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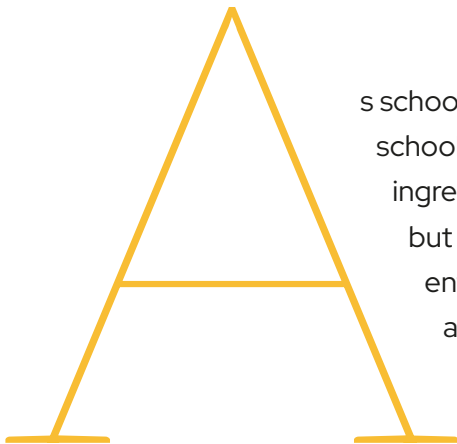
## MAKE YOUR CAFETERIA A CELEBRATION DESTINATION

From World Milk Day to Read Across America Week to National Banana Day, get practical tips and inspiration for how you can host special cafeteria celebrations all year round to keep students engaged and excited about school meals.

**BY MARI BRAND**



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s school nutrition professionals, you know that getting students interested in school meals is half the battle. Meeting regulations, sourcing products and ingredients, hiring and training staff and managing your budget are all vital, but you can't have a successful school nutrition program without enthusiastic customers. Of course, serving delicious food that's appealing to kids is step one, but what else can you do to get your students excited about coming into the cafeteria and buying a meal? One word: celebrations!

Most school nutrition teams host some special celebrations throughout the year for big events and holidays like National School Lunch and Breakfast Weeks, School Lunch Hero Day, Halloween, Christmas and other widely celebrated observances, but those only cover a few weeks or days out of the year. There are plenty of other smaller, more niche observances that make for perfect kid-friendly celebrations all year round; think National Banana Day (April 15), National Pokémon Day (February 27), International Music Day (October 1), National Nacho Day (November 6), National Soup Month (January) and National Waffle Week (the second week of September)—you get the picture. We're not suggesting you host a special celebration every single day or week of the school year—that wouldn't be sustainable for anyone, no matter how well-staffed or creative your cafeteria team is. But adding more special events to your calendar is a great way to make the cafeteria a more exciting place for students (and hopefully add some extra fun to the work day for staff, too!).

### START SMALL AND BUILD FROM THERE

If you aren't used to making special events a more regular part of your program, the idea of adding anything extra to your already busy schedule might not be appealing, but it doesn't need to be as big of an undertaking as the words "cafeteria celebration" might imply. And, as with most things in this field, there are plenty of people you can look to in the school nutrition community for advice, inspiration and resources to help you get started.



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—Sharron Saunders

Sharron Saunders, nutritionist and special diet coordinator at Iredell-Statesville Schools, Statesville, N.C., is one of them, as she and her team are well-versed in everything a top-tier cafeteria celebration entails. In addition to big events like National School Lunch Week (NSLW), National School Breakfast Week (NSBW) and School Lunch Hero Day, some of the other observances their schools have celebrated include World Kindness Day, Read Across America Week, National Banana Day and Dairy Month, along with events of their own creation like their "Fuel Your Body, Fuel Your Mind" healthy snack recipe contest held earlier this year in April.

"My advice to other cafeteria teams is to start small and focus on celebrations that can be done at no cost or low cost," Saunders advised. She also highlighted the importance of collaboration and making sure people's contributions don't go unrecognized. "Support your teams by assisting with printing materials, offering ideas and encouraging them throughout the process. A very important part of all these celebrations is ensuring staff feel seen, valued and appreciated. I make it a priority to build recognition

into everything we do. Recognition goes a long way—sometimes even a handwritten thank you note or sharing photos of their efforts can make a meaningful impact.”

Muriel Brooks, catering and special events manager at Johnston County Public Schools (JCPS), Smithfield, N.C., agreed it’s best to “start small and build from there.” Currently, she and her team try to hold at least two special events per month, typically across all 49 schools in their district, with a different school acting as the main host for each celebration. Still, that effort isn’t solely on the school nutrition team’s shoulders, and Brooks emphasized that reaching out to others in their community, both local and larger organizations, including SNA, for resources and support is a great way to make frequent celebrations achievable.

Brooks suggested cafeteria teams “partner with your school’s art teacher and invite students to help create decorations and displays for the event,” as involving students in the planning process can build even more excitement for the event itself. “You can also reach out to local, state and federal programs to ask about free resources they may offer, such as activity books, educational materials, costumes, information sheets or giveaways. Many organizations are happy to provide items that can be used as student prizes or educational activities to support your event at little to no cost,” she said, adding that they will also reach out to local law enforcement, EMS or firefighters to invite them to serve meals and interact with the students during an event. “There are so many great resources out there and many are free. You just have to do a little research.”

### FIND WHAT WORKS FOR YOU

As far as deciding what to celebrate, both Saunders and Brooks make use of [SNA's Made With School Lunch Celebration Calendar](#) (formerly the Promotion Calendar) to identify events for the school year ahead. In addition to their annual events like NSLW, NSBW, Giving Thanks at Thanksgiving, Spooktacular for Halloween, N.C. Crunch and a Polar Express themed event for the winter holiday, Brooks and her team look for events that will showcase their menu items well.

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—Muriel Brooks

Saunders follows a similar process when preparing their district’s monthly menus and communications materials. “When I send monthly menus to our schools, I also include that month’s promotional calendar page so managers and staff can see upcoming observances and begin thinking about ways they may want to participate,” she explained. “When deciding which celebrations to host, I look for opportunities that are fun, engaging and realistic for all schools in our district to participate in. I also try to focus on events that encourage student involvement and create positive experiences in the cafeteria without adding a significant financial burden to schools. Some celebrations are site-based, allowing individual schools to tailor activities in ways that best fit their students and school community while still aligning with overall district celebration goals.”

### FROM BANANA DAY TO A SPOOKTACULAR HALLOWEEN

After you have some ideas on the calendar, the fun part begins: crafting or purchasing decorations and costumes, brainstorming themed menu items, planning special activities and coming up with everything else you might need for a successful celebration. “Once we choose an idea to make an event, we

start putting together a plan using ideas from various sources such as Pinterest, Google research and different [organizations] such as USDA, GOT to be N.C., SNA, etc.,” said Brooks. “We make a lot of our own decorations, and anything we purchase or create is saved to be reused year after year. I organize everything into ‘kits’ that managers can check out free of charge anytime during the school year to decorate their cafeterias. Many of our annual events even have their own reusable kits, which helps us save money while still creating fun and welcoming spaces for students. We also purchased games like a giant Connect Four and made several other carnival type games that we reuse at our events for the kids to have some fun while enjoying their lunch.”

For bigger celebrations like NSLW and NSBW, Saunders and her team start planning as soon as the themes are announced to ensure they have plenty of time to prepare. Even for smaller events, they try to begin planning a month or so in advance depending on the scope. “For monthly or smaller celebrations, we typically send ideas along with the menu and then follow up a few weeks before the event with additional suggestions.” Like Brooks, they also make use of resources from SNA and other organizations and then “DIY” elements like bulletin boards and displays created by school nutrition teams at each school.

One of Iredell-Statesville Schools’ recent districtwide celebrations was for National Banana Day—an idea from SNA’s

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Iredell–Statesville Schools’ Sharon Elementary School celebrates Read Across America Week with Dr. Seuss themed meals and activities.



Celebration Calendar for a simple event that could easily be held at every school for no or very low cost while still building excitement for both students and staff. Each school was encouraged to take their own approach to the celebration to keep it fun and flexible for everyone. “To build engagement, some sites incorporated positive affirmations and messages on bananas. Our department created signage that was shared with schools, and the materials were used on serving lines, bulletin boards, dining rooms, and hallways to build enthusiasm,” Saunders gave as a few examples. “In addition, the manager at Third Creek Elementary took initiative by finding banana-themed coloring sheets and sharing them with teachers. Once students completed their artwork, the pages were proudly displayed in the dining room. Students took such pride in seeing their work showcased, and it became a simple but powerful example of how a manager can bring attention to an event at no cost while creating joy and excitement throughout the school. Several schools encouraged students and staff to wear yellow, and after an email invitation, some teachers even wore banana suits—including one teacher riding a hoverboard announcing ‘Happy Banana Day!’—which brought laughter and excitement throughout the building.”

In addition to decorations, costumes and engaging activities, they also try to incor-

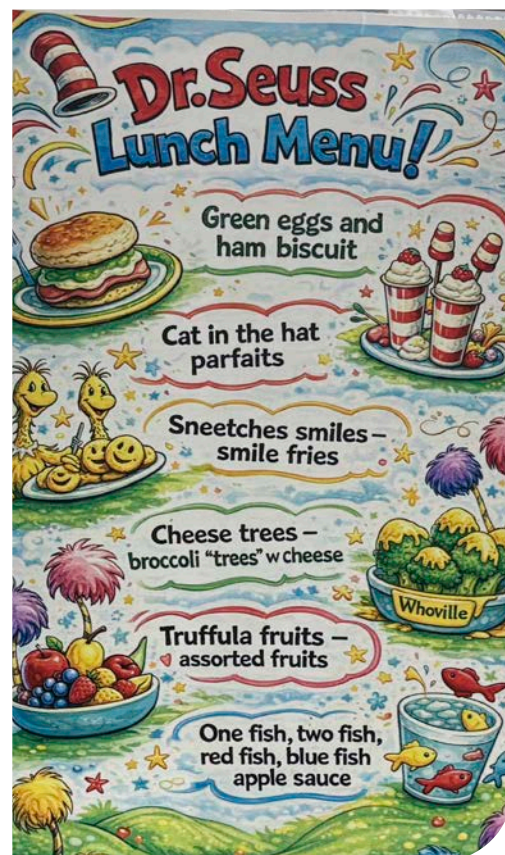


porate themed meals with the celebration. During Read Across America Week earlier this year, Iredell–Statesville Schools’ Sharon Elementary School team developed a themed menu that included Cat in the Hat parfaits; Sneetch smiles (potato smiles); One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish applesauce and Cheese Trees (broccoli with cheese).

Johnston County Public Schools also develops themed meals in addition to their decorations and celebration kits. To go with NSLW 2025’s “Taste the World: Your Passport for School Lunch” theme their menu included foods from around the world for students to try, along with a short history of the origin of each food. Giving Thanks at Thanksgiving features a classic Thanksgiving feast, PB&J spiders, jack o’ lantern oranges, mummy bananas and Dracula tomato basil soup appear on their Spooktacular Halloween menu, and during their Polar Express event students enjoy hot chocolate with their meal.

### WHY IT’S ALL WORTH IT

So, is all the effort worth it? For both Brooks and Saunders, absolutely! “We do it because we love seeing the smiles on our students’ faces and making the cafeteria feel warm and welcoming,” said



Brooks. “These events help create special memories, build relationships and show students that they are cared for every single day. The excitement they share, the sweet thank-you notes and their positive reactions remind us that our job is about so much more than serving meals.” Brooks’ team also prioritizes adding an educational component to their celebrations too, with themed activity sheets for each grade level and a special raffle to give students who complete the lessons the chance to win a prize.

The excitement these celebrations build also increases participation for both districts’ programs and provides opportunities to promote their programs to the broader community on social media and through local news. “Ultimately, our motivation is to promote our department, build relationships and provide nutrition education in a fun and meaningful way—which also helps increase participation,” said Saunders, who always submits photos and highlights of their events to local newspapers, SNA of North Carolina and the National SNA in addition to social media promotion to increase their reach.

Plus, the students aren’t the only ones having fun either. After their first Thanksgiving and Spooktacular celebrations, the



Johnston County Public Schools celebrates NSLW25 and their Spooktacular Halloween event.



Johnston County Public Schools goes all out for their annual winter Polar Express themed celebration.

A World Kindness Day celebration at Iredell-Statesville Schools' Lake Norman Elementary School.



principals at various schools in Brooks' district asked the school nutrition team to make both celebrations annual events because of how much administration, teachers, students, staff and parents all enjoyed them. Most of them also have their own fond memories of their favorite events and moments with students. Brooks' favorite is the winter Polar Express celebration, when they transform the cafeteria into train cars reminiscent of the movie and give each student a silver bell and a golden ticket that they can exchange for a cup of hot chocolate with their lunch. Other Jcps school nutrition team members shared their favorite celebrations and memories too:

"My favorite is when we do our holiday meal at school. The students get so excited for it every year, and it's special because it gives them something different than our everyday menu," said Jennifer Merlin. Tricia Jones agreed, adding "Last year, I had a student tell me it felt like he was eating at his grandma's house. That comment is what reminds me that stressful meals are worth all the work."

Laura Chavis named World Milk Day as her favorite, and Tammy Baker loves their beach/surfing, Dr. Seuss and Mario themed events. Meanwhile, Tammy Twiggs loves apple crunch day when they serve apples with caramel and chocolate along with baked potato day when students get to customize their own

baked potatoes with various toppings. "Any time the students get to embellish their favorite food it's a big hit here," she explained.

### CELEBRATIONS ALL YEAR ROUND

Collectively, school nutrition professionals are all familiar with the need, and sometimes the struggle, to encourage students to participate in their meal programs, and there are plenty of approaches to tackling that. If you celebrate any events at your school, whether it's National School Breakfast or Lunch Week, Halloween, Christmas or anything in between, you already know how excited students are when they walk into a cafeteria transformed by themed decorations, costumes, menus and more, and you probably have your own memories of favorite past celebrations too. So, keeping that energy going by adding more regular special events to your calendar—even if it's as simple as sticky notes with positive affirmations and motivational quotes for World Kindness Day or an exclusive build-your-own potato menu for baked

potato or sweet potato day—can have a big payoff in increased participation and opportunities for promoting your program.

Remember, starting small, saving your supplies and DIYs for future celebrations and taking advantage of free resources from other organizations can make hosting special events monthly or even weekly approachable and fun for everyone involved. Once you start selecting your events and planning, you'll probably realize you already have a lot of what you need within your own team. As Saunders puts it, "Most importantly, start with what you already have. The creativity, relationships and enthusiasm within your school nutrition teams are your greatest resources." Embracing that mindset will help build more excitement and positive connections with students—reminding you why making the cafeteria experience extra special is worth the effort.



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