

## Menu Planning for School Meals

We utilize a cycle menu concept and rotate a 4-week cycle menu throughout the year. This cycle menu is "changed up" quarterly (3 times per school year) to accommodate seasonality, market conditions, introduce different items, and maximize freshness and market prices.

We start the work flow by surveying staff (and sometimes students) about what students like to eat. What are their favorites? What are the "dogs?" We look at historical participation data. This is the "popularity consideration," which is never done in a vacuum.

We consider the color, flavor, visual appeal and texture of all foods which we plan to offer on our menu. We work hard to ensure that we have good "pairings", like oven-baked chicken served with garlic bread. We try to stay away from bad food pairings, like turkey-gravy on mashed potatoes served with French fries. We also consider if the item is something that is recognizable to students. Historically, we have found that if students are not familiar with a food, they are much less likely to try it.

We also consider the production capacity of our system (e.g. what resources are required to produce the item at a Production Center (central kitchen), package, distribute and store at the site and what resources are necessary to produce and serve the item to students at the school.) We take into consideration the "mess factor" and the number of hands it takes to serve a menu and number of steps (and complexity) required to serve during the meal service. Long lines during service, which take longer to serve, either give students less time to eat or takes away from recess or classroom time - neither of those is a good thing. Along with these factors, we must also keep in mind which items are served each day to ensure that food is of high quality when actually served at lunch time. Depending on the day of the week when items are offered, this could cause issues with either freshness, service capability or overall product quality. For this reason, we do not serve bone in chicken or bananas on a Monday since it must be distributed to schools on Friday, for example.

We then create a "straw man" menu and run this past a menu taskforce, made up of our awesome employees who work in our kitchens (kitchen managers, kitchen assistants, distribution drivers, sous chefs, etc.). We get their feedback in each of the areas which are mentioned above.

All menus must meet USDA requirements for calories, saturated fat, sodium, etc. AND components must meet minimum and maximum food values at lunch and minimums at breakfast. All components must be adequate in size or reimbursement (\$\$\$) can be taken back by the Colorado Department of Education or the USDA. This can be costly to school districts and is most critical. Additionally, not all components are counted the same (e.g. a deli meat which weighs .5oz might actually only provide .35oz of "component" value for the meal.) Vegetable components must also be further categorized into the "color" of vegetable and specific quantities of the different colors MUST be offered weekly. Milk must be further categorized for fat content (two varieties of milk must be offered) along with grain items to ensure that adequate servings of whole grain are served each week.

Menus are analyzed, using nutrient analysis software to ensure complete compliance with USDA requirements. Ingredients, along with their unique nutrient value, are input into the

software. Recipes are developed and input into this software with instructions for production, which get printed and sent to the kitchens for staff to utilize as a "standard." Recipes and menu items are carefully arranged to create a menu for each meal service. According to USDA, there are three different grade levels (i.e. PK-5, 6-8, and 9-12) which must be analyzed for each breakfast and lunch menu. This alone starts the analysis process at six different menus. Each time a variance from the "norm" is allowed, it creates a different menu which must also be analyzed. For example, one different 6-12 charter school on a different schedule or serving different foods at breakfast and lunch creates four additional menus which must be analyzed and made to work.

Nutrition information, such as calories, carbohydrates, etc. are published monthly on the FNS website for parents, students and nurses to access for students with diabetes and other conditions that require dietary changes and/or monitoring. Once menus are complete, all ingredient and menu information must be entered into Allerschool, the online system used to manage special diets in CSSD11. This program allows parents/guardians to view and order meals online for students with documented and approved dietary disabilities and allows anyone to view ingredients of menu items. We work hard to ensure that students with common food allergies (ex: the top 8 allergens) have an option available and that as much variety as possible is offered. On days when no "regular" menu items are available which meet the student's special diet requirements, a separate menu item must be offered. This process requires separate recipes, data entry, and ordering capability for both parents and staff (for ingredients), as well as additional prep time in school kitchens.

Finally, menus are pre-costed to fall within budget, taking into account anticipated participation of all items that are offered

Modifications are made along the way with backtracking through the process happening all the time.

Great in theory. Over-complicated, inefficient, and expensive in practice. It's not quite rocket science, but pretty darn close.