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## PLAN A GREAT "TRIP"

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Don't wait for a permission slip to up your **field trip** meal service game.



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Spring is coming—and you know what *that* means! Field trip season is right around the corner. Field trips typically involve a student activity group, a single class or even an entire grade boarding school buses and heading off-campus for most or all of the day for a unique educational experience (and are less-involved than the multi-day class trips that entail overnight travel). The time-honored tradition of field trips has been embraced by generations of students, but such events can be a source of immense frustration for the school nutrition team.

If this has been your personal experience or whether you've heard horror stories from veterans, it might be fair to characterize your reaction to our reminder as less than enthusiastic. But field trips don't have to be something to dread—proactive communication, planning and creativity can greatly reduce the hassle factor and, in some cases, even provide a great opportunity to put your school nutrition program in the spotlight with parents and teachers.

### Are Field Trips Still a Thing?

One reason to adjust your attitude about field trips is that they are not as prevalent as they used to be. Field trips were on the decline even before the pandemic. Transportation costs alone make them an expensive proposition for cash-strapped districts, and as teachers face more and more demands to make the most of instructional time, the logistical challenges involved with coordinating a field trip can be an undeniable disincentive. Today, of course, the one-two punch of COVID-19 and record-high inflation has combined to further discourage resumption of these unique educational excursions.

But advocates of the educational benefits and enrichment opportunities provided through the field trip experience aren't deterred. Many teachers, parents, administrators and community partners recognize the power field trips have to stimulate student knowledge and engagement, whether it's a trip to a museum, historic site, nature center, zoo/aquarium, farm/greenhouse, theater/

concert hall, production plant or other destination—and there's considerable research that backs up these benefits. These are some reasons why supporters see the potential for field trips to make a comeback in the years ahead.

### Frustration Factors

Do you want to be the Field Trip Grinch, casting a pall on the excitement of children eager for excursions to destinations that some might never visit otherwise? Of course, you don't—but there are a few common scenarios associated with field trips that certainly challenge the enthusiastic support of the cafeteria team.

**Scenario:** Your team has prepped a great meal for the day. The menu features several student favorites, including crunchy beef tacos, crispy mashed potato "smiles" and yogurt-fruit parfaits. The first lunch period goes off without a hitch, but when the bell rings for the second lunch period, no one arrives. Are classes late finishing an involved project? Five minutes pass, then 10, and you call the main office. "The fourth-

graders? They're spending the day at the planetarium. They left this morning, didn't anyone tell you?" The students were provided with vouchers for lunch at the onsite food court, so the teachers didn't give a single thought to informing you of their planned absence. Now, the school nutrition operation will bear the cost and frustration of menu items that cannot be salvaged for another meal and must be consigned to the trash can.

**Scenario:** It's a typically busy morning in the cafeteria. Breakfast service is in full swing, and the rest of the team is prepping for lunch. A delivery driver is ringing the backdoor bell, and you're going to have to inspect the delivery yourself, since you're short-staffed today. And now, an unfamiliar man is standing in the doorway of your office. "Hi, I don't think we've met. I'm Angelo Landolfi. I lead the school band and orchestra. I'm new this year, and it's my first



**P**roviding lunches for field trips doesn't have to be a complicated process, but you want to be sure you are covering all the bases as you develop a program that fits most scenarios. Note that these considerations presume that reimbursable meals will be served. If field trip coordinators want greater flexibility (such as serving juice or water instead of milk), you will need to discuss an alternative menu, pricing and payment plan.

### Menu

- Will students have a choice of different meals?
- Have you accounted for all reimbursable components in the meal?
- Can menu items be held safely at ambient temperatures?
  - If heat/cold-sensitive, do you have the tools (e.g. thermal bags, coolers) to hold at food-safe temperatures?
  - Will these need to be returned to the cafeteria at the end of the trip?
- Is the meal easy to serve?
- Is the meal easy to eat?
- Are utensils required?
- Are condiments necessary?
- Are any special meals required to meet food allergy or other dietary restrictions?

### Packaging

- Does to-go packaging help keep items at food-safe temperatures?

- Is the packaging easy to open by students of all ages with minimal adult assistance?
- Does your district/community mandate separation of waste elements (garbage, compost, recyclable)?
  - Are chaperones/drivers aware of any requirements for managing meal-related waste?

### Ordering/Delivery

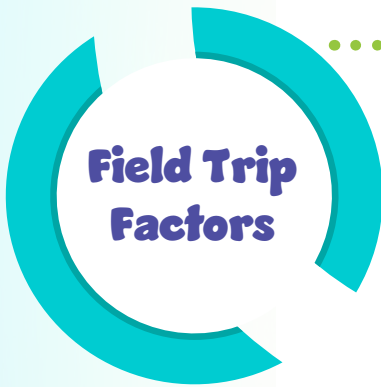
- What is the minimum notice you need in order to provide field trip meals?
- How do faculty/administrators/PTA go about placing an order for meals?
- Are students/parents expected to complete an order form to select among meal choices?
- Are any variables (such as allergen-free meals) clearly stated in your ordering process?
- How will meals be charged to student accounts?

- Will this be handled in advance at the ordering step?
- Will this be handled when students pick up their meals?
- Will trip leaders need to provide a final roster of participants?
- Have you considered how to handle meals for participating students with unpaid meal charges or who fail to submit an order form in advance?
- Will students be required to pick up their meals in the cafeteria prior to departure?
- Will trip leaders be required to pick up meals and transport them to the bus?
- Will the school nutrition team deliver meals to the bus?
- Is there a process for the return of any thermal bags and/or unconsumed shelf-stable menu items to the cafeteria?

*time taking the kids on their annual trip to the symphony. We're leaving in an hour, and the principal just asked me if I'd arranged for lunches on the bus. It wasn't in any of my notes from the previous director, so it fell through the cracks. I know this is ridiculously late notice, but is there any way you can help me? We just need some sandwiches and milk. Maybe chips? And some cookies?"*

**Scenario:** It's the end of the day, and you're working up the details of a training

activity on calibrating food thermometers. The phone rings—it's Ms. Gonzalez, who leads the magnet program on animal sciences and takes her students on an annual behind-the-scenes visit at the zoo. The field trip is not for another month, so there's plenty of time to plan for lunches. But she balks at the steps required to collect information that will ensure students are charged the appropriate price category for the meals. *"I have so many other logistics and*



**A**lthough you'll want to create as much of a one-size-fits-all approach to providing field trip meals to make this an efficient and cost-effective program, if this is a brand-new offering for your school nutrition operation, it can be helpful to get a sense of the variables in the excursions planned by the schools in your district. Field trips are often annual events that don't change significantly from one year to the next. New teachers and community partnerships create new programs, of course, but researching and understanding the most common excursions in your school or district can be very helpful in developing a meal service program that will show off your expertise and your willingness to be a team player in these unique educational experiences. (At the very least, you can raise your awareness for when field trips will impact in-cafeteria participation.)

## Trips

- ▶ What annual field trips are coordinated in your school?
- ▶ Who leads these (teachers, student activity advisors, PTA members, administrators)?
- ▶ Are these for individual classes, full grades or a mix of students from different classes/grades?
- ▶ What is the average age/grade level of students who participate in field trips?
- ▶ What is the average number of students who participate?
- ▶ When are these trips typically scheduled in the school year?
- ▶ What is the destination? How far away is it? How does the general flow of the day/program

affect meal service for those students?

- ▶ Are there overnight class trips planned that will affect cafeteria meal counts?

## Meal Service Expectations

- ▶ Are you providing meals for all participants or is there a brown-bag or onsite meal service option?
- ▶ Do any of the participating students have special menu needs for allergies or other dietary restrictions?
- ▶ Is there an expectation for menu items that do not comply with requirements for reimbursable meals (such as for juice or water instead

of milk)? If so, are trip coordinators aware that a different pricing structure and payment system will be required?

- ▶ Will you be expected to provide meals for the adults (leaders, chaperones, driver) on the trip? Do these meals need to be different from student meals? How will these be charged or paid for?
- ▶ For annual trips to the same destination, where are meals typically served and consumed? On the bus? At the destination? Will students be eating at picnic or other tables?
- ▶ Will you be asked to provide bottled water or a snack for the trip home? Who will pay for these?

*paperwork to manage for this trip, I don't understand why we can't just get all the lunches for free. It's just 15 students and three adults."*

In many communities, field trips are representative of the longstanding irritations experienced by school nutrition professionals who are routinely overlooked and undervalued as members of a school's staff. It's certainly unfair that you might not be able to automatically expect the courtesy and respect of being included in field trip plans, but the fact is that you can take steps to address the common pain points in the process, even turning a former nuisance into a novel opportunity! Here are some tips and tricks to creating a field trip meal service program.

## Process Management

Start by considering all of the elements of your conventional cafeteria meal service and how you'll adapt each to the needs and constrictions of a field trip. The checklist and questions in the boxes on pages 3 and 4 will help ensure you've covered most of the bases and inspire you and your team to identify any additional areas we've missed.

While you may be able to borrow approaches you already use for alternative breakfast service, afterschool snacks or mobile summer foodservice programs, class excursions tend to have several singular aspects, many of which are out of your control. For example, it's likely you won't be familiar with the specifics of *where* the students will eat their meals. Even the teachers and chaperones planning the event may only have a vague idea. (*"We're not sure if the kids will eat on the bus or on the steps of the museum entrance, or there may be an adjacent picnic area—it all depends on*

## Peer Assistance

Social media groups are a great resource for collecting best practices about initiatives like field trip meal service. When SN posted a query about field trip practices, SNA member Keri DuBois-Gould, NDTR, CDM, CFPP, School Nutrition Director, Quabbin Regional School District, Barre, Mass., shared some terrific resources available on her district's food-service website. Click [here](#) and scroll to the bottom of the page for their operating procedures and forms.

*traffic and how much time we have before the scheduled tour begins.")* It's also unlikely that anyone from your team or with food handling experience will be present.

Plus, every field trip is different. It's impractical to try to prepare for every variable, so it may be best to apply the most restrictive parameters that require the simplest solutions. For example, while one field trip lunch might be served at a place where there are picnic tables and trash cans, another will require students to eat on the bus in their seats. Thus, you may want to *always* provide a meal that is easy to eat, with components that don't add unnecessary waste (think grapes or apple slices, instead of bananas or whole oranges, which must be peeled) and in packaging that is simple to manage on a lap. Meal kits—either prepackaged ones you purchase or those you assemble on your own—are a particularly good choice for field trips. Indeed, prepackaged kits require zero prep



by your busy team, and they are easy to order and have on hand for those occasions when you have little or no notice of an upcoming excursion.

Similarly, you may not be able to confirm in advance whether the bus will have room for one or more coolers to safely transport milk and any other temperature-dependent items. (Not to mention the headaches of providing coolers and icepacks and getting these returned to your department at the conclusion of the trip.) For field trips, you may want to keep a supply of shelf-stable milk packaged in aseptic boxes on hand.

Teachers and chaperones will have their hands full corralling students in an unfamiliar setting, often within a rigid schedule. You want to make their meal service responsibilities as simple as possible to execute. Make sure that any special meals, especially for students with food allergies or intolerances, are clearly

labeled in large print. If you're not using a meal kit, provide a simple reference sheet to help make sure that all of the reimbursable menu components are distributed to each child.

Will students pick up meals in the cafeteria before they go, entering their PIN into the POS? If not, you may need to request a roster of participating students in advance and make it easy for adult trip leaders to record any absences or last-minute additions so you can update your POS the next day.

### **Don't Wait To Be Informed**

Even if you build it, they still may not come. You can have an easy-to-implement field trip meal service program. You might have created, posted and distributed a detailed operating procedure requiring teachers to inform the school cafeteria about upcoming field trips, even if meal service is not requested. And you may *still* find yourself facing one of the scenarios described at the start of this article. For peace of mind and to be customer service-forward, the onus is on you to be proactive about being aware of upcoming field trips and marketing your program to leaders.

If you're a director, supervisor or cafeteria site manager, put a tickler in your personal calendar on the first school day of each month to check on the status of planned field trips. There's likely a master calendar that is maintained by the principal's office or perhaps the transportation department. Find out who is responsible for maintaining such schedules at each school site.

Send periodic reminder emails to faculty and the PTA. Change up the content of these emails so they attract attention. For example, in one communication, you may want to focus on promoting your field trip



## **In-School Field Trips**

Feeling inspired by all this discussion of the unique educational opportunities students can experience on a field trip? Maybe it's time to offer an in-school field trip, inviting classes, grades or groups to explore your school nutrition operation! A behind-the-scenes tour of a prep kitchen and central warehouse is a great way to engage kids in school meals. From the large kettles and banks of ovens to refrigerated walk-ins, the setting is very different from a home kitchen. Depending on the size of the group and the available time, you might organize a hands-on activity to assemble kid-friendly snacks, teaching culinary and food safety skills, as well as reinforcing nutrition messages. Provide paper chef hats, aprons and gloves to make the experience even more engaging.



## Go the Extra Mile

Do you have a bus or food truck that you use for summer meal service? Savvy school nutrition directors are on the lookout for ideas that will improve the return on investment for these vehicles by finding opportunities to send them on the road during the school year, whether for special foodservice promotions (like the *monthly Birthday Bus in Grant County, Ky., featured in SN's November/December 2022 issue*), nutrition education engagement activities or pop-up style meal service at select locations. SN has also heard anecdotal reports of some districts exploring the possibility of sending a staffed food truck to travel along with the field trip buses and provide meal service straight from the truck!

meal service options, but in another, you can explain why it's important (especially to the district budget) to let cafeteria staff know when a field trip will affect expected meal counts for the day.



At the beginning of the school year, make sure field trip procedures are part of the resources that are provided to teachers and student group advisers. This is good information to include in any separate orientation materials made available to new faculty or administration hires.

Invite feedback on this aspect of your school nutrition program. At the conclusion of an event, you might consider sending a simple evaluation form to field trip coordinators, leaders and chaperones—even parents and students. Were they satisfied with the service your team provided? Were there any glitches in the process? Are there suggestions for improvement? By showing your interest in their opinions, you demonstrate a customer-forward spirit that will be much welcomed as they manage all the logistics involved in the outing.

If you had the opportunity to participate in a school field trip when you were a kid, it's likely that you still have fond memories of the novel experience. As a school nutrition professional, you can play a role in helping to create such indelible memories for the children you serve today. It may be a small role—it's unlikely that kids will remember what they ate on the bus—but consider the simple matter of how their level of engagement and enjoyment might be affected by being hungry and cranky instead of full and raring to go! Your field trip meal can make the difference. **SN+**

*Patricia Fitzgerald is Editor of School Nutrition.*

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