Taking a cue from a hot trend in commercial foodservice, many school nutrition operations across the country are incorporating mobile meal delivery and service into their program offerings. Whether “going mobile” is seen as a solution to address local food insecurity during summers, afternoons or weekends, or is a strategy to reach untapped participation potential at the secondary level, your colleagues are finding success by hitting the road in a variety of vehicles, from buses and vans to trailers and trucks. These vehicles are used to deliver meals, certainly, but in some cases, to prep and serve the meals, as well.

What about you? Could your summer meals program use a boost? Are there low-income populations in your community you can’t reach easily during non-school hours that could benefit from a delivered snack or supper? Or perhaps you already have been building a successful mobile service, but want to take it to the next level and you aren’t sure where to start. No matter where you stand on this spectrum of possibility, with careful planning, the right resources and a network of community support, you can drive your program forward.

What’s the Truck Appeal?
There are many reasons for you to consider adding a mobile component to your school nutrition operation. First, kids love anything that is new and different...
(except, maybe, vegetables); a food truck has the potential to generate a lot of buzz. Second, we all know that student customers have ever-evolving, sophisticated tastes, and food trucks are one of the hottest foodservice trends at the moment—especially appealing for savvy middle and secondary school tweens and teens. Third, mobility offers you the opportunity to specifically target the highest-need populations, which often are under-
served during summers and weekends. Fourth, a mobile program can help you expand your points of sale and, ultimately, increase participation to improve your bottom line. Finally, your vehicle can provide an additional promotional point, marketing your school nutrition program to the greater community, through its presence alone, with efforts boosted by bright, eye-catching graphics.

Don’t take our word for it: Check out the enthusiastic affirmations of a couple of veterans. In November 2008, School Nutrition ran a feature (“Special Deliveries”) highlighting School Nutrition Director Donna Martin, EdS, RD, LD, SNS, and her ground-breaking use of mobile delivery and service in Burke County (Ga.) Public Schools. Martin saw it as a reasonable solution to a problem. In 2006, after the county government cut funding for a summer feeding program run by the recreation department, it fell to her operation to ensure hungry kids were fed. Taking meals to the kids, using school buses, offered many benefits: They could serve a low-income population spread across a large geographic area; provide both foodservice employees and bus drivers with additional income in the summer months; and gain consequential marketing benefits for the school nutrition program.

“There are little things you don’t think about, but when you add them up, they matter,” says Martin of ways that her innovative mobile meals program has served the children in her community. “We use air-conditioned school buses; the kids like to be cool, and some of them don’t even have air conditioning at home, so they might come [to the meal site] just for that.”

Another tip born of her experience: “When we can, we use bus drivers who already drive those neighborhoods,” explains Martin. “Not only do the kids get comfortable when they see the same person every day, but they form a bond and it ends up being a really positive experience—one we didn’t anticipate.”

By 2012, Martin was distributing 3,000 meals each day during the summer, using a fleet of 16 buses—and had begun incorporating mobile operations into the regular school year, too. Serving 500 meals each day through a newly launched supper program required the addition of a specialized vehicle: a hot/cold catering/delivery truck allows her team to provide a greater range of menu items, while doubling as a delivery vehicle to serve a satellite school without a cafeteria facility of its own. [Editors’ Note: For more details, see “On the Road Again,” Tools of the Trade, February 2012.]

It’s hard to miss a giant RV with the words “Mobile Wellness Command Center—Nutrition Transport #1” emblazoned on the side, and for Billy Reid, child nutrition services director for the Salida (Calif.) School District, that’s kind of the point. “It’s a cool-looking RV, and the kids really respond to it,” says Reid. “Ultimately, everything is about the service that we provide to children; food trucks are trendy, very ‘now,’ and my job is to attract the customers I’m not yet reaching—I know I can do that with [food trucks].”

When his mobile program was first profiled by School Nutrition in February 2012, Reid reported that his child nutrition team had served 47,000 meals during an eight-week period in Summer 2011 (an increase of 15,000 meals from the previous year). Providing an update to SN, Reid

---

**A License to Drive**

Just “who is gonna drive this truck”? It’s an important consideration when launching a mobile foodservice program. Some vehicles will require a Commercial Driver’s License (CDL) to operate—and if you are prepping and serving meals from the truck, then you likely will need food handling certification, as well. It’s not always easy to find staff with all the credentials you need!

- Decide if you can afford a dedicated driver, or if you want to be able to pull drivers from an existing staff pool. Just make sure you have a plan in place for a back-up driver!
- If using school buses for delivery and/or service is your best option, you may have the option of using your existing pool of bus drivers, rather than sending one or more staff members to earn their CDL. A good relationship with your transportation department will be critical at every stage of the process, from bidding to procurement to the launch of your program.
- Your mobile truck will be subject to the health department laws of your area, and requirements will depend on the type of vehicle and the type of service you provide. Loop in district, town, city and county officials to see if you can streamline the process; it’s sometimes possible to cut through red tape when you employ the direct “route.”
estimates that in Summer 2013, his operation distributed approximately 70,000 meals in the same time period. Of those summer meals, approximately 3,000 each week were served directly from the RV. Today, Reid has added a supper service to the truck, which means the Salida school nutrition team is now doing mobile delivery for three meals a day. He reports that he is conducting a feasibility study to explore implementation of service through a street-style food truck with the capability to serve hot food at some of his secondary school sites.

Others are jumping on the food truck bandwagon, going mobile to expand program, promotion and participation opportunities. Columbia (Mo.) Public Schools is using a trailer featuring a fully equipped kitchen that rotates among the district’s high schools, serving such items as barbecue pulled pork and chicken sandwiches. Across the country in Miami-Dade County, Fla., the food and nutrition department is delivering a variety of “meals on wheels,” initially during the summer months, but now through part of the school year, as well. Both breakfast and lunch, featuring hot and cold offerings are available through the truck, acting as an additional point of service. Minneapolis Public Schools and Boston Public Schools both recently took to the streets to expand their summer feeding programs.

**Let’s Begin at the—End?**

“I think the biggest mistake most people make is that they don’t know what to do with the food truck once they have it,” advises Reid. “You have to approach any project from a business model perspective, and ask yourself if the return is going to be worth the investment. You have to know what you want to achieve in the end before you can get started.”

Destination first, journey second. Reid’s advice, because identifying your goals early on in the process will serve you well. Just because something is new or trendy doesn’t mean that it’s right for your program. Take a hard look at what is already working—or not—to determine feasibility. Is your goal to start summer foodservice, or to increase access to an existing summer meals program? Entice new customers at the secondary level? Do you expect your vehicle to serve multiple purposes, such as bulk food delivery in addition to meal service?

As he considers the purchase of a new food truck, Reid knows that the bottom line is the bottom line, explaining, “My next question, after I know the price of the vehicle I want, is what the return on my investment is going to be, which means figuring out how much revenue I can generate serving x number of meals to children in x amount of time, and from that, how many years it will take me to recoup my investment.”

Not long ago, weighing this type information may have seemed like a daunting task. Anti-hunger advocate Share Our Strength (SOS), which has turned attention to promoting summer meal programs as a critical hunger-relief effort, recently launched the Mobile Meals Playbook resource. According to SOS Program Manager Kimberley Caldwell, the Playbook is the perfect tool for school nutrition professionals to start their mobile meals planning process. “The first question is always, ‘Is mobile right for you?’ and we developed this resource to help people determine the answer. We provide a checklist, plus strategies and resources, including our amazing new budget calculator.”

In developing the Mobile Meals Playbook (http://tinyurl.com/SOSMobileMealsPlaybook), SOS took a close look at mobile summer foodservice programs around the country to identify successful strategies. While there was plenty of anecdotal evidence about what has worked (and what hasn’t worked), SOS wanted to dig deeper. It conducted interviews with schools and other summer foodservice sponsor organizations across the country to collect and organize data.

“We thought that specific models [would emerge], but what we saw was that while there are consistent elements, there are not necessarily consistent models,”

**Shop Right**

When it comes to actually buying a vehicle, the bid process can be extremely intimidating; as one school nutrition director joked, “I know food—not trucks!” Start by reaching out to colleagues who have a mobile program to find out what they are doing. Next, check in with your district’s transportation department. In Pinellas County, Fla., Lynn Geist, SNS, assistant director of the school nutrition program, recounts, “We had a small fleet of trucks already that we delivered with, so we had a whole department in place to help with [bidding], and we worked together to achieve the kind of vehicle we wanted. It was important to have that group of people in place who could help us get there.”

In Minneapolis Public Schools, Assistant Director of Nutrition Services Irfan Chaudhry affirms the value of this partner. “In our case, transportation really stepped up for us,” he recounts. “They traded in a bus they weren’t using to get a bus for us, and it didn’t cost us anything, which is incredible.”

Seek other opportunities to repurpose existing options. In Miami-Dade County Fla., a truck was procured in 2004 to serve as an emergency kitchen following a hurricane. Ownership was turned over to the food and nutrition services department in 2007. Now it features a colorful design promoting school meals and is used (along with a “food bus”) as a mobile option to increase participation.

Be prepared to lower or change your expectations—to think out of the box about your solution. Describing her bid process as “a flop,” Laina Fullum, director of nutrition services for Columbia (Mo.) Public Schools, didn’t give up when she realized she couldn’t afford the $60,000 price tag of the truck she had her eye on. “When we discovered we couldn’t afford a truck, it forced us to look at alternatives.” The solution? A trailer. “There really isn’t that big of a difference between a truck and a trailer for our purposes, but a trailer is significantly less expensive and in fact, they can be a little wider than trucks, which can come in handy.”
explains Caldwell. “The handbook is set up to give you a look at what elements are working in a specific place, and it gives you advice on how to set up those elements in a way that works for your program.” You’ll find a library of best practices on every aspect of mobile foodservice, from finding the right ride to creating—and meeting!—meal demand.

Other factors to incorporate into your plan include:
- reimbursable meal accounting
- parking during delivery/service
- garbage disposal
- labor (drivers may need to be certified as food handlers and vice versa)
- insurance
- fuel and maintenance
- traffic

Creating Key Partnerships
The importance of community buy-in cannot be stressed enough when it comes to implementing a mobile feeding program. In Minneapolis Public Schools, Assistant Director of Nutrition Services Irfan Chaudhry cast a wide net when he was seeking to build support for the department’s new mobile meals program. Looking beyond the school district, “We received a $25,000 grant by joining forces with Second Harvest, and we also worked with Hunger-Free Minnesota, using the data they collected to identify some high-need areas [requiring mobile service].” According to Chaudhry, these and other allied organization partnerships served the dual purpose of securing financial assistance, while raising the profile of the school nutrition program itself in the nonprofit arena.

Naturally, coalition-building among your school nutrition staff, principals and administrators, transportation departments, custodial staff and other district stakeholders also should be part of the process. Penny Parham, administrative director, department of food & nutrition, Miami-Dade County (Fla.) School District, advises inviting everyone to the party, and then keeping the lines of communication open. “Don’t hesitate to include everybody! You have to consider technology, operations, staffing the truck, accountability—everything. And your connections on an individual level are really important; they can make or break the sales, visibility and success of the food truck.”

Make Time for Marketing
You can get more out of your truck, trailer or van if you let it double as a rolling advertisement for your school nutrition program. Districts with a dedicated truck fleet often invest in a branded design that is literally wrapped around the truck to give it distinctive visual impact. In Pinellas County, Fla., vehicles are emblazoned with eye-catching phrases that tout the benefits of school nutrition and summer feeding, such as “Food That’s In When School Is Out” and “We Think Food Because They Can’t Think Without It.”

Consider capitalizing on the novelty of meal service from a food truck. Those using this option to build participation at the secondary school level tend to rotate service among different sites. Marketing it as an infrequent, special opportunity prevents students from taking it for granted as simply another daily point-of-purchase option.

Caring and Sharing
Working in a school nutrition environment is a privilege, says Minneapolis’ Irfan Chaudhry. Every decision is in service to the customer—the kids. “The purpose attached to working for public schools...
gives me goose bumps. We are the ‘vehicle’ that is reaching out to the community, and our kids, providing multiple services. Our food truck program contributes to this, and allows us to increase student access to the best possible, locally grown, ‘clean living’ food,” he says.

In Salida, Calif., Billy Reid is ready to take a step back from his meals via wheels success in preparation to move forward. “We’re currently in the process of re-evaluating our entire program and revitalizing it; it’s good, and it works, but we are looking at expanding our [mobile] service, as well as some re-branding and marketing for the future,” he explains.

In the meantime, like most of his peers across the country, Reid is eager to share his expertise. He invites school nutrition colleagues to call on him, and others with experience with mobile meals, for guidance no matter where they are in the process. “The great thing about school foodservice is that we’re all in this together,” he notes. “In the private sector, there is competition, but [here] we are all willing to share and help one another achieve success. Reach out to those who have done this, and take it one step at a time.” Pausing, Reid adds, with a big laugh, “And hey, if it doesn’t work, you can always sell the truck! Call me!”

Christina Uticone is a freelance writer based in Houston, Texas. Illustrations by Ivary, iamStudio and Kamaga/jiunlimited.com.

The Summer Food Service Program can be a good entry to starting up a mobile feeding operation. Learn more about how summer meals can be a great fit at www.schoolnutrition.org/snmagazinebonuscontent.

Your School Menus on a Mobile App
Affordable. Easy to maintain. And drives results.

*It used to take me up to 2 days to create PDF menus. With Nutrislice, it takes approximately 20 minutes and they are more engaging and customer friendly. Thank you, Nutrislice!* - Lisa Holt, Director, TN

866-524-3444 nutrislice.com/menus