

Hot Topics in School Nutrition Pre-Conference Session Summary Report

JANUARY 14, 2023



OVERVIEW OF SESSION

The past three years have been the most challenging time school nutrition professionals have faced. Multiple current hot topics for the 2022-2023 school year have emerged, including staffing challenges, inflation, decreased participation rates, unpaid meal debt, changing regulations and ongoing supply chain issues. The Hot Topics in School Nutrition Pre-Conference Session brought together participants from industry, state agencies and school nutrition program operators to share best practices and brainstorm new ideas on how to navigate these challenging issues. Bringing together these dedicated professionals was a proactive way to remain solution-oriented to help the School Nutrition Association develop resources and professional development opportunities for its membership.

WHO ATTENDED

Thirty-nine participants discussed hot topics and possible solutions in small groups. Representation included five from industry, seven from state or national government and twenty-seven from school districts.

FACILITATORS

The session was led by SNA Past Presidents Reginald Ross and Jean Ronnei.

Reginald Ross, SNS: SNA President 2020-2021. Since 2013, as Zone 3 Operations Consultant, Reggie has served as the liaison between NC-DPI and 41 school meal programs across 11 counties surrounding Charlotte, NC. Reggie provides ongoing support, training, and technical assistance to help these programs improve meal service for students and stay aligned with federal and state school meal guidelines. Reggie conducts regular Administrative Reviews and Procurement Reviews of the programs in his region and in the state. He assists other consultants who are assigned as a team to review selected School Food Authorities. Reggie joined SNA his first month on the job with Charlotte-Mecklenburg. Since then, he has served SNA in numerous capacities, including as Southeast Regional Director and At-Large Director on SNA's Board. Reggie is also an active member of North Carolina SNA, having served as President from 2013-2014. In recognition of his efforts, Reggie earned Foodservice Achievement Management Excellence (FAME) Silver Spirit Award in 2014.

Jean Ronnei, SNS: Jean has been a leader in school food for many years. In addition to serving as president of the School Nutrition Association (SNA), she led efforts in Saint Paul Public Schools (SPPS), MN to transform its program to one that received national recognition for building effective financial systems, designing innovative marketing strategies, and creating healthy menus that honored the diverse student body and drove participation. In addition to serving as Nutrition Services Director for SPPS, Jean served as Chief Operations Officer. In that role, she was responsible for Technology Services, Facilities, Safety & Security, Custodial, Transportation and Nutrition Services. This role provided her with valuable insights into K-12 and has made her uniquely qualified to support school districts in her role as Senior Consultant for ProTeam Foodservice Advisors.

PROCESS SUMMARY

The attendees were intentionally divided into small groups representing different perspectives. Table hosts were provided guidance in advance to help keep the discussion flowing and inclusive, as well as provide summary notes for this report. As participants arrived, they were asked to submit hot topics ideas that were added to a prepared list of anticipated hot topics. Each group drew two hot topics from the 'mystery box' to discuss at their table and report out as time allowed. The following pages are a transcription from the table hosts.

COMMON THEMES ACROSS MULTIPLE GROUPS

Although the questions varied, a few common themes surfaced.

Supply chain challenges: Ongoing disruptions in the supply chain coupled with rising costs, labor shortages, and insufficient regulatory relief continue to create significant challenges for the school nutrition programs.

Building partnerships: Several examples were given of how manufacturers or distributors may have useful ideas or materials for preparing products, including packaging and ideas for moving lines faster. Local outreach to administrators, businesses and parents may be useful in addressing needs or improving understanding of a need or opportunity as well as educating the community about school nutrition programs. The primary theme was developing a partnership mentality for working together.

Attract interest: To keep programs vibrant, student taste testing, friendly competitions on menu ideas and garnishing, and marketing were some of the ideas discussed to attract interest, participation and even help with increasing the workforce.

Lease freezers or warehouse space: As districts continue to struggle with supply chain challenges, participants discussed the feasibility of leasing storage space and challenges associated with this option, including transportation issues moving product to the schools.

Co-op purchasing: Cooperative purchasing was discussed as a way to increase district's buying power and receive better pricing on products.

USDA regulations: Operators face challenges with current meal pattern regulations and worry about proposed rules. Industry is concerned that proposed regulations will result in manufacturers stepping away from school business.

TRANSCRIPTION OF TABLE DISCUSSIONS AS PROVIDED BY TABLE HOSTS

Hot Topic: Supply Chain Challenges

Districts continue to face ongoing supply chain challenges due to manufacturer shortages, decreased SKU's, longer lead times, and record inflation.

- Discussion notes and possible solutions:
- Rising costs of products have caused directors to change menus.
- Rethink bidding process.
- Use products in more than one way for menus.
- Order products further in advance if you have sufficient storage.
- Impact of Transitional Meal Standards and proposed USDA Meal Pattern is of great concern for product availability.
- Continue to build relationships with vendors and communicate needs so everyone can work together.

Hot Topic: Major food distributors are dropping school districts, leaving districts with distributors that are not qualified, don't have good customer service, have more archaic systems, and don't know how to do commodity processing, etc. There is a concern regarding a lack of competition for bids, and in many cases no responses to bids.

Discussion Notes and Possible Solutions

Possible solutions:

- Request manufacturers to reduce minimum orders to distributors
- A state approved list of distributors
- Maintain a list of distributors for: dairy, produce, commercial items, commodity items, paper supplies
- Use local distributors
- Reach out to state agency for waivers i.e., milk distributors
- Have an inventory of shelf stable milk – but the product is expensive
- Look to local and regional companies to provide some of needed items. This is good for the local / regional economy too.

Challenges for smaller school districts:

- Minimum orders
- Space or spec issues
- Lease warehouse space – transportation issue
- Co-op purchasing
- Leasing of freezers

Hot topic: Negative meal balances are presenting challenges to the program and districts. Moving from serving meals at no cost to students to requiring families to now pay, programs are experiencing decreased meal participation and rising negative meal balance amounts.

Discussion notes and possible solutions:

- Ask principals to talk to parents. Principals have a stronger connection with families than the FNS director does.
- Software companies have materials to help parents sign up for meal benefits.
- Schools set up an account to cover fund balance losses
- Districts to advocate for universal meals for all students

Hot topic: Vegetable subgroups can be a challenge to fit starches and beans as a part of cold lunch menus.

Discussion notes and possible solutions:

- Use with the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) program if eligible. It makes it easier to meet meal pattern and the reimbursement is higher
- Can serve cold bean dishes like the Texas Caviar and possibly room temperature baked beans
- Taste testing for summer food service program to encourage students to taste these items
- Pre-portioned veggie cups

Hot Topic: Administrative Reviews

Discussion notes and possible solutions:

- Make a plan for your review
- Work with your state agency consultant
- Train staff all along the way
- If there is a finding, prepare district leadership for the possibility of a payback

Hot Topic: How does industry provide what operators need to increase participation?

Individually wrapped and/or bulk entrees that are easily prepared (speed scratch made).

Discussion notes and possible solutions:

- Ideas and menu descriptions for making and developing menus
- Provide pre-portioned items (ex. beans) that are already packed
- Anything to drive faster service
- Provide ideas through staff chefs who can come and train staff
- Look for partnerships with vendors who really understand the business to help provide solutions
- Equipment companies – what can we offer to help move lines even quicker
- Pilot program to bring together industry, state agencies and end users to really talk about it. Have a kitchen design consultant to work with architect and facilities team to ensure needs are met.
- Ask for a seat at the table.

Hot Topic: How do you improve workplace culture?

Discussion notes and possible solutions:

- To assess employees, possibly do a personality test to discover strengths.
- Utilize strengths of each person to enhance processes, present as 'trying some new things' and utilize discovered strengths.
- Possibly make changes in the process and move people around. Where people are strong, use that. It will make them feel good.
- The greatest morale booster may be to always let your staff know that they are appreciated in big and small ways. Help them shine as often as you can.

Hot Topic: Quality of equipment. Manufacturing labor is not as knowledgeable and they face labor shortages, unskilled labor and we face lead time during the pandemic.

Discussion notes and possible solutions:

- Partner with maintenance department to select equipment
- Make sure utilities can support purchased equipment
- Train staff on proper cleaning and daily maintenance

Hot Topic: Lack of flavor in school meals – need to change USDA standards as they are too stringent and impact flavor of foods (It really ends there!)

Discussion notes and possible solutions:

- Lobby at SNA's Legislative Action Conference (LAC) for fewer restrictions and not to go to the next level of sodium.
- Small district does different menus for different areas of the city.
- More kids' input by taste testing newer items.
- Educate our students and or have culinary competitions.

Hot Topic: Packaging/trays to improve participation of meals – appearance of meals.

Discussion notes and possible solutions:

- Put a lot of emphasis on garnishing
- Change a way of thinking and develop relationships with packaging vendors
- Increase in grab and go items
- Hire a chef
- Garnishing competition traveling 'trophy' garnishing school of the month

Hot Topic: Marketing – how to promote your program when most departments are understaffed.

Discussion notes and possible solutions:

- Challenge parents to come up with menu (contest style) that meets components
- Changing names of food items (region, popular) cheeseburger = Beale Street Burger.
- Take pictures daily.
- Promote DJ (rocking breakfast)
- Include industry to sponsor things like chef contest with students, using our regulations and menu it (with recognition) or promotional avenues like Facebook, TikTok, social media.
- SNN - School Nutrition News

Hot Topic: Unused commodity/entitlement

Discussion notes and possible solutions:

- Use your PAL on the most expensive items
- Cash in lieu of commodities program for all states

Hot Topics: Callouts – day of or short notice absence

Discussion notes and possible solutions:

Pool of employees:

- People can find their own replacements – list absences and pool/sub employees can choose a location.
- Post a list of subs inside of district office.
- Establish a policy of disciplinary action based on attendance policy (hold them accountable). Also, helps boost morale and provide opportunity for other associates that come to work.
- Coaching – get to know associate and determine if flexibilities can be applied (location/time)
- Staffing concerns: Goodwill industries – may be a source for staffing.

Hot Topic: Universal Meal ends.

Discussion notes and possible solutions:

- Long term: Fund universal meals at federal level
- Short term: donations, state legislature, local churches – set up account for food services, PTA, social media campaigns, non-profit donation awareness campaign.

Other discussion:

- What about a whole state being Community Eligibility Program (CEP) eligible? Further discussion led to a recommendation that the USDA multiplier go from 1.6% - 2.5%. This is being advocated for as it would make CEP more appealing to districts.
- Some states are covering the cost of reduced-price meals.

Hot Topic: How some teachers do not consider school nutrition staff as professionals. Example; lunch ladies, lack of respect.

Discussion notes and possible solutions:

- Employee of the month. Do things to acknowledge staff. Higher retention rate. Food handlers card required in some states.
- Stereotypical thinking: Make sure administrators are treating staff fairly and as contributing members of the team
- Present professionally: uniforms, professional development, Local Chapter of SNA

Hot Topic: Staffing Solutions to staff shortages. (Increase in on-the-job injuries, Workers Compensation, decrease in morale.)

Discussion notes and possible solutions:

- Increase wages and hours to make it competitive with other companies and others in the school system.
- Try to hire parents or grandparents who want to work the hours of their children. Put job posting on the school newsletter so that all parents know the job is open.
- To increase morale: Shirts, prizes for employees, more training makes them more confident.
- Build morale from the top down to the bottom.
- Recruit employees from other restaurants.

Hot Topic: Government restrictions on sodium, sugar, whole grain, etc.

Discussion notes and possible solutions:

- Find other ways to season food
- Use chicken stock when you can
- Have seasoning stations
- Ex: baked chicken – make it lemon pepper or other flavors
- Brand Items:
- Ex: use pizza boxes
- Ex: use different vendor
- Go to LAC
- Have your voice heard
- The more people that go the more we can accomplish