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K-12 FOODSERVICE

BY MARI BRAND



# Ending the School Year on a **HIGH NOTE**



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The end of the school year and the start of summer break is a season of transition for everyone working in school foodservice (and of course for the students too). It's hard work closing down your kitchen and it can be emotional and bittersweet as you watch some of your students come through the lunch line for the last time. But even through all this, it's also a time to pause and take pride in everything you've made happen this year and celebrate!



With the final days of the school year rapidly approaching—or already passed for some of you—we're taking a look at some of the incredible end of the year celebrations and heartfelt moments you've shared with your teams and students, from creative cafeteria transformations to fun final day lunches.

## Decorations and Celebrations Galore

In many cafeterias, festive decorations and themed celebrations are a year-round





occurrences throughout the year. The Dolly Parton and grizzly bear cutouts are permanent cafeteria residents, but even they joined in on the celebrations.

"Our school mascot is a grizzly bear... and Dolly is just something I thought would be fun for the kids," explained nutrition assistant Kelly Beam Newcomb. "The kids enjoy seeing all the ways she and the bear dress up with us."

This year, she and her team welcomed the start of summer break with a vibrant "Hello Summer" banner, a tropical beach backdrop and life-size surfboards so Dolly and the bear can hit the waves once school is officially out for the summer. "The kids' reactions are priceless! They get excited to see new things and are always looking for surprises all over the kitchen," she added.

Meanwhile, at **Archer City ISD in Texas**, cafeteria manager Debbie Rainwater Gulley and her team embraced the excited anticipation everyone feels in the lead up to summer with an impressive "Peace Out Countdown" to the last day of the school year and summery decorations throughout the cafeteria.

"This is the second year we've done a countdown, although this is the largest! We're as excited for summer break as the kids," Gulley said. "The kids enjoy the countdown and don't hesitate to tell us when we've forgotten to change the number... a couple of my ladies are very creative and like decorating, so we give it our best shot!"

Although it wasn't specifically an end of the year celebration for them, **Agawam**



affair, but that doesn't mean you can't make the last week or day of the school year extra special. At **St. Joseph School District in Missouri**, creative seasonal décor and themed dress up days are regular





PTO handed out glow bracelets to the kids,” said manager Meleen Gaynor. Adding to the theme, they served French bread pizza with white cheese that glowed perfectly under the black lights!

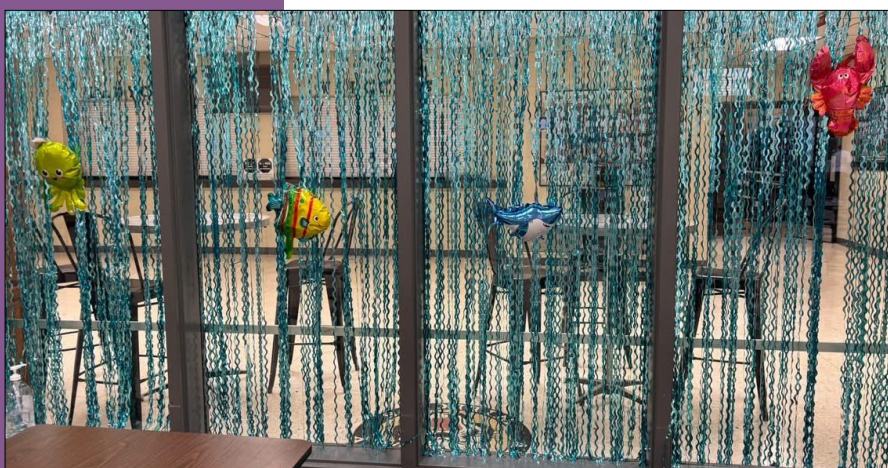
“The favorite part was seeing [the kids] smiles, listening to the laughs and dancing around. We kept hearing ‘wow, you did this for us!’ and we had just as much fun as the kids,” Gaynor recounted.

## Field Day Frisbees

Many of us have fond summer memories of throwing frisbees or flying discs at the beach or during a backyard cookout, but have you ever thought of using frisbees as a serving dish? Maybe not, but that’s exactly how Cheryl Jeffrey, school nutrition director at **Glencoe Public Schools (Okla.)** rang in the start of summer with her student customers.

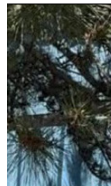
Inspired by a BBQ restaurant in Texas with the same unique serving method, Jeffrey worked with the Oklahoma Tobacco Settlement Endowment Trust (TSET) who sponsored the event and paid for enough frisbees to treat their kindergarten through 6th grade students to an extra fun lunch during field day. Complete with a sandwich, cheese stick, chips, crackers, raisins, carrots, cookies, apple juice and milk—all stacked on top of a frisbee—the lunch was a big hit with the kids.

“One little kid said to me ‘this is the best day of my life!’ I heard about it for days, they loved them,” said Jeffrey, also noting that participation was extra high that day. The students got to eat outside on picnic blankets or at outdoor tables, and although



**Jr. High School (Mass.)** went all out with a cafeteria glow party that captures the summer night vibe perfectly, complete with glow sticks, glowing tie-dye shirts, colorful flowers, rainbow streamers and black lights. “During breakfast it didn’t look like much, so the kids were like ‘oh, nice,’ but during lunch we had loud music and the lights off and the





the playground was open after lunch as usual, for many kids the frisbees (which they all got to take home afterwards) stole the show. "The little kindergarteners as soon as they got done just stayed and played with their frisbees in between them... It was one of those moments where you think 'I've got to do this again next year,' because so many people were so happy about it," Jeffrey explained.

Although some teachers were concerned the lunch and the frisbees would get out of hand, especially among the older students, they were all impressed with how

smoothly the entire event went in the end. All in all, the frisbee lunch was a big success, and something Jeffrey looks forward to trying again in the future, hopefully with enough frisbees to allow the high school students to join in too.

## Fond Memories and Heartfelt Goodbyes

Amidst all the fun and excitement that comes with the start of summer break, the last days of the school year are also filled with bittersweet goodbyes. With high school seniors graduating and younger students





moving on to middle school or high school in a new building, seeing the students you've built fond relationships with visiting the cafeteria for the last time is emotional.

"The emotions run high on our seniors' last day. We had the opportunity to feed their future, see them grow and get to know them. To see them walk out the last time brings tears," said Caila Wellsted, director of nutrition services at **Freeland Community School District in Michigan**. "Our high school team is built of moms and grandmas.

They see these students as their own in some ways. I have seen my staff hug crying students, pay off meal accounts for them, be a listening ear and [bring] meals and flowers for a student and their family after the passing of a parent," Wellsted added.

The last days of this school year were even more emotional than some at Freeland High School, with their cook Sally Burkey retiring after over 40 years. "I am going to miss all of it, the kids, staff and the kitchen crew. What the kids don't know is that it wasn't them who needed me, I needed them," explained Burkey, who served this year's senior class their last school lunch before they graduated.

Even though her students aren't ready to leave school entirely, Newcomb shared similar sentiments after seeing her 6th graders come through her school cafeteria one last time. "They actually came through this week saying 'this is the last time I'm going to put my code in here,' and I told them to stop saying that or I was going to cry!" she recalled. I try to make a positive connection with all the students as much as possible... I have been with a lot of them since kindergarten. I call them 'my kids,' and some of them even nicknamed me 'lunch lady momma.' There were lots of hugs on the last day of school."

## Happy Summer!

Whether your school has already finished for the year or you still have a few weeks to go, the final days of the school year are sure to be filled with all kinds of emotions—both the fun and excitement of summer break





and the bittersweet feeling of saying goodbye to the students you've come to know and care about over the years. If your school is still in session, hopefully these ideas will spark some inspiration for your own end of the year celebration. And if you've already closed down for the summer, it's never too early to brainstorm for next year—or host your own cafeteria glow party or fall-themed festivities to commemorate the start of school instead! **SN+**

*Photos courtesy of Glencoe Public Schools (Okla.), St. Joseph School District (Mo.), Agawam Jr. High School (Mass.), Archer City ISD (Texas) and Freeland Community School District (Mich.)*





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