

Cafeteria Visits 101: Bringing Congress to Your School



Cafeteria Site Visit 101

Meeting with a Member of Congress, or their congressional staff, is a very effective way to convey a message about a specific issue or legislative matter. A cafeteria site visit can give a Member of Congress a firsthand look at how school nutrition programs operate. More importantly, it demonstrates to Members of Congress your expertise and knowledge by providing them with a snapshot of what you do on a daily basis; i.e. how the school nutrition programs work, how many children you feed, the size of your school district, and any concerns that you may have with the programs in general.

Below are some suggestions to consider when planning a cafeteria site visit in your school district. A checklist is also included to help make the visit a huge success.

Let's get started!

PLAN THE VISIT CAREFULLY

Be clear about what it is you want to achieve. The purpose of the visit, or tour, is to educate the Member on what programs you implement. It is also a good time to showcase your programs and answer any questions concerning those programs. Most Members are not experts on these issues. That is why they look to the experienced professionals in this field – you. You are a most valuable resource to them. Therefore, you are in a prime position to educate them about the programs which may assist them in doing their job even more effectively. Suggestions for potential activities and education topics for your Member of Congress:



- Visit a school with a high or low percent of student's eligible for free or reduced-price meals to identify need
- Showcase new serving lines that increased participation or increased consumption of fruits, vegetables or whole grain products
- Visit a school with high participation in the breakfast program or with alternative serving methods, such as breakfast in the classroom
- Showcase nutrition education activities and how the cafeteria is used as a classroom to teach students about proper nutrition

- Showcase improved food offerings, such as an increase in fresh fruits or vegetables or Farm-to-School foods
- Highlight the success of a Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program
- Discuss the quality and quantity of the commodity foods used in your nutrition program
- Discuss the importance National School Lunch Week and National School Breakfast Week play in the educational process. Invite the Member to join in any coordinated promotional activities.

MAKE AN APPOINTMENT

You will first need to determine which Member of the U.S. House of Representatives represents your district and then contact his/her District office or the Washington, DC office. Don't forget to include your U.S. Senators as well. (This contact information is available online at SNA's Legislative Action Center – www.schoolnutrition.org. All you need is your zip code).



After you contact the office of your Member of Congress, ask to speak with the aide who handles child nutrition programs. Identify yourself as a constituent and tell the aide you would like to discuss the possibility of the Member being your guest at your school. Be sure to tell the aide what the purpose of your call is (a firsthand look at the cafeteria) and

what it is you hope to achieve (better understanding of the child nutrition programs).

You will probably be asked to submit your request in writing. In your request, please explain your purpose and who you represent (name of school and location). It is easier for Congressional staff to arrange a meeting if they know what you wish to discuss and your relationship to the area or interests represented by the Member. Don't forget to build in enough lead time with your request. Schedules book up quickly.

In the event the Member cannot accept your invitation for the cafeteria visit, please encourage a staff member who handles nutrition issues to attend on his/her behalf. A staff member is a great substitute for the Member since this person typically handles these types of issues on a daily basis. The opportunity to establish a relationship with the staffer is critical for future conversations.

BE PREPARED

It is important to have an agenda to compliment the timeframe of the visit. Take some time to develop what you want to showcase and highlight. Remember, this is your time to shine. Have a "welcoming committee" meet the Member at the front of the school. It is also important to have information and materials specific to your school on hand at the time of the site visit. These materials could include:



- Size of your school district
- Numbers of meals served on a daily basis
- Background information on the lunch and breakfast programs
- Background information on the impact of your school nutrition program on the local economy – jobs created and support to the local community
- Any special events that are unique to your school addressing healthy eating, such as nutrition education programs

- Contact information on who participated on behalf of the nutrition staff

This information can be included as part of the "take away" packet. Realize that you will have a limited amount of time with the Member. It is your job to make sure that you utilize his/her time wisely. The Member's time is extremely valuable and your site visit is most likely part of an already packed schedule.



To increase your odds of success, it is recommended that you arrange a time during a scheduled Congressional district work period or recess. Most district work periods are scheduled around the federal government's holiday schedule. A calendar listing this information can be obtained at the Member's district office, or at the SNA website.



When arranging the cafeteria site visit, aim for a time when the children are being served their meals and build the visit around this. Remember, the purpose of the site visit is to see the programs in action.

Build your educational components, along with the most important issues you wish to cover, into the agenda at the beginning. And, remember to leave ample time for questions throughout the entire visit.

In addition, it is also important to extend an invitation to your local media folks to cover this event. Not only can the local newspaper provide coverage for the Member, your school can also be highlighted in the local news. If you are successful in getting a member of the press to attend, make sure to have a location identified for a photo with the Member and the children



BE POLITICAL

Members of Congress want to represent the best interests of their district or state. In some instances, a Member may lack important details about certain matters. It is therefore helpful to share with the Member information and examples that demonstrate clearly the impact or benefits associated with a particular issue. Remember, this is a good time to share any concerns that you may have. For example, are there issues that are making it difficult to operate the program? Whenever possible, demonstrate the connection between what you are experiencing and suggestions or recommendations which would make the programs work more effectively. If appropriate, seek a commitment from the Member for their support for child nutrition programs.



BE RESPONSIVE

Be prepared to answer questions or provide additional information in the event the Member expresses interest or asks questions. Follow up the meeting with a thank-you letter. The note could outline what was discussed during the site visit, and send along any additional information and materials that may have been requested.



School Nutrition Association

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CHECKLIST

Scheduling the Cafeteria Site Visit:

- ✓ Identify Member of Congress (MOC) using SNA's Legislative Action Center—www.schoolnutrition.org
- ✓ Contact office of MOC and discuss the idea of a cafeteria visit with the appropriate staff person (If you do not have the direct number, dial the U.S. Capitol Operator at (202) 224-3121 and ask for your MOC)
- ✓ Identify potential dates and name of school for the site visit and include this information in your correspondence to the Member
- ✓ Submit request to MOC and include the following:
 - Purpose of event
 - Potential Dates/Times
 - Your contact information (include e-mail, phone, fax numbers)
 - Draft agenda for the site visit
 - Include names of those who will also be participating (i.e. principal, superintendent, media/press, etc.)
 - Thank MOC for their consideration of the request
- ✓ Make sure you have the name of the scheduler, or staff person from the MOC office so that you can stay in touch throughout the scheduling process
- ✓ Notify your school district's Communication and Media Office as necessary

CHECKLIST

Planning the Cafeteria Site Visit:

- ✓ Develop the agenda for the cafeteria site visit
- ✓ Review which meal will be served based on your menu and whether the MOC will visit during breakfast or lunch
- ✓ Develop and compile “take away” packet of information for MOC
- ✓ Identify “welcoming committee” to greet the MOC. Limit the committee to yourself and 3-4 other key school stakeholders and consider including a student on the committee.
- ✓ Invite key school stakeholders on the welcoming committee. This could vary by district, but may include the school superintendent and school principal.
- ✓ Reach out to local press and other media outlets and extend an invitation for them to cover the event (contact SNA HQ for assistance if needed)
- ✓ Have a location already identified to snap a photograph of the Member with staff and children
- ✓ Conduct a “dry run” of the cafeteria visit and work out any kinks
- ✓ Reserve a room at your school to discuss issues and concerns with MOC
- ✓ Alert your school’s front office that there will be a “special guest” arriving at the school
- ✓ Address all security issues for outside guests in advance (sign-in sheet, nametags, etc.)
- ✓ Issue a press release reporting on the visit, including basic background data given to the member or staff visitor

CHECKLIST

The Day of the Cafeteria Site Visit:

- ✓ Assemble welcoming committee for the MOC for “meet and greet” at a designated location of the school
- ✓ Conduct your cafeteria tour with your VIP’s and enjoy a cafeteria meal with the children
- ✓ Adjourn to room for Q and A
- ✓ Thank all participants for attending and check them out at the front desk

After the Cafeteria Site Visit:

- ✓ Send thank-you note to MOC, scheduler and staff person
- ✓ Send any follow up materials that were discussed during the site visit