

**CAFETERIA
CIRCUS**

NATIONAL SCHOOL LUNCH WEEK
★ OCT 12TH-16TH ★ 2026 ★

TOOLKIT



What's Inside

EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO BRING
THE BIG TOP TO YOUR CAFETERIA,
ALL IN ONE PLACE.

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Welcome to NSLW!

A NOTE FROM OUR PRESIDENT AND CEO

To every school nutrition professional stepping into the spotlight this October,

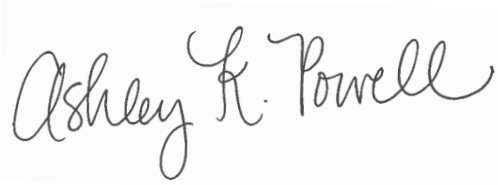
This National School Lunch Week means a little more to us this year. In June, we marked 80 years since President Truman signed the National School Lunch Act into law. That same year, in October 1946, a small group of school food service professionals gathered in Chicago and founded what would become SNA. Eighty years later, both of those things are still standing because people like you show up for them every single day.

We say this every year, and it's still true: too many people, even some of the families who rely on it most, don't fully understand what the National School Lunch Program actually does. They don't see the planning, the nutrition standards, the budgeting, the early mornings. They just see lunch. This week is our chance to change that, to help parents see the healthy, delicious food you're serving, to give local reporters and bloggers a reason to pay attention, and to get teachers and administrators talking about school meals as something worth caring about, not just something that happens down the hall.

Cafeteria Circus is playful on purpose. Eighty years of history deserves a real celebration, not just a quiet acknowledgment, and the people who make this program work deserve a spotlight as big as the one you give your students every day. But underneath the decorations and the themed menus, this week is about something simple: making sure your community understands that what happens in your cafeteria shapes whether kids show up ready to learn.

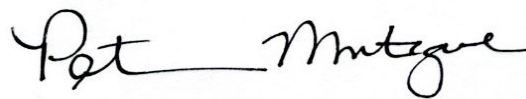
Thank you for everything you juggle, literally and otherwise, to get a tray in front of every student. Thank you for carrying forward something that started 80 years ago and making it better every year since. We hope this toolkit makes the celebration easy, and we hope by the end of the week, your school community understands a little more clearly just how much goes into the show you put on every single day.

With gratitude,



Ashley Powell

SNA President, 2026-2027



Patricia Montague, FASAE, CAE

SNA Chief Executive Officer

Celebrating School Lunch

WELCOME TO THE GREATEST LUNCH ON EARTH!

National School Lunch Week

National School Lunch Week (NSLW) celebrates the school nutrition professionals who serve nutritious, delicious meals that help millions of students learn, grow, and thrive. It's a time for schools, families, and communities to recognize the important role school meals play in supporting student health, well-being, and academic success.

Every school day, more than 95,000 schools and institutions serve lunch to over 30 million students nationwide. That's the scale of what your team is part of, and exactly why this week's spotlight belongs on you.

-Source: SNA School Meal Statistics, schoolnutrition.org



To our NSLW Ambassadors
THANK YOU

Our National School Lunch Week Ambassadors support essential School Nutrition Programs around the country and help fuel the mission of school nutrition that ensures we can continue to offer valuable tools, training, and resources to the dedicated professionals in our network



Why Cafeteria Circus?

Every year, SNA looks for a theme that can engage an entire school; from a kindergartner discovering a new fruit to a senior leading the morning announcements. Cafeteria Circus does just that, offering something for every age while bringing the whole school together around one shared celebration.

More than a theme, a circus is an experience. It creates excitement, sparks curiosity, and turns an ordinary day into something students look forward to. That's exactly the spirit behind this year's National School Lunch Week: transforming the cafeteria from a routine stop into the place everyone wants to be.

With Cafeteria Circus: Where Healthy Choices Take Center Stage, healthy foods become the stars of the show and school nutrition professionals take on the ringmaster's role they've earned. Through themed menus, playful activities, and colorful decorations, students of every age are invited into the big top to discover that healthy choices can be both nutritious and fun.

Why This Week Matters

School lunch became federal law in 1946 under the National School Lunch Act. In 1962, Congress designated the second week of October as National School Lunch Week to recognize the impact of that program, a tradition SNA has helped carry forward every year since.

NSLW26 Resources

Bring the excitement to your school with SNA's FREE National School Lunch Week resources, including activity ideas, decorations, promotional materials, social media graphics, and more. Visit schoolnutrition.org/nslw or scan the QR code to download everything you need for a show-stopping celebration!



Prepare for a Spectacular Show

GET READY FOR NATIONAL SCHOOL LUNCH WEEK

Every great show starts with a little planning! Use this simple timeline to help your team create a fun, engaging celebration that puts healthy choices center stage.



Set the Stage

6-8 Weeks Before

- ★ **Plan your performance.** Choose activities, menus, and daily themes.
- ★ **Gather your cast.** Assign staff roles and recruit volunteers.
- ★ **Map your budget.** Decide on decorations, supplies, and giveaways.
- ★ **Order your gear.** Order SNA Official Merchandise, apparel, and giveaways for early arrival.

• CIRCUS •



Build the Big Top

4-6 Weeks Before

- ★ **Create the atmosphere.** Design decorations, signage, and displays.
- ★ **Spread the word.** Promote the celebration with students, staff, and families.
- ★ **Draft your press release.** Connect with your communications team or local media contact in advance.
- ★ **Invite special guests.** Welcome administrators, school board members, legislators, or local media.

START



Take Center Stage

Showtime!

- ★ **Welcome the crowd.** Greet students with music, decorations, and smiles.
- ★ **Celebrate healthy choices.** Encourage students to try something new.
- ★ **Keep it safe.** Double check that decorations, costumes, and taste-test stations stay clear of allergens and meet your district's food safety and meal pattern guidelines.
- ★ **Capture the memories.** Share photos and recognize staff and student participation.



Rehearse the Show

2 Weeks Before

- ★ **Confirm your guests.** Follow up on invitations and share the final schedule.
- ★ **Finalize menus.** Confirm orders and prepare featured recipes.
- ★ **Practice activities.** Test games, stations, and student challenges.
- ★ **Build excitement.** Share countdowns, PA announcements, and teaser posters.



Take a Bow

Final Curtain Call

- ★ **Celebrate your team.** Thank staff, volunteers, and partners.
- ★ **Share your success.** Post highlights with your school community.
- ★ **Save your best ideas.** Keep notes and decorations for next year's show.





The Official Resources

START THE SHOW WITH THESE FREE SNA RESOURCES!

Official Logos & Graphics

Download official campaign logos and graphics in English and Spanish for a coordinated celebration.

Activity Guide

Discover themed activities, planning tips, decor ideas, and student engagement inspiration.

Social Media Toolkit

Share ready-to-use graphics and sample posts to build excitement with your school community.

Press Release Template

Customize and share your school's National School Lunch Week celebration with local media.

Proclamation Template

Invite local leaders to officially recognize National School Lunch Week in your community.

Official Merchandise

Find themed apparel, decorations, and giveaways to complete your celebration.

Digital Backgrounds

Add a touch of Big Top fun to virtual meetings and presentations.



SHARE YOUR SHOW!

Tag @SchoolNutritionAssociation and use the #NSLW26 hashtag when you post your celebration. We regularly feature member photos across our channels, and yours could be next!

Scan the QR code or visit schoolnutrition.org/nslw to download your FREE National School Lunch Week resources, provided by School Nutrition Association.



Idea Planner

USE THE SPACE BELOW TO PLAN YOUR OWN SHOW.

There's no wrong way to fill it in, just start writing!

✧ ✧ Reflect on Last Year

*What worked last year that's worth repeating?
What would you skip this time?*

✧ ✧ Bring the Big Top to Life ✧

*Which activities, decorations, or menu ideas
from this toolkit fit your school best?*



✧ ✧ Set Your Spotlight Goal ✧

*What's one thing you want students, staff, or
families to walk away feeling this week?*

Activities for Every Age

Bringing your NSLW show to life for every age group!



Elementary School (K–5)

Make It Magical & Hands-On

- Bring the theme to life with colorful décor, characters, and storytelling.
- Add simple activities like games, crafts, scavenger hunts, or taste tests.
- Celebrate every student for participating and making healthy choices.

Pro Tip: Keep it fun, simple, and full of imagination!



Middle School (6–8)

Make It Creative & Interactive

- Offer challenges, trivia, taste tests, or activities that encourage exploration.
- Give students a voice by letting them vote, create, and share ideas.
- Connect school meals to energy, focus, sports, and success.

Pro Tip: Add choice and friendly competition to boost engagement!



High School (9–12)

Make It Meaningful & Student-Led

- Invite students to lead activities, promote events, or create content.
- Highlight how school meals fuel academics, activities, and future goals.
- Celebrate the impact of school nutrition professionals.

Pro Tip: Keep it authentic—older students want opportunities that matter!



Celebrate Everyone!

Make It Meaningful & Student-Led

- Recognize students and staff through announcements, displays, or awards.
- Share photos, artwork, and stories from the celebration.
- Show appreciation for the team behind every meal.

Easy Costume Ideas

BRING THE CIRCUS TO LIFE WITH THESE IDEAS!

Dress the part with fantastic, school-friendly outfits! Staff and students can join the fun using items they already have at home, DIY accessories, and a little creativity.



Circus Performer

Channel the excitement of the big top with bright colors, stripes, hats, bow ties, suspenders, or playful accessories. Add a homemade name tag like “Ringmaster,” “Snack Juggler,” or “Fruit Acrobat.”

Ringmaster Ready

Lead the celebration in style with a blazer, button-down shirt, vest, or dress clothes. Add a DIY top hat, bow tie, or microphone prop to announce the day’s “main event.”



Food Character Fun

Dress as a favorite cafeteria food!

Create simple costumes inspired by fruits, vegetables, grains, or other menu favorites using colorful clothing, signs, or homemade accessories.



Circus Crew Day

Coordinate as a team with matching colors or roles—think ticket takers, performers, carnival crew, chefs, or carnival helpers. Group costumes make the cafeteria feel like a true celebration.



School Lunch Superstars

Celebrate the people who make school meals possible! Wear superhero-inspired outfits or create custom capes and badges highlighting the “heroes behind the tray.”



For an easy way to bring the theme to your school, explore official National School Lunch Week merchandise, including wearable items like T-shirts, bags, and more. These items make it simple for your team to show their school spirit and create a coordinated celebration!





Complete Your Look

VISIT THE SNA SHOP

Visit the SNA Shop at www.schoolnutrition.org/NSLW or scan the QR code to find all of the official Lunch Week merchandise and themed extras like clothing, decor, giveaways and more!





Fun Decor Ideas



BRING THE CIRCUS TO LIFE WITH THESE IDEAS!

Transform your cafeteria into a colorful celebration where school meals take center stage! These easy decor ideas help create a fun, festive atmosphere without requiring a big budget.



Create Your Own Big Top

Create an entrance using paper banners, streamers, or a cardboard "circus tent" doorway. Add a sign like "Welcome to Cafeteria Circus!" or "Step Right Up to a Great Lunch!"



Circus Colors & Banners

Decorate with bright colors, pennants, balloons, and paper chains. Get students involved by creating artwork or themed decorations for the cafeteria.



Food-Themed Characters

Bring healthy choices into the spotlight with posters or cutouts of smiling fruits, vegetables, grains, and other foods dressed as circus performers.



Game Booth Stations

Turn serving areas into "circus attractions" with signs like "Fruit Juggling Station," "Veggie Variety Tent," or "Build-Your-Own Snack Spectacular."



Carnival Photo Booth

Create a fun photo area with props like clown noses, ringmaster hats, juggling pins, tickets, and homemade circus signs.



Cafeteria Ticket Trail

Create a path of paper tickets, stars, or footprints that lead students through the cafeteria adventure—from the entrance to the lunch line.



Menu Signs & Centerpieces

Give menu items a circus twist with creative names and table displays. Add mini tents, food character signs, or themed table toppers.

ENHANCE YOUR CELEBRATION!

SHORT ON TIME? ADD EXTRA FLAIR WITH:

- Circus-themed banners, tablecloths, signs, and party decorations.
- Balloon arches, pennants, or hanging decorations.
- Props like hats, tickets, and accessories for staff costumes.

Complete the Look with Official NSLW Gear

Make your celebration even easier with official National School Lunch Week merchandise! From wearable items like T-shirts and bags to posters, stickers, and other themed extras, the SNA Shop has resources to help your cafeteria shine.



Circus-inspired Lunches

TIME FOR THE MAIN EVENT: LUNCH!

Every great show needs a star performance—and school lunch is ready to take center stage! These balanced, school-friendly meals add a little fun to the menu while providing the nutrients students need to learn, grow, and thrive.

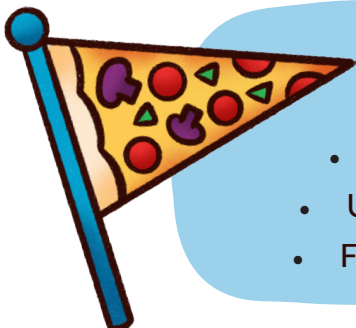




NSLW Menu Planner

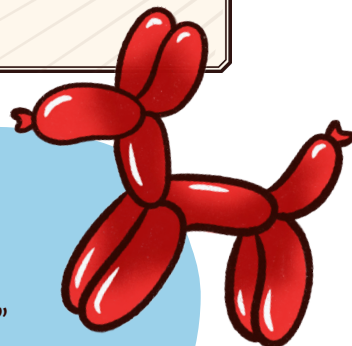
PRE-PLAN YOUR EXCITING NSLW MENU!

Day	Menu Options	Notes
Monday		
Tuesday		
Wednesday		
Thursday		
Friday		



Menu Planning Tips

- Highlight familiar favorites with creative names and signage.
- Use colorful fruits and vegetables to make trays “photo-worthy.”
- Feature the school nutrition team as the stars behind every meal.



Get Inspired: Media Ideas

LIGHTS, CAMERA, CIRCUS!

Get inspired by a selection of kid-friendly, movies, TV, books, and music!

Movies & Television

- The Greatest Showman: Music-filled celebration of performers and teamwork (PG).
- Dumbo: A classic circus story about courage and believing in yourself (PG).
- Toy Story 4: Nostalgia-filled story about reconnection and new beginnings (G).
- Paddington: Kindness, curiosity, and community (PG).
- Sing: A fun competition celebrating confidence and teamwork (PG).
- Akeelah and the Bee: Determination, teamwork, and achieving goals (PG).

Books

- The Circus Ship by Chris Van Dusen: A colorful circus adventure.
- Sideways Stories from Wayside School, by Louis Sachar: A silly school adventures.
- Circus Shapes, by Stuart J. Murphy: A playful circus-themed math story.
- Wonder, by R.J. Palacio: Story about kindness and inclusion.
- The One and Only Ivan, by Katherine Applegate: Friendship, courage, and compassion.
- The Dot, by Peter H. Reynolds: A story about creativity and confidence.

Music

- “The Greatest Show” — The Greatest Showman Cast
- “A Million Dreams” — P!nk / The Greatest Showman
- “Best Day of My Life” — American Authors
- “Happy” — Pharrell Williams
- “On Top of the World” — Imagine Dragons
- “Can’t Stop the Feeling!” — Justin Timberlake
- “The Lion Sleeps Tonight” — The Tokens
- “Shake It Off” — Taylor Swift
- “Roar” — Katy Perry
- “Walking on Sunshine” — Katrina & The Waves



Social Media Guide

TIME TO GET SOCIAL!

Show off your school's Cafeteria Circus to your community with these tips & tricks.

Your celebration doesn't have to end at the lunch line. What you post this week helps parents, staff, and your district see the work that goes into every tray, and it gives SNA a way to celebrate you nationally. Use the captions below as a starting point, and swap in your own school name, photos, and details.

Hashtags to Use

Keep it to 4-6 per post, placed at the end of your caption.

#NSLW26 #CafeteriaCircus #SchoolNutrition #SchoolMeals

Sample Instagram Captions

Instagram moves fast: one strong line, a little detail, and a clear ask.

Kickoff Day

Step right up! [SCHOOL NAME]'s cafeteria just became the Greatest Lunch Show on Earth.

This week, we're celebrating National School Lunch Week with Cafeteria Circus: new decorations, themed menus, and a whole lot of reasons to actually look forward to lunch. Same great meals, just a lot more fun finding out what's on the menu.

This is what it looks like when lunch becomes something to talk about at pickup.

Comment [emoji] if your child is checking out the Big Top this week.

Behind-the-Scenes / Staff Spotlight

Meet the real stars of the Cafeteria Circus.

Before your child ever sits down to eat, our cafeteria team has already planned the menu, prepped the food, and made sure it meets national nutrition standards; then they do it all again tomorrow.

This week, we're giving them the spotlight they've earned all year.

Drop a [emoji] if you're grateful for the team feeding our students every day.

Closing Day

That's a wrap on Cafeteria Circus at [SCHOOL NAME].

One week of decorations, costumes, and star-performer menus, but the real show happens here every single day of the school year. Thank you to every student who tried something new and every staff member who made it happen.

Save this for next year's show.



Sample Facebook Captions



Facebook readers want a little more context. Give them the why before the ask.

Parent-Facing / Community

This week, [SCHOOL NAME]'s cafeteria is going full Cafeteria Circus for National School Lunch Week.

Every school day, more than 30 million students across the country eat a school lunch, and it's a lot more work than most people realize to get a balanced, kid-approved meal on the table every single day.

Our team put together themed menus, decorations, and activities all week to celebrate that work and get kids excited about healthy choices.

If your child comes home talking about Ringmaster's Pizza or the Veggie Variety Show Bowl, now you'll know why. What's the funniest thing your kid has said about school lunch this year? Tell us below.



Thank You / Recognition



Something that doesn't get said enough: the people running your school cafeteria are pulling off a daily balancing act.

Before the first bell rings, our cafeteria team has already been planning menus, prepping food, and making sure every student in line gets a meal that's good for them and good to eat. National School Lunch Week gave us a reason to say thank you a little louder, but we're grateful for this team all year.

If your child has had a great lunch this year, this is the team to thank.

Drop a comment for our cafeteria team, we'll make sure they see it.



Content Ideas & Shot List

If you only have a few minutes to grab photos or video during the week, prioritize these:

- Your cafeteria entrance or Big Top decor, captured before students arrive.
- A close-up of a fully plated Circus-themed tray, the more colorful the better.
- Students trying a new menu item or voting on a favorite topping.
- A short thank-you video from your team at week's end.



Monday

Kickoff

Decorated cafeteria, kickoff caption, first-day energy

Tuesday

Why School Lunch Matters

Education post using a fact from the bank below, myth-busting, standards explained

Wednesday

Behind the Scenes

Staff spotlight, prep footage, team introductions

Thursday

Student Voice and Community

Tag a guest, local partner, or district leader who visited

Friday

Closing and Thank You

Recap, staff thank-you, save-for-next-year moment

Connecting With the Community

INVITE YOUR COMMUNITY TO TAKE PART IN THE SHOW!

Engaging Teachers & School Staff



Take Center Stage

Invite teachers and staff to dress up in circus-inspired accessories, greet students in the cafeteria or make a special appearance during lunch. Think colorful hats, bow ties, stripes or full-on circus costumes!

Morning Announcement Spotlight

Ask teachers or administrators to share a daily Cafeteria Circus Spotlight—a fun food fact, cafeteria staff shout-out, healthy eating tip or announcement about the day's activities.

Cross-Curricular Circus

Invite teachers to bring the theme into their classrooms. Art students can create circus posters or food characters, math classes can explore food-related graphs and measurements, and English classes can write stories about the Cafeteria Circus.

Involving Parents & Families



Step Right Up for Family Lunch

Invite parents and caregivers to join their students for lunch during NSLW. Add a few circus-inspired decorations and conversation starters to make the meal feel like a special event.

Take-Home Circus Challenge

Send home a simple activity families can complete together, such as designing a healthy circus meal, creating a food character or finding foods from each food group at home.

Share the Show

Invite families to follow along with NSLW celebrations online. Share photos, special menus, student creations and cafeteria staff spotlights through your school's social media channels and #NSLW26.



Bringing in the Community



Invite Community VIPs

Invite local officials, school board members and community leaders to visit the cafeteria during NSLW. Give them a behind-the-scenes look at school meals and introduce them to the school nutrition team.

Team Up with Local Partners

Invite local farms, grocery stores, businesses or community organizations to support your celebration with educational materials, activities or other appropriate resources.

Put School Nutrition in the Spotlight

Invite local media to cover your NSLW celebration. Share the story of your cafeteria team, highlight a special event or showcase how school meals help students fuel their day.

SHARE YOUR STORY WITH US!

SNA wants to hear about your school's National School Lunch Week adventures. Share your photos, videos, and stories with us by tagging:



@schoolnutritionassociation



@powerofschoolmeals



@school-nutrition-association

and using the hashtags

#NSLW26 #CafeteriaCircus #SchoolNutrition #SchoolMeals