

Food Service Staff Conversation Guide

This guide is provided to help you build a relationship with food service staff in the interest of connecting classroom-based nutrition education to the cafeteria.

Understanding School Food Service:

School food service workers are employees of the school district's nutrition services department. This department functions like a business within the school district; all operating funds (including staff salaries) are generated by school meals, either through the sale of paid meals, through reimbursement for free and reduced meals, or the sale of 'competitive foods' (snack items). The food service staff are managed by the district's food service director, not the principal.

School food service workers are subject to numerous regulations. Meal service practices must comply with National School Lunch Program regulations, school kitchens are regulated by the local health department, and Maryland State Department of Education monitors inventory, production, and food safety records. Therefore, some food service workers may be shy about interacting with someone from outside of their operations, especially if they are worried they'll be asked to do something that could violate regulations.

Food service workers work shifts of various lengths, and staffing is often staggered throughout the day for prep, service, and clean up. There is no such thing as 'free time'. Meals must be ready to serve at the bell, and service is often continuous until the last student is served.

Different school districts have different operational models. Some receive all food at a central warehouse and then distribute to schools. The food may be delivered ready to heat and serve, or the staff may do processing and preparation. Some districts do meal prep at production kitchens (often located in larger middle or high schools), then send the day's meals to satellite sites (smaller elementary schools). Some districts have central kitchens where meals are made from scratch (or almost from scratch). The operational model impacts the staffing model. Production kitchen managers may oversee all staff at satellite schools, or the satellite schools may have a manager of their own.

Last but not least, school meals are far from perfect, but they have come a long way in the last ten years. However, progress is rarely acknowledged by the general public; rather, people are often stuck in their assumptions that school meals are of poor quality. Take time to review the school lunch menu and eat a meal in the school cafeteria—you might be surprised at what's available.

How should I approach a conversation with school food service staff?

- Make your intentions clear: *I do nutrition education with my class and I'd love to learn about your operation so I can promote the healthy foods you're serving in the cafeteria.*
- Be respectful of their time: *I'd love to chat about promoting healthy foods in the cafeteria, is now a good time?* (Immediately after service can be a good window if the time is scheduled in advance).
- Acknowledge their work: *I ate lunch in the cafeteria with some students the other day and I really enjoyed the apples you served.*



Sample questions for food service staff: Your goal is to build a relationship and share ideas so you can partner in connecting nutrition education to healthy options in the cafeteria.

- How long have you worked in school food service? What changes have you seen during that time?
- What are some items on the menu that have surprised you with their popularity? Which items do you wish students would take more of?
- What are your ideas for promoting healthy foods in the cafeteria? What have you tried? What has worked and what has not?
- Do you get to choose any of the items you serve, or is ordering handled by your central office?
- Do you cut fresh fruits and vegetables in the kitchen, or do they arrive pre-cut?
- What are your favorite items on the menu?

