kitchen equipment needs or competing with non-foodservice promotion of less healthy foods. These circumstances create barriers to serving appealing and enjoyable meals and ultimately impact student participation in and enjoyment of the lunch and breakfast program. Fortunately, most of these issues can be overcome if school communities work collaboratively to address them with simple changes, which can make large, long-term improvements.

Throughout the School Meals Leader’s Guide we will focus on five areas that have been used by schools to successfully improve the perception, participation, and quality of their school meals. Your school meals team may identify areas outside of these five to focus on, as each school’s needs and challenges are different.

1. IMPROVE THE CAFETERIA ENVIRONMENT

The “cafeteria” is where food is sold, purchased and consumed, but it may have a different name or a very different look in different schools. How food is displayed, prepared and marketed; how the tables, chairs and food are arranged; the amount of time students have to eat; and the overall cleanliness, comfort, look, and name of the cafeteria can impact what and if students choose to eat. At an age where students are forming their dietary preferences and habits, the cafeteria has the ability to promote healthy or unhealthy food habits; therefore, it is important to make sure the environment supports the selection and consumption of nourishing options in a safe and enjoyable setting.

2. IMPROVE MEAL AND MENU QUALITY

Taste is the primary driver of food choices. Thus, a menu that includes a range of diverse, fresh and delicious options is most likely to appeal to the most students. Your school nutrition professionals want students to eat and enjoy the meals they serve, but they are sometimes limited by labor hours, product availability, cooking/preparation restraints, cost or concerns about waste. Working with the nutrition team to identify challenges and overcome them in order to enhance or improve the menu can have a significant impact.

3. IMPROVE STUDENT AND FAMILY PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOL MEALS

Many students and families may not even be aware of the improvements that have been made in school meal programs and many parents may believe that the healthier option is to pack from home. Increasing family and student awareness of the current school meal program and promoting it as a great option for all students can begin to improve perceptions and help increase participation.
4. ADVOCATE FOR MORE TRAINING AND IMPROVED EQUIPMENT FOR THE SCHOOL NUTRITION TEAM.

Having adequate equipment and skills to prepare and promote delicious and healthy foods are some of the greatest challenges facing school nutrition professionals today. Nearly 90% of school districts have at least some equipment needs and most school nutrition professionals desire more training in nutrition, culinary skills, and administrative processes. Addressing these needs can help school nutrition teams go above and beyond in their cafeterias.

5. ADVOCATE FOR SCHOOL WELLNESS POLICIES

The cafeteria is only a piece of the school nutrition puzzle and it’s hard for it to be successful if it’s competing with less healthy food options in other areas of the school. Local wellness policies—established by the district’s local wellness committee, which includes school staff, students, parents and community members—should aid in establishing an environment that promotes students’ health, well-being and ability to learn throughout the school. Each school district that participates in the National School Lunch Program is required to update, implement and assess their local wellness policy. Individual schools may also have a school health advisory council that seeks to further promote a healthy school environment by establishing school specific policies. Ensuring local wellness and school health policies promote strong nutrition standards, provides students with adequate mealtime and preferred scheduling, including lunch after recess, and limits the sale of unhealthy food items can help make healthier food choices the easier choices.
Starting the Conversation with Your School Nutrition Team

From the conversation with your school nutrition manager, they should feel that you are not there to critique the school meals but rather to serve as an important partner to the school meals improvement effort.

Tips for having a positive and productive conversation, include:

• Arrive at the conversation with an open mind, putting aside preconceived notions about the cafeteria, school nutrition team, and school meals.

• Explain PTA's commitment to promoting healthy lifestyles for every student and that you understand school meals are a major component of student health.

• Explain the school meals initiative and what it would consist of (e.g., school meal assessments, action plan development, implementation and evaluation).

• Give the school nutrition manager an opportunity to discuss the challenges they are facing before discussing possible solutions and ideas.

Learn About Your School Meals

Before starting your school meal efforts, get to know your school meals program and the strides your school nutrition team has already made. Have breakfast and lunch at your school a few times to taste the meals and observe the atmosphere during meal periods. This will allow you to have informed conversations with your school meals team about the school meals program.

Build Your School Meals Team

PTAs and families are an important resource and asset to school leaders and the school nutrition team in supporting healthy school meals. Establish a high-quality partnership with school leaders and the school nutrition team from the beginning to ensure all voices are heard and all barriers and concerns are considered.

1. Set up a meeting with your school principal to discuss your PTA’s interest in supporting healthy school meals, gain their commitment to being a part of the school meals team and receive their approval to continue the conversation with your school’s school nutrition manager.

2. Once approved by the school principal, schedule a meeting with your school nutrition manager to discuss your PTA’s role in supporting healthy school meals and gain their commitment to being a part of the school meals team. Your school’s school nutrition manager may want to gain approval from your district’s nutrition services director—the person who oversees all aspects of foodservice in your district. The nutrition services director may also wish to be a key member on your school meals team.
Conduct the School Meals Assessment

Although your school meals team may have an idea of what to focus on, it is important to conduct a formal assessment to fully understand the school wellness policies, school meal environment, quality of the school meals, student and parent perceptions and capacity of the school nutrition team. Conducting a formal school meals assessment will also provide direction to your school meals team so that you can prioritize your efforts. The initial assessment will also provide a baseline to compare your end result to and illustrate the impact of your efforts.

First, complete the School Health and Safety Policies and Environment and Nutrition Services modules in the Alliance for a Healthier Generation Healthy Schools Program assessment. This will provide an overview assessment of the school meal environment, quality of meals provided, local wellness policies and the school nutrition team capacity. Work with your school nutrition team to complete the assessment.

Second, depending on your primary area of focus, you will want to complete additional assessments to gain further information about the specifics of what exactly is needed at your school to improve school meal participation, perception or quality.

The Cafeteria

Assessing the cafeteria will provide insight into whether the layout and overall atmosphere is inviting and promotes and encourages healthy behaviors.

How to Assess: The Smarter Lunchrooms Self-Assessment will provide a detailed look at your school food environment, whether healthy food items are promoted and how welcoming the cafeteria is perceived to be.

Tip: While observing the cafeteria, observe how long students have to eat breakfast or lunch. Take note of the time, from the point the last student sits down to enjoy their meal to the point students are dismissed. This will help your team analyze your school wellness policies and ensure students have adequate time to enjoy their meals.

Student and Family Perceptions

Assessing the student and family perceptions of school meals will aid in identifying menu items that are poorly received by students, what items students would like to have added, concerns families have about food quality or quantity, families’ knowledge of the updated guidelines and current meal quality and barriers to participation.

How to Assess: National PTA’s Student and Family Perceptions Survey can be sent home with students, created as an online survey or distributed at Back to School night.
**Meal and Menu Quality**

Assessing meal and menu quality will identify the meals students dislike, which are most popular and what should be replaced or improved.

How to Assess: Work with your school nutrition manager to identify menu items that students consistently do not purchase. Also, identify the menu items that students consistently point out as least and most favorite on the *National PTA's Student and Family Perception Survey*.

**School Nutrition Staff Needs**

Assessing the school nutrition training and equipment needs will help your school meals team identify possible resources to help increase school nutrition capacity.

How to Assess: Talk with your school nutrition manager about their training and equipment priorities and wishes. This can be an open conversation rather than a structured questionnaire.

**School Wellness Policies**

Assessing your local and district wellness policies will allow your school meals team to identify outdated or weaker policies and ones that are not being implemented. It can also be a time to look for gaps and opportunities to codify things that are already happening in practice.

How to Assess: Complete the *Action for Healthy Kids School Health Index* for a comprehensive look at your school policies. Questions to ask of your wellness policy may include:

- Do all foods and beverages sold on campus during the school day meet or exceed USDA's school meal nutrition standards, competitive food, and Smart Snack standards?
- For food and beverages that are marketed in the school place, do they meet the Smart Snack standards?
- Do students have at least 10 minutes to eat breakfast and 20 minutes to eat lunch, counting down from the time they are seated with their food?
- Does lunch period follow recess?
- Are there specific goals for nutrition promotion and education?
Develop Your School Meals Action Plan

Now that you have completed the school meals assessments, you are ready to create your action plan. The action plan should be developed with input from all of the school meals team members in order to utilize all viewpoints and knowledge.

Follow these steps when developing your plan:

1. Set up a meeting with your school meals team to share results from the assessments and brainstorm possible solutions and challenges
2. Identify your long-term school meals objective
3. Identify short-term goals and action steps for implementation
4. Develop a timeline and budget
5. Determine roles and responsibilities
6. Plan for long-term sustainability
7. Review your action plan to check for completeness

Tip 1: Most PTAs have a limited budget and must plan carefully to achieve their goals for the year. Ideally, school meal improvement activities will be included in your PTA's annual budget process from the beginning. If that's not possible this year, don't worry! Much can be accomplished with a small budget, particularly with the help of volunteers and by collaborating with community members.

Tip 2: Use National PTA's School Meals Action Plan Template to help map out your school meals action plan and for an example action plan, see National PTA's School Meals Example Action Plan.

Expand Your Team

During action plan development, think of other people in your school community who can help your school meals team review your action plan, think of additional solutions and aid in achieving your goal. While this group may not be content experts, they may be able to provide resources, training, and feedback, gain support from the school community or help with implementing your action plan. Additional school community members may include:

- Students (student council president, engaged students, etc.)
- School staff (school nurse, health and physical education teachers, janitorial staff, other school members with an interest in health)
- School board members
- Local business or community leaders
- School business official or chief financial officer
- Local universities or colleges
- Chefs, restaurant owners and farmers
Consider These Strategies

Depending on what your school meals assessments unveiled, the strategies below may provide direction when developing your action plan. Be creative and use the strengths of your school and community, but also be realistic. Taking smaller, achievable steps are better than developing one large goal that is impossible to achieve.

The Cafeteria

Work with your school nutrition team and try these researched lunchroom techniques to promote healthy behaviors in your cafeteria.

• Offer attractively displayed fruits and vegetables at the start of the service line.
• Place white milk before chocolate milk in the milk cooler.
• Ensure that water is readily accessible to all students. Try providing fruit and vegetable-infused water to encourage water consumption.
• Place a variety of fruit at the point of check out.
• Ensure the school nutrition team is trained to politely prompt students to select and consume the daily vegetable option. Or recruit family volunteers to help welcome students to the cafeteria and encourage them to eat their food throughout the meal service.
• Give fruits, vegetables, and other healthy foods fun names, such “power peas” or “dinosaur broccoli trees”
• Ensure the daily fruit and vegetable option is bundled in the grab and go meals.

Create a welcoming cafeteria environment so students enjoy spending their meal times in the cafeteria.

• Paint murals in the cafeteria that illustrate healthy behaviors – kids playing sports, eating fruits and vegetables and/or cooking with friends. See if there is a local artist, parent, art teacher or student who would like to lead the mural efforts.
• Hold a contest to rename the cafeteria something new and exciting.
• Collaborate with the art teachers to highlight students’ artwork in the cafeteria.
• Advocate for additional funding or considering fundraising to replace outdated tables, seating and other cafeteria fixtures.
• Organize regular cafeteria activities that allow students to try new foods and provide feedback on what they would like to see in the school meals. Try a smoothie station, around the world fruit and vegetable stand, meat alternative tastings and other fun, healthy activities.

Meal Quality Resources

1. The Let’s Cook Healthy School Meals is a chef-inspired compilation of school meals recipes that can be used for swapping in new recipes to revamp your school meals menu.
2. Alliance for a Healthier Generation provides sample recipes and menus that can be used as ideas for new menu items.
3. The Let’s Move School Garden Checklist will help you plan for a school garden.
4. Let’s Move Salad Bars to Schools donates salad bars to schools.

Cafeteria Resources

1. The Smarter Lunchrooms Movement provides researched techniques that nudge students towards engaging in healthy eating habits.
2. Action for Healthy Kids provides activities and strategies for improving the cafeteria.
Meal and Menu Quality

Swap out unpopular lunch or breakfast items for newer, revamped entrée options.

- Work with the school nutrition team to revamp the menu to make meals more enjoyable and nutritious. This doesn’t mean your team has to develop new recipes from scratch; check out the great recipes and menus already available on the web.

- Work to incorporate more fresh fruits and vegetables into the breakfast and lunch program. Investigate the possibility of a salad bar, school garden and/or a farm to school partnership with local farmers.

- Encourage student involvement. Start a school meals student recipe contest that encourages students to submit a recipe that meets the school meal standards (within a budget) that they would like to see served in the cafeteria. Have the school nutrition team choose a recipe they will highlight the following month.

- Provide taste testing activities with students to see how they prefer fruits and vegetables to be prepared.

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Family and Student Perceptions

Improve family and student perceptions of school meals by informing them of the school meals updates, hosting fun and interactive school meals activities and getting them involved in your efforts.

• Incorporate a school meals session or booth at your back to school night, new student orientation, parent teacher conferences or other school activities that allows the school nutrition team to present to families and students what the school meal program is, the updated nutrition standards and changes and updates in the cafeteria. This will allow families to better understand the school meals program and give the school nutrition team an opportunity to explain their efforts.

• Create a monthly newsletter and use social media to highlight activities in the cafeteria, new meals that are being tested out that month, nutrition tips promoted in the cafeteria and additional information the school nutrition team wants to relay to families.

• Invite families to eat the school lunch with their kids so they can better understand the quality of the meals served and participate in the school meals conversation.

• Create a system that allows families and students to provide feedback. Try a biannual community forum, online system or a comment box in the front office.

• Involve students in the school meals activities and discussions to promote a sense of student responsibility.

• Some school meal programs offer catering services—consider catering your PTA events through the school nutrition department.

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**School Nutrition Training and Equipment**

Help your school nutrition team gain additional training and/or school nutrition equipment to ensure their school meal efforts are fully supported.

- Identify grants that your school may be eligible for and help your school nutrition manager complete the application(s). If there is a grant writer employed by the school district, work with them to apply to grants your school meals team has identified. If your school district does not have a grant writer, see if there is a parent or community member who is a successful grant writer who can aid in that process.

- Find a time to get on the school board agenda to present equipment and training needs and advocate for additional funding.

- Organize a healthy fundraiser to help purchase school nutrition equipment.

- Ask if there is an additional role PTA members and families can fill during meal times that will allow the school nutrition team to focus their efforts on providing school breakfast and lunch.

**School Wellness Policies**

Work to ensure your district and school have strong wellness policies that promote healthy snacks, meet healthy marketing guidelines, promote healthy fundraising and set adequate mealtimes.

- Get involved in your district’s local wellness committee, your school’s school health advisory council, or both. In the meetings you can present the evidence for strong wellness policies that will improve the school food environment, nutrition standards, lunch time scheduling and nutrition education plans.

- To strengthen your case, present your school meals team’s plan for strong implementation of the policies in your school. Your school could serve as a model for other schools in the district.

- If a school wellness team doesn’t exist at your school, start one!
Measure Your Progress

Evaluation is a critical part of wrapping up your program. It is important to understand what worked and what didn't so that you can plan for an even more successful school meals initiative next year. You can engage more people in the school conversation when you measure your progress and publicize your results. Depending on what your team focused on, you can repeat your previous assessments to document what your school meals team improved and identify areas that your team still needs to address. Share your results at a school forum or parent night to generate support and further commitment.

Sustain Your Efforts

Now that you have created your school meals team, conducted a school meals assessment, implemented your action plan and measured your progress, it is important to continue these efforts to ensure your successes create long-term, sustainable changes at your school.

• Ensure your initial efforts do not get forgotten when moving forward to focus on additional areas of school meals. When creating your next action plan, include steps to ensure your previous efforts are sustained.

• If you conducted a pilot program such as a school garden, breakfast to-go program or salad bar, make sure to highlight your successes to the school administration and community in order to expand or make it a permanent program.

• Showcase any successes on social media or school/PTA newsletters. Invite reporters to check out the progress first hand at your school.

• Advocate to have your strategies added as an action plan item to your school’s improvement plan to ensure it continues to be implemented and evaluated.

• Identify areas of weakness in your school meals efforts in order to prevent them from happening again as you move forward with your efforts.

• Make sure any school meal improvement efforts will be included in your PTA’s budget planning process for the next school year.

• Make notes and introductions for next year’s PTA chairperson or Healthy Lifestyles Chair so they can continue the partnership with school leadership and plan realistically.

• Present your progress at a school board meeting and propose ways in which the district can continue to support school meal efforts.
Looking Forward

Now that you have focused your efforts on one or all of the five components discussed in this guide, think about addressing other school meals issues.

Summer Meals

For students who rely on school meals, summertime may be a time of hunger. Working to ensure your community has a summer meal site can help combat childhood hunger, or better yet, talk to your school leaders about your school becoming a summer meals site. **Once you have an identified site**, help get the word out about the program through school newsletters, announce it at school or community events, send out an email blast and share the information on social media.

Community Eligibility Provision

**The community eligibility provision** (CEP) allows eligible schools and school districts to serve school meals, free of charge, to all students. This helps reduce the stigma for the students who receive free or reduced lunches, provide lunches for students whose family member may have not filled out the paperwork and reduces administrative burden. If your school has a high percentage of students who receive school meals for free or at a reduced price, you may be eligible to become a CEP school. Talk with your nutrition services director and school leaders to see if your school is eligible.

Healthy Fundraising

To further promote a healthy environment, work to ensure fund-raising in your school promotes a healthy message. Work with your local wellness committee to create healthy fundraising policies that your district and/or school will follow. Make sure to set the same example in your PTA fundraising events.
References


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