

Memorandum

To: Somerville School Committee

From: Lauren Mancini, Director, Food and Nutrition Services Department (FNSD)

Date: January 26, 2026

Re: Food and Nutrition Services Department – 2025–2026 School Year Update

Executive Summary

The Somerville Public Schools Food and Nutrition Services Department (FNSD) provides free, nutritious, and culturally responsive meals to students while operating fully within federal and state regulatory requirements. During the 2024–2025 school year, the department successfully served approximately 900,000 meals across 11 district cafeterias with no disruptions to service, despite ongoing staffing challenges and evolving operational demands.

Key highlights this year include the successful opening of the Argenziano production kitchen, which has allowed the department to expand scratch cooking and reintroduce many student-favorite menu items. At the same time, staffing shortages and the absence of a substitute pool remain the department’s most significant operational challenge and are a major focus of planning efforts moving forward. This memorandum provides an overview of department operations, accomplishments, and priorities for the remainder of the school year.

Overview of the Food and Nutrition Services Department

The FNSD provides healthy, nutritious, and culturally responsive meals for students during the school day while complying with all applicable state and federal regulations.

FNSD Quick Facts

- During the 2024–2025 school year, FNSD served approximately 900,000 meals in 11 district cafeterias.
 - o About 260,000 breakfasts
 - o About 650,000 lunches
- All student meals are provided free of charge.
- FNSD is a fully self-operated and self-funded department; all labor and food costs are supported through federal reimbursement.
- There were no disruptions to meal service, including during periods of federal government uncertainty.

On an average school day, the department serves approximately 5,000 meals, with more than 70% of students participating in school meals.

Mission and Vision

Mission Statement

To nourish every student by providing high-quality, nutritious, inclusive meals in a welcoming environment, fostering healthy habits and supporting academic success.

Vision Statement

We envision a school community where every student is empowered to thrive—physically, emotionally, and academically—through access to wholesome food, education about healthy choices, and meals that respect cultural diversity.

All departmental decisions related to menu planning, staffing, and accommodations are guided by this mission and vision.

Federal and State Regulatory Framework

The FNSD operates under the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and the Massachusetts Universal Free Meals Program. As a self-funded department, FNSD operates similarly to a small business within the district, relying on federal reimbursement funds to cover all labor, food, and operational expenses.

To qualify for reimbursement:

- A **complete breakfast** must include at least three of five components (grains, meat/meat alternate, dairy, fruit, vegetables), with fruit required.
- A **complete lunch** must include at least three of five components (grains, meat/meat alternate, dairy, fruit, vegetables), with a fruit or vegetable required.

The department continues the district's long-standing commitment—dating back to the Shape Up Somerville initiative—to offer meals that emphasize fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and scratch cooking whenever operationally feasible.

Menu Planning, Cultural Representation, and Religious Dietary Considerations

FNSD is proud of the menu diversity developed to reflect Somerville's multicultural community. Many recipes have been developed by department staff and feature global flavors, including items such as chicken or tofu masala with naan, bean and cheese pupusas, jambalaya, and General Tso chicken. These meals are designed to be culturally inclusive while remaining compliant with USDA meal pattern requirements.

Religious Dietary Accommodations

The department's meal program must remain equitable, consistent, and compliant with federal and state regulations. While FNSD is legally required to provide dietary accommodations for documented medical conditions and disabilities, public school food service programs are not required to provide individualized meals based on religious practice.

To support students whose religious practices influence their food choices:

- Vegetarian and vegan options are offered daily and often meet the needs of students who avoid certain foods for religious reasons.
- Online menus allow families to filter by dietary preferences and review menus in advance.
- Families always retain the option to send meals from home if school offerings do not align with religious dietary practices.

This approach ensures compliance with regulations while maintaining transparency, equity, and respect for all students and families.

Production Kitchen Expansion and Scratch Cooking

A significant accomplishment in the beginning of this school year was the opening of the production kitchen at the Albert F. Argenziano School. This milestone has allowed the department to expand scratch cooking and reintroduce popular student-favorite meals, including macaroni and cheese, vegetarian chili, pasta with meat sauce, and tacos. The production kitchen has also enabled the addition of new scratch-cooked menu items such as tikka masala, pulled chicken tacos, and butter chicken.

This expansion supports the department's long-term commitment to fresh, high-quality meals and strengthens operational capacity district-wide.

Staffing Challenges and Workforce Development

Staffing continues to be the most significant challenge facing the FNSD. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, staffing levels have not returned to pre-pandemic norms, and there is currently no substitute pool available to cover absences.

Understaffing impacts daily operations by increasing workloads, limiting advance food preparation, and affecting staff morale. Despite these challenges, staff continue to meet service expectations and ensure students receive meals every day.

Planned Focus Areas

- Strengthening recruitment strategies to attract new employees
- Standardizing onboarding practices across all sites
- Developing an annual training plan to support skill development and consistency
- Establishing recognition and retention initiatives to demonstrate staff value and create growth opportunities

Addressing staffing challenges is a critical priority for the department moving forward.

Labor Relations and Contract Year

The 2025–2026 school year is a collective bargaining year for the department. FNSD is working collaboratively with district administration and union representatives to review operational needs, staffing models, and training expectations. These discussions are intended to support both workforce stability and the evolving demands of school food service operations.

Summary and Next Steps

The Food and Nutrition Services Department remains committed to providing high-quality, nutritious, and inclusive meals to Somerville students while operating within federal and state requirements. Despite staffing and logistical challenges, the department has maintained uninterrupted service, expanded scratch cooking, and continued to respond to community needs.

The department will continue to focus on strengthening staffing systems, expanding training and retention efforts, and enhancing meal quality. Committee members and district leadership are welcome to visit school cafeterias or the production kitchen to observe operations firsthand.

For additional information, families and community members are encouraged to visit the FNSD webpage or contact the department directly.