

Engaging with Students and School Meals

Eating in the Cafeteria

Walking through the service line and sitting with students will provide you with invaluable insight into the mechanics of food service operations, the tone of student-food service staff relationships, what is available, and how healthy foods are presented. Students from your classes will be thrilled to have you eat with them!

Here are some tips to prepare for your school meals experience:

- Look at the monthly menu for the school district to find out what is being served.
- Find out how much a meal costs—the monthly menu for the district may list the price.
- Bring cash in small bills.
- Find out what time the lunch period begins and ends, and during what portion of that time the service line is active (i.e., the staff may go into prep and transition mode during the second half of the lunch period while students eat versus serving continuously during staggered lunch periods)

When you eat in the cafeteria:

- Go through the line with the students (even if the staff encourages you to skip ahead in line). You want to experience how long they wait, how they interact with the staff, and how meals are served.
- Say thank you to the food service staff—they don't hear it often enough!
- Take note of the interactions between students and food service staff, the verbal directives or prompts directed at students, and how things are arranged on the line.
- When you are finished, jot down some notes about your experience. Be sure to include ideas on how to build a positive relationship with food service staff and how healthy foods could be better promoted.

Leading a School Meals Discussion with Students

An informal discussion about school meals with students can be very revealing. This can happen while you join them for lunch or as part of a classroom activity.

Be sure to frame the topic appropriately. Don't ask questions that lead them to believe you're promising an overhaul of the menu, ice cream as the entrée, or sushi Fridays. Instead, frame questions around their current participation in school meals, such as:

- How often do you eat school lunch?
- When you don't eat school lunch, why not?
- Do you have favorite menu items?
- Do you eat the fruits/vegetables offered? Why/why not?
- Do you ever choose to buy fruits and vegetables as snacks (not part of the full meal)?

Take notes from your discussion. If students are enthusiastic about sharing their ideas you may consider organizing a School Nutrition Advisory Committee (SNAC) to lead nutrition promotion activities in the cafeteria.

