

Understanding School Food Operations

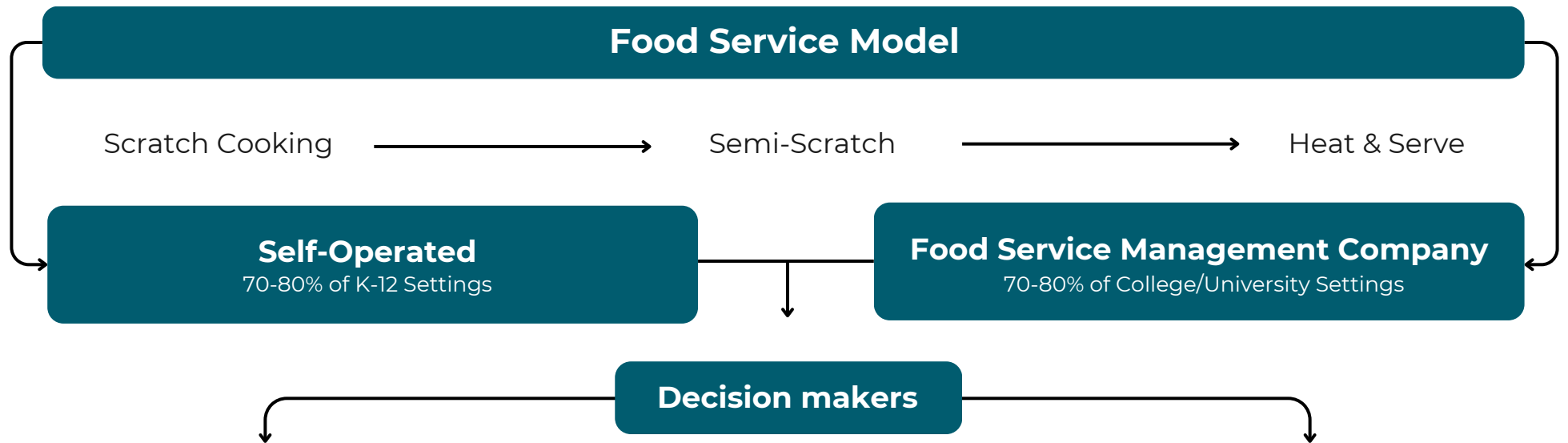
What to know and how to get started making change



Presented by:
Balanced.org



Understanding Institutional Food Service **Kitchen Models**

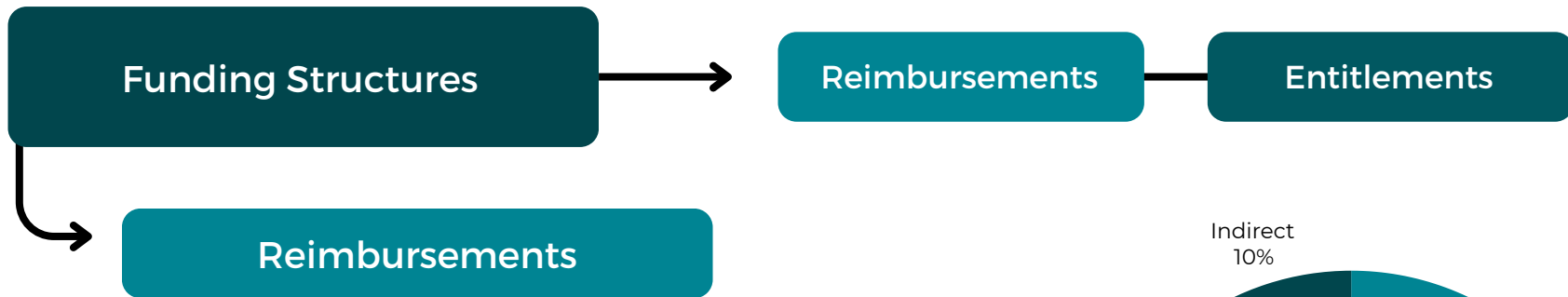


- Food Service Director
- Cafeteria Manager
- Operators, “Lunch Ladies and Men”
 - More direct line of communication
 - More likely to implement change due to student or parent pressure
 - May have more flexibility to try new menu items

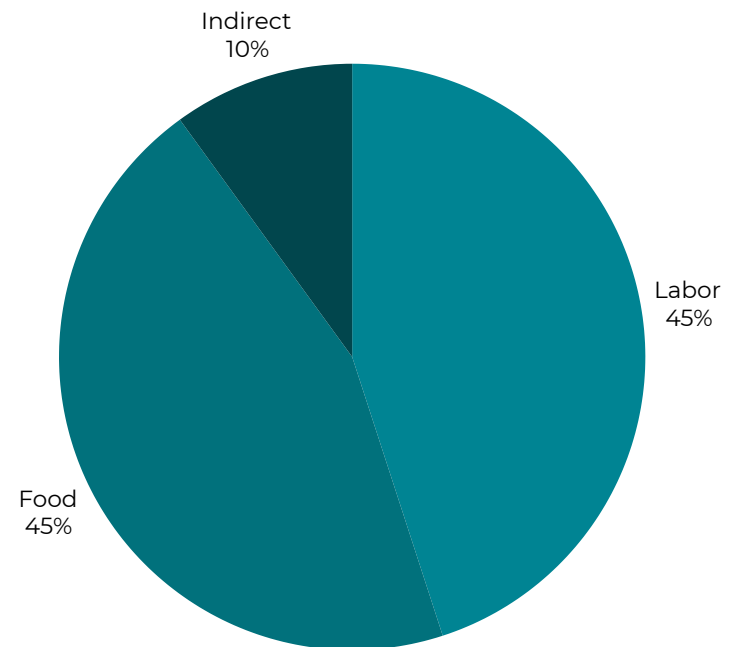
- Aramark, Sodexo, Compass, etc...
 - Harder to navigate and make a change
 - Contracted for a certain amount of time
 - May have access to more products, suppliers, tested recipes + training
 - More likely to implement change based on bottom line or contractual obligations



Understanding Institutional Food Service **Finances**

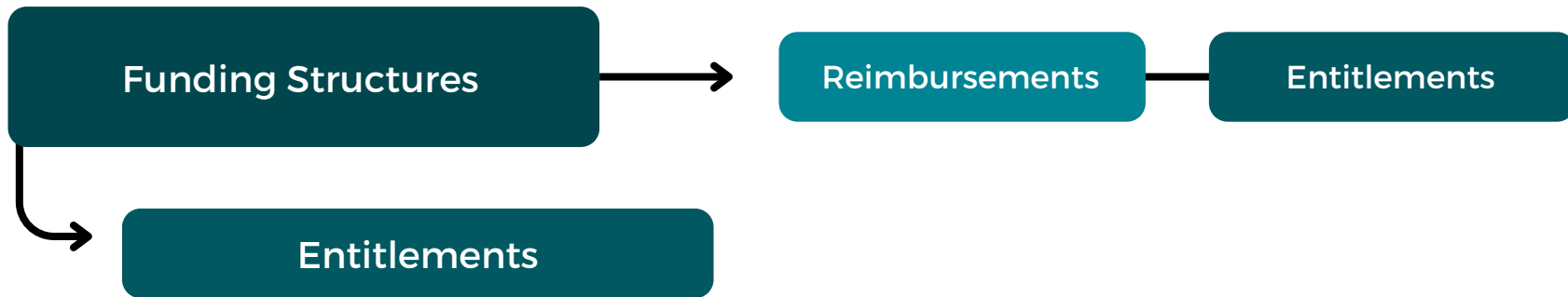


- Full pay, reduced, or free lunch students
 - Federal government reimburses the district for **each meal served up to \$5.13**
 - Full pay - the difference between what a student pays (~ \$2.25) **Reimbursement rate: \$2.88**
 - Reduced - the difference between a reduced rate (~.40) **Reimbursement rate: \$4.73**
 - Free. **Reimbursement rate: \$5.13**





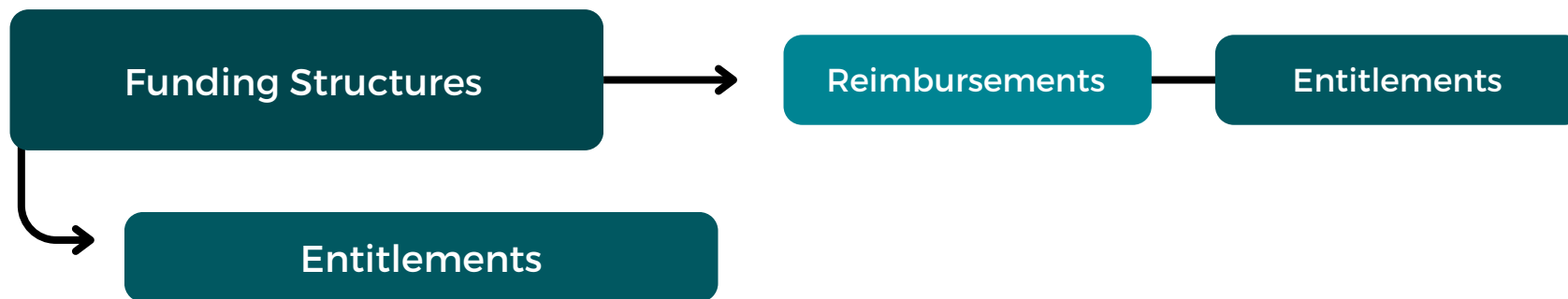
Understanding Institutional Food Service **Finances**



- Food Entitlement Funds or Pre-Determined Allocations
 - Schools receive food entitlement funds based on enrollment & participations
 - Use entitlement funds to purchase foods directly from USDA
- USDA Commodities
 - USDA purchases about 2 billion pounds of food from American farmers each year
 - Offered to schools at a reduced price
 - Many basics, meat, cheese, and beans
 - Example use: Schools can purchase cheese in bulk send it to their pizza vendor, who then uses it to make pizza for the school, leading to a significant reduction in the price of the pizza.
- An analysis of USDA commodity costs for FY24-FY25 shows that meat (beef, chicken, turkey, pork) averages \$3.14 per lb, while beans average \$0.65 per lb, making meat \$2.49 more expensive per pound.



Understanding Institutional Food Service **Finances**



- Schools may elect to spend a portion of their USDA Foods entitlement to receive produce through the USDA DoD Fresh Program.
 - This program is available to schools to help increase access to fresh produce for schoolchildren.
 - More than 42,000 schools place orders for weekly deliveries of American-grown fresh fruits and vegetables through local vendors
 - The program also allows schools to purchase locally sourced produce.

Product/Spending Considerations

- Participation rates (decreased participation = decreased entitlements)
- Storage
 - Dry storage (beans, dry or canned) versus fridge/freezer (meat, frozen meals)

Other Considerations or Barriers

Kitchen Capacity & Labor

- Appliances & equipment
- Storage & preparation space
- Team skill and bandwidth

Procurement:

- Contractual obligations
- Supplier/distributor limitations
- Product availability (scale, frequency, etc...)

Community Perceptions:

- Students & families
- District or school staff
- Kitchen team
- Community broadly (rural, ag-community schools, as an example)

Food Quality & Familiarity

- Familiar foods (ultraprocessed, animal-based, etc..)
- Less forgiveness for PB meals that go “wrong”
- Risk-aversion to make and try new foods



Getting Started

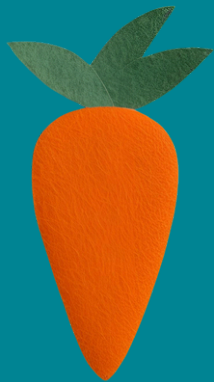
Building buy-in is critical for meaningful change. Three key ideas can help frame how you approach your advocacy.

Do Your Research

Build Relationships

Start Reasonably
(then build on success)

Staff, Students, Families, School Community



1 Do Your Research

- Research the processes and realities of your specific institution
- Ask a lot of questions
 - Probe for clarity “Specifically, what would it take to make XYZ happen here”
- Avoid blanket assumptions
- Come with solutions & be prepared to collaborate

3 Start Reasonably (then build on success)

- Not All-or-Nothing
 - Compromise on first steps
 - Embrace flexibility
 - Examples: taste tests, PB “chicken nuggets” instead of WFPB from-scratch meals
- First step, not last step
 - Add or increase plant-based options vs. entirely vegan menu
- Start with an easy win
- Celebrate progress (then advocate for more)
- Demonstrate demand & enthusiasm by encouraging participation from peers

2 Build Relationships

- Be transparent about goals (short & long term)
- Communicate your “Why” first then provide data when appropriate
- Acknowledge limitations
- Encourage and empower others who want the same thing (power in numbers)
 - Embrace flexibility rather than an all-or-nothing approach
 - Involve students, school staff, and the nutrition team in decision-making processes
- Demonstrate gratitude and celebrate effort

