



Menu Planning Resource

Timeline

JANUARY

Establish preferred length for base menu for the upcoming school year

- Determine cycle plan length (2-, 3-, 4-week cycle plan)
- Determine best days for certain items
- Plan times to sub in special items based on promotions, seasons, and other events throughout the year; create limited time offer promotion calendar with dates of when items need to be added to bid (if RFP based) and/or volume increased for special recipes; will help with forecasting and communication between school and vendors
- Determine menu projections and estimated quantities
- Plan tentative student taste/feedback opportunities for upcoming school year

FEBRUARY

Post School Nutrition solicitations for menu items, paper items, small wares, equipment, etc.

- Must identify best internal timelines for meeting local requirements/needs, but frequently this occurs around February for the following school year

MARCH/APRIL

- Review Buy American documents before approving menu items awarded on bid
- Award solicitations

APRIL/MAY

- Evaluate planned menu based on bid response

JUNE

- Communicate quantities to vendors
- Establish regular communication/ checkpoint timelines for upcoming school year with all vendors (will discuss what is working well, what is not working, timelines for needed changes)

JULY

- Analyze base menus and schedule them in software program
- Plan tentative student taste/feedback opportunities for upcoming school year

AUGUST/SEPTEMBER

- Analyze current food costs
- Be thinking of menu refreshes to happen for second half of first semester and/or second semester; repeat summer steps to ensure smooth transition

OCTOBER

- Review data on current menus & plan for adjustments; consider current food cost, usage, acceptability of menu by students

ONGOING

- Review culinary trends/new product availability
- Set meetings with vendors to discuss new menu items; talk to vendors 3-4 months prior to menu day or required time for solicitation updates
- Update menu analysis as needed when making menu week changes
- Make planning notes for next school year throughout current year
- Monitor participation levels related to menus and adjust menus to foster student engagement and participation growth

Culinary Considerations

- Equipment availability for production and service
- Labor needed to prepare and serve menu
- Cross utilization of culinary techniques
- Culinary integrity
- Cannot just meet regulations; it needs to make sense from a culinary standpoint
 - Work with your menu planner/planning team to form a cohesive team to make the regulations work for you
 - Work with your nutrition specialist (if available) to help balance nutrition with culinary integrity
- Can any parts be made in advance?
- How does it hold?
 - In the event of remote serving (i.e., buses, etc.), what items would be best? Have a list in mind.
- Connect it to the classroom: Agriculture Education, Farm to School inspirations

- Presentation
 - Packaging suggestions: Have a plan A and B-modified service/remote service/shortages on packaging
 - What toppings/garnish/condiments are important with it? Determine and work with menu planner on what condiments/toppings are must haves in the cycle plan to make the menus make culinary sense (i.e., mustard, ketchup, relish, and onions on burger days)
 - Serving vessels/packaging

Menu Considerations

- Offer different fruit(s) at breakfast and lunch
- Slice produce
- Tips for ordering and menuing produce (i.e., bananas)
- Fruit that can be sliced the day before
- Seasonal availability: coordinate with Harvest of the Month calendar

Engagement Opportunities

STUDENTS

Sample questions to ask:

- What are some items that you would like to see on menus?
- What would you like to see more of on the menus?
- What do you want to see less of on the menus?
- Where are you eating when you aren't at school?

Keep it open-ended and casual, they are more likely to engage with you if you are relaxed

- Send email to principals looking for groups of students to meet with including both students who eat school meals and students who do not
- Focus groups-menu committee: Incorporate student voice and feedback into menu ideas (with training and guidance) -- “student inspired” or “student approved” meals: vote for a favorite
- Consider developing a student advisory committee that represents the student population; group to meet routinely to develop relationships and obtain valuable feedback

SCHOOL NUTRITION PROFESSIONALS

- Sample questions to ask: What to remove? Why? What to add? Why?
- Training considerations-preparing new menu items and getting feedback (Does the team need to learn new culinary techniques or presentation ideas? Or let the team come up with the idea.)
- Equipment guidance when planning menus
- Provide guidance on how to communicate with students about menu items

BROKERS AND MANUFACTURERS

Be open and honest; create partnership

Sample questions to ask:

- Is this item stocked at my distributor?
- Is there an ample quantity available?
- Who else is using this product that is like my district?
- For eligible items: Is commodity available on this?
- Request data
- Discuss trends (not items just hitting market, mainstream trends)
- Let them know watch list/items looking for
- Have vendors learn your programs so they know what to promote

PARENTS

- Send email to Principals looking for groups of parents to meet with including both students who eat school meals and students who don't; meet virtually
- Ensure communication with parents through Principals
- Utilize parent engagement opportunities (Back-to-School Nights, Meet-n-Greets, Family Fun Nights, Wellness Events, etc.) to share with parents about the school meal program and what is offered

TEACHERS

- Manager and/or School Nutrition Director attend teacher/staff meeting at the beginning of the school year to share program updates and reminders; share information about new menu items; thank them for their support.