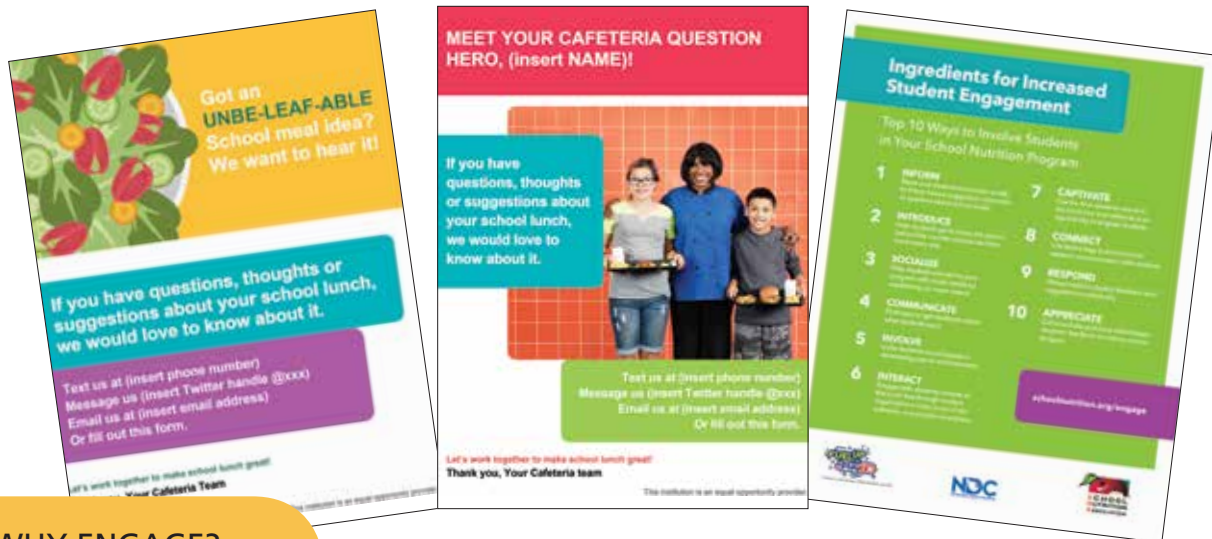


Want to **Feed More** Kids? **Seek More Feedback**



WHY ENGAGE?

Why is it so important to connect with students and increase their engagement in your school meals program? Certainly, it will help to increase participation, but there are other objectives and outcomes to proactive outreach that can prove beneficial to school nutrition operations.

- ◆◆ **Directors** can gain insight about the barriers that keep students away from eating school meals, as well as build an understanding of what is working and where there are plateaus and opportunities for growth.
- ◆◆ **Managers and school nutrition staff** can get to know the students they serve—and vice-versa—while identifying ways to create and present more appealing meals by capitalizing on effective marketing techniques.
- ◆◆ **Students** become empowered to make healthier choices and become leaders among their peers.

Your school meals program can benefit from SNA's new **Ingredients for Increased Student Engagement** tools.

BY CHRISTINA UTICONE

WHEN IT COMES TO INCREASING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT in initiatives that promote physical health and nutrition, our friends at Fuel Up to Play 60 (FUTP 60) quite literally wrote the playbook. (In fact, they write a new one every year!) Most *School Nutrition* readers are likely familiar with the FUTP 60 Playbook model, which offers participating schools with best-practice guidance on a host of wellness strategies, from in-class physical activity breaks to farm to school programs to breakfast promotion and more. Beyond the Playbook, FUTP 60 has developed other programs and strategies that encourage students to lead the way in creating a culture of wellness in schools. Among these is the Student Ambassador Program.

Peer power is an essential element in successfully driving student involvement in most school-based endeavors, so the Student Ambassadors (youth in sixth grade or higher) serve a valuable role—individually in their schools and collectively as a group—in generating support for programs and activities that promote healthy behaviors. With thousands of kids engaged across the country, the FUTP 60 Student Ambassadors can and do provide insights into how adult advocates for child wellness can improve their outreach efforts to engage youngsters at all grade levels.

SNA's marketing team had opportunities this school year to lead conversations with FUTP60 Student Ambassadors to learn specifically how America's school cafeteria teams can do more to connect with the kids they serve. The Youth

Engagement Network Pilot was designed to understand the types of student insights that would be most useful to school nutrition operators (e.g. meal quality, service, dining environment, social factors) and to gain an improved understanding of some of the barriers to student participation. SNA asked the Student Ambassadors to help bust myths about school meals, as well as to identify best practices for collaboration activities with cafeteria staff.

The ultimate goal of the project was to use the student feedback to produce, with support from National Dairy Council (NDC) and FUTP 60, resource materials that school nutrition professionals at all levels can use to improve their efforts in generating greater student engagement in school meals and other cafeteria-based activities. SNA and its partners are excited to present **Ingredients for Increased Student Engagement**, online tools available now at www.schoolnutrition.org/engage.

Perhaps the best testament for taking full advantage of these resources comes from the enthusiasm of the Student Ambassadors who participated in the pilot; they were so appreciative of SNA and NDC's efforts to engage *them*. All of the youth participants reported that they enjoyed speaking with decision-makers and leaders. Nearly 90% said they developed confidence, empowerment and new skills (communications, storytelling, leadership) as a result of their involvement in the pilot.

This generation has an avid desire to be active partners in creating change. They want to be asked their opinions and for those to be *heard*—and taken seriously. They want to dialogue

about their needs and concerns. They are open to learning more about your perspectives, too. Understanding your challenges and the factors that go into your decisions about their meals gives kids a better foundation to work *with* you on addressing their priorities. Connecting with student customers to engage their interest and their involvement can pay off in far-reaching ways.

RAISE THE BAR

Most *School Nutrition* readers know all this. But are you *truly* acting on your awareness about students' need to be actively engaged in the school meals operation? Do *their* perceptions and *your* reality match up?

Let's say that every single menu item served has been vetted by a student tasting group. That's great. Do the rest of the students know this? Or are they making assumptions that the menu is created only by adults? Perhaps your monthly menus include the manager's name and contact information with encouragement to reach out with questions, concerns and feedback. But do you really think students retain that information—or even register seeing it? If you're being honest with yourself, would you concede that there's a lot more you can do to connect—really connect—with your student customers?

The following top 10 list of strategies was developed to help you revisit and refresh your efforts to engage students both inside and outside the cafeteria. This step-by-step checklist can be used by *everyone* on the team, from the cashier to the server to the manager to the director.

STEP 1: INFORM

Do your students know who to talk to when they have suggestions or questions about their school meals? The first step in increasing student engagement is making sure students know who to talk to about their school meals—and *encouraging them to do so*.

Let students know you're listening by distributing a periodic survey or establishing a permanent suggestion box. If you have some tech-savvy office assistance, use social media or apps to reach out to students and request online feedback. As students—and you—become more sophisticated in using smartphone technology, you may be able to link your digital menu boards to text-based polling software for real-time engagement, whether on a specific menu item or something that has nothing to do with school meals—such as picking NFL or NHL winners—but makes even the serving line a fun destination.

STEP 2: INTRODUCE

A consistent theme among the FUTP 60 Student Ambassadors was that they all wished that they knew more about the cafeteria team they see every day! Connect school nutrition staff with students in a meaningful way. Help your students get to know the people serving their school lunch with "icebreakers" and other prompts that facilitate student-staff connections. This can be as simple as eye-catching signage introducing a staff member, along with a photo and a few facts about the person (such as how long have they worked in school nutrition, a description of their role, a favorite part of their job). End with an action statement to encourage student-submitted questions and comments.

Go further by presenting students with trivia about staff members displayed around the cafeteria (e.g. favorite school lunch growing up or preferred weekends activities). Mix it up by periodically surveying the students for questions about what *they* want to know about their favorite school nutrition staffers.

STEP 3: SOCIALIZE

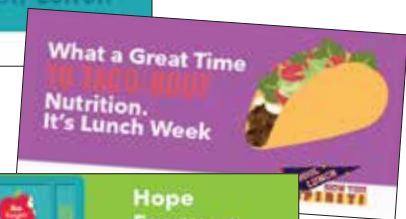
Meet kids where they “live”—online! Connecting with students online is about more than just being *on* social media—it’s about *using* this tech tool effectively. Learn how students use different social media apps (Twitter for news, Snapchat and Instagram for social sharing, Facebook for connecting with their parents, etc.) and craft your messages accordingly. If you’re already using social media but don’t seem to be finding a foothold with students online, this is yet another opportunity for a student survey. Reach out and ask which platforms they use and where they would like to find your program on social media.

Feeling anxious about generating the “right” content to share? Look no further than your own SNA members-only account on SchoolNutrition.org. Login to www.schoolnutrition.org/pr to access shareable content that includes banner ads, customizable handouts, flyers and an animated video. These materials can be used every day or—to help you capitalize on special occasions like National School Lunch Week, National School Breakfast Week and School Nutrition Employee Week/School Lunch Hero Day.

Whether you use SNA materials or generate cafeteria- or district-specific content, you should follow a few general rules-of-thumb for successful social media shares:

- ◆◆ Images, GIFs, videos and memes are more eye-catching and engaging than text-only status updates.
- ◆◆ Tag both people and organizations and use hashtags to broaden the reach of your posts. Start with something simple, such as #schoolnutrition, and brainstorm unique hashtags with staffers. Does your school district or school nutrition program have its own hashtags? Make sure to include those as well.
- ◆◆ Two things about photos: practice and be picky! Great food photos will help you put your best foot forward with all stakeholders, not just students.

Be relentless in sharing information about how your students can connect with your cafeteria online: website URL, Twitter handle, Instagram and Facebook accounts, hashtags, etc. Make sure this information is displayed in the cafeteria and appears on all print materials and on all digital ones, too.



WHERE TO BEGIN?

Are you excited about raising your student engagement efforts to the next level? SNA and National Dairy Council want you to turn that enthusiasm into action, without delay! Visit www.schoolnutrition.org/engage to access a number of resource materials you can use to start making better connections with the kids you serve. Ingredients for Increased Student Engagement include:

- ◆◆ colorful, customizable flyers to encourage students to share questions, thoughts or suggestions with the cafeteria manager
- ◆◆ two variations of flyers or displays with prompts for establishing ways for students to get to know their cafeteria team members

STEP 4: COMMUNICATE

Ready to traverse that two-way communication street? It’s not just about getting their feedback on your menu; it’s also about seeking student opinions on *everything* about the cafeteria operation, from customer service to lunch line experience to dining area décor and atmosphere. Don’t just ask the students what you want to know—ask them what they want you to know! Your students may have helpful suggestions and concerns that have nothing to do with the food you serve.

FUTP 60 offers a variety of resources that its Program Advisors can use to engage students in different physical activity and healthy eating “plays” from its playbook. Visit www.FuelUpToPlay60.com/tools to access these and find related ideas that will help open the lines of communication between students and school nutrition managers and staff.



STEP 5: INVOLVE

At the heart of your program are the menu items you serve. If students aren't eating, you have a *long* road of engagement efforts ahead. Menu development should always involve some level of customer taste testing—and even when you've decided to add a kid-approved item to the menu, you may still need to coax students to embrace the unfamiliar.

There are many ways to involve students in endorsing the cafeteria menu. It can be as simple as offering lunchtime samples of new items or ingredients before they go on the menu, along with an opportunity for kids to vote and offer feedback. Or you can create more elaborate ways for students to feel invested and give feedback on their school meals, such as:

- ▶▶ Form a student club or panel charged with brainstorming ideas for menus, as well as schoolwide celebrations, to generate peer-to-peer interest in school lunch. Similarly, you can charge an existing group—such as the student government—with some of these responsibilities.
- ▶▶ Coordinate contests that carry the investment theme to the next level, such as giving winners “naming rights” for new menu items.
- ▶▶ Work with kids to generate student-created memes and artwork that offer a peer-to-peer marketing effort, as well as help *you* to see school meals from the student perspective—a win/win!

STEP 6: INTERACT

When everyone steps outside of their comfort zone, exciting things happen! Get students out of the lunch line, and your staff out of the kitchen, and make a point to interact in fresh, new ways. Is your school already active in the Fuel Up to Play 60 program? If so, your first order of business should be to connect with your school's Program Advisor(s) and Student Ambassador(s) to join forces for creative brainstorming, problem-solving and generating enthusiasm for healthy school meals and a healthy school environment for all students.

If your school is *not* active in FUTP 60, consider becoming a Program Advisor yourself or partnering with an engaged teacher or administrator to take steps toward maximizing the opportunities of this national program. Visit www.FuelUpToPlay60.com for general information, as well as www.FuelUpToPlay60.com/playbooks/current-seasons-play-book for inspiration from specific activities to engage students and adult stakeholders in a school-wide effort.

STARTING THE DIALOGUE

SNA asked Fuel Up to Play 60 Student Ambassadors to share their reflections on the following questions, which led to the development of the “Ingredients for Increased Student Engagement” tools. Variations on these queries may be a great place for you to start working with student groups and individual youngsters in your school.

- ▶▶ Would knowing that students were involved in developing menus, designing the cafeteria, etc., have an impact on whether you would participate in school meals?
- ▶▶ Do you have tips for how school nutrition staff can connect and work with “influencers” like FUTP 60 Student Ambassadors?
- ▶▶ In general, how best can school nutrition professionals ask for feedback or involvement from students?
- ▶▶ Do you think the lunch line can be an intimidating place? What could be done to make it less so?

The FUTP 60 Student Ambassadors had their own questions that they posed to Linette Dodson, PhD, RD, LD, SNS, director of school nutrition, Carrollton City (Ga.) School District, and Sandra Voss, RD, SNS, director of food & nutrition services, Marquardt School District 15, Glendale Heights, Ill., who participated in one call. These may give you some insight into the types of questions your students have, but haven't asked—yet.

- ▶▶ What role do students have in choosing what is for lunch?
- ▶▶ How do you get the word out to students about nutritional content in menu items?
- ▶▶ What is the best way for students to approach their school nutrition directors or cafeteria staff to get more involved in decisions about lunch or the lunch room?

STEP 7: CAPTIVATE



Make the cafeteria lunch line and dining areas places where students are eager to be. From basic merchandising best practices to seasonal décor changes to more elaborate activities and games, when you make an effort, the kids will notice. Every time a student goes through the serving line or sits down to eat in the cafeteria, that's a chance for you to interact with her or him.

Remember those staff trivia posters we suggested in Step Two? Create a Bingo-style or other trivia game for students to complete, winning prizes based on who knows the most about their favorite school nutrition staff member. Lunch period activities—such as taste tests and food decorating contests—help students feel excited by and invested in their cafeteria.

STEP 8: CONNECT

The social media strategies described in Step 3 are not the only ways to capitalize on the latest communications technologies to attract student attention. Work with your tech teams to make better use of video, because this generation is all over YouTube! Can you convert a real-time cafeteria promotion for use with a smartphone app? Look at software options that allow participants to rate food items or cafeteria experiences. Create simple online games or quizzes that reinforce nutrition messages.

Another way to engage students is to invite *them* to do the cutting-edge work. Suggest they submit positive videos, smartphone photos or school breakfast/lunch memes as contest options. Sure, younger kids still use crayons and markers for art contests, but perhaps it's time to offer the older kids a poster contest opportunity that allows them to make use of design software. Just make sure the prize is a worthy incentive.

STEP 9: RESPOND

How you respond to student feedback is critically important. Students want to be heard, so addressing their individual concerns requires an individual approach. Responding to negative feedback can be challenging, but it provides yet another opportunity for dialogue, particularly with secondary school students.

Identify and practice positive customer service-based strategies with your staff for effective responses to students. For example, use “if/then” statements to rehearse how to address student criticism: “If a student says ‘I hate school lunch!’ then you can respond by asking him or her to be more specific and constructive: ‘Can you tell me *exactly* what it is that you don’t like? What would you like to see on the menu instead?’”

STEP 10: APPRECIATE

You might be surprised at just how important this step is to your students! Go beyond saying a simple “thank you” when students participate in activities designed to gather their feedback. Instead, let your customers know how their feedback made an impact. Be specific and share how their comments, questions and concerns have shaped changes in your cafeteria. With this step, you bring the communication loop full circle, creating an atmosphere of trust and teamwork between school nutrition staff and students.

TO ENGAGE IS TO EMPOWER

Student engagement in school meals doesn't have a “finish line,” and marketing to your students isn't a linear process with a defined beginning or end. SNA and NDC want to encourage *School Nutrition* readers to take these 10 steps and use them as inspiration for creating a unique and innovative engagement program that is customized for your students.

When you engage your students in making the cafeteria—and the school environment—the cornerstone of a healthy environment, you also empower them to speak up and advocate for positive changes. Your confidence and commitment to this effort makes you a leader who is creating a new generation of active and engaged leaders. It's up to you—are you ready to take the first step? Reach out and connect with your kids. **SN**

Christina Uticone is a freelance writer based in Houston, Texas, and an SN contributing editor. SN Editor Patricia Fitzgerald also contributed to this article. SNA and National Dairy Council thank the Fuel Up to Play 60 Student Ambassadors who participated in the Youth Engagement Network Pilot, as well as Linette Dodson, PhD, RD, LD, SNS, director of school nutrition, Carrollton City (Ga.) School District, and Sandra Voss, RD, SNS, director of food & nutrition services, Marquardt School District 15, Glendale Heights, Ill., who participated in one of the calls with the students and reviewed the online tools.