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Nutrition for Health

Providing Economical and Healthy School Foods

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School food service departments must pay close attention to food costs, in order to meet their budgets. This is a significant concern, given the increase in food and transportation costs that occurred over the past several years. The following strategies may be helpful in controlling costs.

- Join a purchasing co-op. Combining bids with neighboring school districts to purchase larger quantities at lower prices helps to maximize your purchasing power.
- Complete an annual procurement plan based on your menu to maximize the use of commodities, especially for the more
- Compare produce prices among various vendors. Contact local farmers about products they can supply at a reasonable price. If available, use the Department of Defense Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program. Buy fresh fruits and vegetables in season to get the best price and peak flavor.
- Make data-driven decisions. Data on student participation, student preferences, food cost, labor cost, equipment replacement cost, and training cost are needed to guide the operation in a strategic planning process.
 - º Engage students in periodic food/taste evaluations to be sure that foods are acceptable and are well marketed to students.
- Adopt a 2-3 week cycle menu.
 - One set of menus allows the operator to feature items students' rate as highly acceptable. This can increase student satisfaction and higher student participation rates.
 - ^o A 2- or 3-week-cycle menu helps to standardize and optimize food procurement, inventory turnover, and daily production quantities. This helps to improve food service operations and helps control costs. A consistent inventory uses less storage space.
 - ^o Accurate usage projections can be established and may result in better pricing.
 - ° Delivery schedules can be easily set up and managed.
 - o Food service employees can use the food production history to improve production planning.
 - Menu writing, costing, and nutrient analyses only have to be done for one cycle, with occasional market adjustments.
 - Employees can enhance their skills in producing, displaying, and garnishing items, and in serving correct portion sizes. Meal presentation is key to maintaining participation.
 - Students and cashiers learn what items must be selected to qualify for a reimbursable meal.
 - Only one cycle menu has to be communicated to families.
- · Revamp cycle menus to serve less expensive, popular student choices more often. For example, serve spaghetti instead of lasagna, with whole-grain commodity pasta to reduce costs.
- Serve low-cost beans or other legumes more often as a meat alternate or vegetable choice. For example, serve a bean burrito, substitute kidney beans for some of the meat in chili, or offer garbanzo beans on a salad bar. The USDA suggests that yogurt can also be considered as a meat alternate during meal planning.
- Train staff to follow standardized recipes. Every extra scoop costs money! For example, don't add extra ground beef to the
- Ask employees to present new ideas and processes for daily tasks, and reward innovation.
- Market your program as healthy, delicious and a good value to students, teachers, staff, and parents to boost participation. Compare the cost of a typical lunch brought from home to school lunch.
- Create new customers through catering! Showcase healthy menus at board meetings and other school events. Cater classroom parties or activities.
- The School Nutrition Association (http://www.schoolnutrition.org/) has great resources for Food Service Departments.

Dr. Cullen is an expert in health promotion and education, specifically school food policy and student student food selection. She currently is evaluating the effect of Texas school food policy changes on food selection in Texas schools.

> Dr. Finn is CEO of The American Council for Fitness and Nutrition, which is dedicated to teaching children the important concept of energy balance. In teaching lifelong wellness habits children must learn that what they eat and what they do must be in balance.





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* Adapted from the following resources:

Stallings, V. A., Suitor, C. W., & Taylor, C. L. (Eds.). (2009). School Meals: Building Blocks for Healthy Children. Washington, D. C.: The National Academies Press.

Meeting the Challenge of Rising Food Costs for Healthier School Meals Available at: http://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/Resources/DGfactsheet_challenge.pdf

National Food Service Management Institute (NFSMI) at www.nfsmi.org Provides:

-Training materials on Financial Management, First Choice: A Purchasing Systems Manual for School Food Service, Food Buying Guide for Child Nutrition Programs Instructor Manual and Participant Workbook, Measuring Success with Standardized Recipes.

Telecasts on effective financial management, cooperative purchasing, procurement and inventory control Fact sheets on research related to cost control, purchasing, and financial decision making.

Food and Nutrition Information Center Healthy Meals Resource System at http://healthymeals.nal.usda.gov Provides:

Purchasing and Procurement resource list and Menu Planning and Preparation resource list. Web site links to materials developed by State agencies, other government agencies, and food product associations.