

# K-12 Food Service

Quick Start Guide to Balanced Menus



# GET STARTED



## Get an easy win

### Pick one, pick an easy one

From your list of prioritized changes, select one item you can begin implementing immediately with relative ease and minimal pushback—such as replacing canned fruits with fresh varieties or adding a new vegetable to the menu twice a month. Choose a start date, share your decision with - **and invest your team in** - the reasons behind this adjustment. Draft a plan, clearly outline the steps necessary to make the change, and then work with your team to put it into action!

Once you've taken that first step, you and your team can gather feedback from students and school community, then work your way through the other changes on your prioritized list. A steady and deliberate approach will help make the changes less sudden for your students and more sustainable for your team.

# KEEP GOING



## Prioritize your next steps

### Make a list of your team's priorities

Work with your team to define what balancing menus means for your kitchen. Analyze your menus, focus on nutrients of impact like fiber, saturated fats, and sodium. Balance may look like **reducing processed foods, swapping some animal-source proteins for plant-based proteins options, introducing more fruits and vegetables, or finding products that help you increase fiber while reducing sugar and sodium.**

# BE SPECIFIC



## Make it bite sized

### **Make it bite-sized**

The proverbial question “How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time.” applies to any meaningful change you and your team commit to -- and the items on your prioritized list are no exception! Although, we strongly suggest, for a variety of reasons, that you not eat an actual elephant.

Each of your prioritized changes will likely require multiple steps to implement. Spend a bit of time getting clear on those steps by answering some important questions. Start with one change at a time.

For example, if your team decides to reduce the use of animal sourced proteins, you'll need to figure out:

- how many meals a week/month you want to make that change
- which meals and/or animal protein you want to reduce or swap out first
- what plant-based protein you want to use as a replacement
- from where you're going to source the replacement protein
- how much of that protein you'll need to procure
- what budgetary changes might be necessary
- etc...

Through this exercise, you'll be able to better anticipate and address any barriers or potential challenges you and your team might experience throughout the process, and hopefully it will help break each big priority down into manageable bite-sized steps.

### **Create a timeline**

It's okay if big change takes time! The important part is feeling confident in the timelines you lay out to make those changes.

Now that you have your one or more of your priorities broken down into manageable parts, and you know what issues might arise, you can put together an implementation timeline. Sometimes, working backward with an end-goal date in mind is useful. In some cases, it makes more sense to start where you are and plan ahead. You know yourself and your team best -- choose a system that makes sense and provides accountability for moving your team forward.

### **Plan, Train, Test...Repeat!**

Once you have your changes broken down and your timeline for one or more laid out, now it's time to train your staff, test out the recipes, and make adjustments. Use your team and/or a trusted group of students or other staff members as your initial taste testers. Ask for their feedback and make adjustments if necessary. You may be surprised by how receptive your community is to the changes you're leading, and of course, you'll always have nay sayers. Change can be tricky, so stay positive, use feedback to your advantage, and be willing to adapt.

# CREATE BUY-IN



## With your team

### **Share**

Why do you want to make these changes? Share your passion with your staff. Share the next page with them, showing the state of children's diets and how THEY can be the one's to directly impact their students. This is important for other staff and school community members too!

### **Empower**

Include team members in the decision making process. Solicit input on menu planning, allow them to express their concerns, validate their experience, and highlight their positive contributions. Emphasize the ways that change can make their jobs easier and remind them you're all in this together. Provide as much support as possible and encourage them to teach each other new skills.

### **Emphasize collaboration**

Show your team how much you value their thoughts! Whether it's taste testing, brainstorming together, or team problem solving, foster collaboration and take advantage of every opportunity for team involvement.

### **Ask & Listen**

Ask your team what they need to effectively implement these changes. They know best about what their needs are.

### **Keep your door open**

Have an open door policy and make sure your staff knows you are always open for feedback and discussions.



## With your school community

### **Build relationships**

Make breakfast or lunch for just the school staff with some of the new items. Talk about the changes and why they are important, Ask for feedback. Let them feel like they are part of the process.

### **Share the research**

You may have your mind made up about what you are going to serve. However, after your staff taste tests, allow the school staff to try and offer feedback. Set boundaries, we are making these changes, but we could use your help on how we could potentially make it more student friendly?

### **Be a resource**

Empathize with school staff, you know how hard their jobs are, and your goal is to contribute to their success through enhanced nutrition. Acknowledge their concerns and if useful, note the ways in which less processed, more nutrient-dense, fiber-rich meals help students with both performance and behavior. Emphasize how your different roles and influence can be beneficial to the other.

# FOOD & CHILDREN'S HEALTH

**97%** of children and adults do not consume enough dietary fiber

**93%** of school-aged children don't eat enough fresh fruits and vegetables

**60%** of today's standard American diet includes ultra-processed foods like chicken nuggets and pizza

**4X** Children eat 4 times the recommended amount of protein...



**2X** ...and twice the recommended amount of sodium.

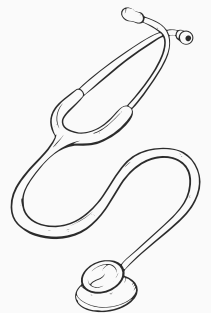
**"The current generation of children is expected to live shorter lives than their parents."**

*-The New England Journal of Medicine,*

**30%** Diabetes rates among children increased 30% between 2000-2010, and continue to rise

**1 in 5**

1 in 5 children under age 17 already have been diagnosed with high cholesterol



**The leading causes of preventable illness and death in the U.S. are related to diet**

*"Children eating more fruit, but fruit and vegetable intake still too low."*

<https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2014/p0805-fruits-vegetables.html>

*"Diabetes rates skyrocket in kids and teens."*

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2014/05/03/diabetes-rises-in-kids/8604213/>

*"Atherosclerotic Cardiovascular Disease Beginning in Childhood"*

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2812791/>

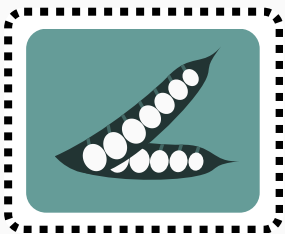
# MARKETING YOUR MENU IMPROVEMENTS

You probably have a lot of experience marketing and promoting the menus you've created, so we've designed some strategies on the following pages in the hopes of helping you build on the successes you've already had.



## Think about messaging

Using words like balanced, enriched, flavorful, energy-boosting, fiber-rich, nutrient-dense, and other positively-associated phrases is a great way to start investing your team, customers, and other stakeholders in the menu changes from the very beginning. If you can help them see how the menu changes will improve some part of their life, you'll be on track to winning them over!



Replace vegetarian or vegan as a descriptor on dishes that don't absolutely require labeling. Hearty Lentil and Tomato Basil Marinara over Pasta for example, doesn't need the word vegetarian between hearty and lentil. If a vegetarian or vegan eater is curious, they'll ask, and for everyone else, there's no need to point out something that might dissuade them from the choice otherwise!

The terms "Vegan" and "Vegetarian" have a significant impact on the marketability of a product—and not in a good way. Unless the majority of your customer base identifies as vegan or vegetarian, those labels do more harm than good.



## Stealth Health

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## Make Healthier Eating Cool

**Prosocial messaging—that is, messaging that makes a person believe “everyone else is doing it”—is a powerful behavior change motivator.**

On your menus, in your conversations, and/or on any promotional materials you develop, it’s easy to use prosocial messaging, and more and more food service professionals are doing just that to increase their sales.

So, what does prosocial messaging sound like? Here are some examples:

- More people are choosing the quinoa bowl than ever before!
- We know you and your classmates love to eat the veggie soup on cold winter days.
- Lots of people pick the chickpea curry when they want energy for later!
- Since its debut, the veggie pot-pie has only gotten more popular.
- More people are opting to swap their greasy burgers for fiber-rich bean burritos.

Prosocial messaging is especially powerful when you have an audience of customers who are likely to be influenced by the positive choices their peers are making.



- Fun descriptors like “Superhero Spaghetti Squash,” “Totally Cool Tomato Soup,” and “The Queen’s Three Bean Chili” are great for younger students.
- Linking a food product with a beloved adult/influential person is also a good strategy. Ask teachers, school leaders, or others on campus if they have a preferred healthy menu item and incorporate that into the menu, e.g., “Mr. Thompson’s Favorite Hummus Wrap.”
- Use signage or marketing materials to highlight a healthy food item as a recommended choice:
  - “Lunchroom Pick of the Day,” “Principal Lawson Suggests...,” “Mr. Elliot Recommends...,” “Dr. Peterson’s Lunch Recommendation,”



## Highlight the impact

After talking to students and gathering data highlight the positive responses and your hard work. Capture the attention of concerned parents who perceive school lunch as unhealthy by emphasizing the positive changes. One such example is replacing processed food items with nutritious, plant-based meals prepared from scratch. This strategic shift will ultimately lead to a rise in student participation.



## Highlight the impact

### Below are examples of how to highlight the change:

- Post an article on your district's webpage
- Write an article to parents and share it in individual school's newsletters and webpages
- Send out mass emails to all parents
- Create a "Nutrition Services" Newsletter
- Invite parents to join their students for lunch
- Use social media to your advantage, post pictures of your amazing meals and promote the work you are doing

### Like all change, your new and improved menu may take a while for your customers to get used to—and that's OK!

Trial-and-error is a normal part of this entire process, but we have no doubt marketing menu improvements is a skill you'll master in no time! With strategic messaging and promotion, not only will those you serve grow to love the food, you'll have the satisfaction of knowing you're helping them live healthier and live better.



**Establish social media accounts on Facebook and Instagram for your department. Emphasize the positive changes to the menu, and utilize these platforms as a means to acknowledge and appreciate employees.**



## Let's get started!

On behalf of your students who may not yet fully appreciate all the hard work you do behind the scenes for their benefit, we thank you for your willingness to lead, to act, and to innovate. We know this process can be difficult, thankless, and overwhelming, which is why we pledge our continued support to you and your institution, and we know that the future will be brighter for so many as a result of the collaboration you were willing to undertake with us.

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