



Innovative Menu Design: Creating Tempting and Nutritious School Meals

October 21, 2025

1:30 PM - 2:00 PM

Professional Standards Learning Codes: 1110, 1120



Meet Your Host



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Welcome!



upLIFT was designed specifically for child nutrition professionals like you. It offers resources to help you LEARN about nutrition, get INSPIRED on meal choices for your participants, FEED students healthy meals, and TEACH others in your community about your programs.

You can look forward to materials and monthly webinars featuring unique upLIFT content showcasing Arizona child nutrition professionals, and providing ongoing inspiration throughout the year. This will empower you to upLIFT your programs in your own unique way!

Overview

1. Benefits of Innovation in School Meals
2. Key Principles of Innovative Menu Design
3. Collaboration and Monitoring Success

Benefits of Innovation in School Meals

Why It Matters

Innovation in School Meals

- 1** Increasing demands for more appealing meals from students and parents.
- 2** Tackling menu fatigue and reducing food waste caused by repetitive meals and unappealing ingredients.
- 3** Enhancing each student's overall well-being by offering support in areas of health, nutrition, and academic achievement.

Why It Matters

Rising Expectations from Students and Parents

- Innovation in school meals is necessary given the evolving expectations of students and parents **shaped by outside influences.**
- Stay aligned with contemporary tastes and nutritional standards.
- Students and parents are looking for meals that aren't just healthy, but also modern, diverse and trendy.

Why It Matters

Combating Menu Fatigue and Food Waste

- Repetitive meals may result in decreased interest among students, leading them to skip meals or only eat specific components.
- This issue also contributes to food waste.
- Introducing innovation can help sustain students' interest and encourage them to explore new foods.
- This approach allows for more effective use of ingredients, minimizing uneaten food and supporting environmental sustainability.

Why It Matters

Supporting Overall Wellness and Academic Performance

- Innovation plays a crucial role in enhancing students' overall health, wellness, and academic success.
- Adequate nutrition nourishes both the body and mind of students, resulting in improved concentration, elevated energy levels, and enhanced cognitive abilities.
- This provides a valuable opportunity to teach students about healthy eating habits, promoting lifelong wellness and establishing a foundation for success.

Key Principles of Innovative Menu Design

Poll Question

What type of meals do your students prefer most?

A) Traditional comfort foods (*ex. macaroni and cheese, meatloaf, fried chicken, chicken noodle soup, mashed potatoes*)

B) International cuisine (*ex. Mexican, italian, asian-inspired*)

C) Build-your-own options (*ex, sandwich or wrap stations, salad bars, taco kits, etc*)

D) Plant-based meals (*ex. entrees made with legumes, soy, or plant-based alternatives to meat*)

Key Principles of Innovative Menu Design

Understanding Nutritional Guidelines

- **Meal Components:**

- Meat/Meat Alternates: Includes lean meats, beans, and legumes.
- Grains: At least 80% of weekly grains must be whole grains.
- Fruits and Vegetables: A wide variety of subgroups and quantities is required.
- Milk: Non-fat and low-fat options are mandatory.

- **Added Sugars:**

- There are product-based limits for cereals, yogurt, and flavored milk
- Weekly dietary limits: Less than 10% of total weekly calories should come from added sugars.

- **Sodium:** Sodium targets aim for a 15% reduction for lunch and a 10% reduction for breakfast by the 2027-28 school year.

- **Additional Guidelines:** Maximum and minimum calorie limits must be adhered to, along with restrictions on saturated fat.

Key Principles of Innovative Menu Design

Knowing Your Audience

- **Enhance Atmosphere and Ambiance:** Attract students by recreating the experience of dining at fast food or casual restaurants, or by capturing the cozy charm of inviting cafes.
- **Conduct Taste Tests and Utilize Surveys and Feedback:** Involve students by hosting taste tests for potential new meal options. Collect their opinions and preferences to discover the most popular dishes, both in the cafeteria and beyond. (Tip: Use engaging phrases like “cafeteria pop-up” or “flash mob taste-test” to spark excitement!)
- **Encourage Involvement in Menu Planning:** Establish student committees to actively contribute to the meal planning process, and implement menu planning software to enhance transparency and improve communication with parents and the community.
- **Analyze Consumption Data:** Examine plate waste and average daily participation to identify trends in food selections.

Key Principles of Innovative Menu Design

Incorporating Global Flavors

- **Cultural Relevance and Diversity:** Highlight the rich diversity within the community by incorporating dishes from various cultures. This approach not only broadens palates but also fosters inclusivity. Tip: Offer samples of your cultural meals to teachers and staff; they can help promote these new items beyond the cafeteria!
- **Cultural Theme Days:** Organize special menu days that celebrate a specific country or region, creating a festive atmosphere that honors student identities.
- **Spice and Herb Education:** Teach students about the use of spices and herbs to elevate flavors. This can be achieved by hosting workshops during school events or distributing flyers with tips on how to enhance simple meals.

Key Principles of Innovative Menu Design

Emphasizing Sustainability

- **Incorporating Sustainability Practices:** Begin by introducing more plant-based recipes, implementing recycling and composting programs, and providing a share bin. Gradually, practices such as bulk milk or reusable non-food supplies may become more achievable!
- **Start Local Sourcing:** Partner with local farms to source fresh menu items that cater to the tastes of students and parents while also reducing your carbon footprint.
- **Use Seasonal Ingredients:** Choose seasonal produce to ensure freshness and improve cost-effectiveness. Developing a growing and purchasing strategy based on monthly harvests can simplify this process!
- **Strategies for Waste Reduction:** Implement methods to minimize food waste, such as portion control, cycle menu pre-planning, and food donation programs.

Key Principles of Innovative Menu Design

Creative Presentation Techniques

- **Enhance Visual Appeal:** Arrange meals in colorful and enticing presentations to capture students' attention. This can be done through vibrant plating, creative garnishes, or cutting food into playful shapes.
- **Innovative Serving Styles:** Use bento boxes or compartment trays to offer diverse options and facilitate portion control. Introduce make-your-own stations, salad bars, and build-your-own bowls to engage students in meal preparation.
- **Try Playful Dish Names:** Consider whimsical names like “Power Pasta” or “Rainbow Rice Bowl.” Ensure that you have clear signage and menu boards to accompany the dish titles.
- **Incorporate Student-Friendly Packaging:** Use packaging similar to that found in restaurants, such as foil wraps or paper bowls. Provide convenient grab-and-go options for students on the move.

Key Principles of Innovative Menu Design

Ensuring Accessibility, Convenience and Inclusivity

- **Provide Dietary Accommodations:** Ensure that meal options cater to various dietary preferences, including gluten-free, vegetarian, and vegan choices
- **Innovate Meal Distribution Locations:** Explore different locations for food distribution, such as grab-and-go stations, breakfast in the classroom, or breakfast after the bell. (Note: Research has shown that this method can significantly increase participation!)
- **Embrace Novelty:** Add an element of surprise by serving food from unconventional places, like a storage closet or a food truck, to create a unique and exciting experience. (Always prioritize food safety and budget constraints, of course!)

Key Principles of Innovative Menu Design

Creative Meal Planning Strategies

- **Regularly Plan Themed Meals:** Effectively marketing themed meals is essential for creating the excitement necessary for success. Themes can range from the simple, like Taco Tuesday, to the more elaborate, such as International Cuisine Week.
- **Create Build-Your-Own Stations:** Encourage independence among your students by providing options like salad bars, grain bowls, or opportunities to assemble their own meals, such as sandwiches or wraps.
- **Experiment with Fusion Foods:** Explore various combinations of familiar and global flavors, such as Latin-Asian fusion or an Italian-American mashup.
- **Implement Seasonal Menu Cycles:** Consider introducing a seasonal four-week lunch cycle to keep students engaged and excited about the variety of school meals.

Collaboration and Monitoring Success

Poll Question

What barriers do you face when trying to innovate school menus?

- A) Budget constraints**
- B) Limited kitchen equipment**
- C) Resistance to change**
- D) Supply chain issues**

Collaboration and Monitoring Success

Measuring Success

- Track participation and plate waste before and after even small menu changes.
- Gather feedback consistently through surveys, taste tests, or informal conversations with students and families—every source of input is valuable!
- Stay adaptable and open to modifying menus and cafeteria practices based on feedback and evolving student tastes. Consider forming a small student advisory council to gather insights, which could be both fun and beneficial!
- Celebrate accomplishments and share success stories to not only showcase your program but also inspire others to implement changes in their districts. “We don’t have trade secrets!” — Patti Bilbrey

Collaboration and Monitoring Success

Partnerships and Inspiration

- Partnering with local health initiatives, culinary programs, or regional chefs can strengthen your school's dedication to student wellness while involving families in the journey. [Blue Watermelon Project](#) here in Arizona serves as a great example!
- Participate in school nutrition conferences and webinars to improve your understanding of program regulations, become familiar with products available to schools, and, most importantly, seek out inspiration!
 - The [USDA Team Nutrition](#) resources are specifically designed for NSLP operations, but you can find motivation in various places, including the non-school food service sector!

Case Study - Scottsdale

Scottsdale Unified School District: A Leader in Innovation

- Make it a goal to have a deep understanding of what appeals to YOUR students and families
- Draw inspiration from popular fast-casual dining trends to make meals more appealing
- Utilize modern serving dishes to enhance the presentation of meals.
- Introduce creative items like poke bowls, incorporating affordable substitutes such as imitation crab and edamame.
- Involve foodservice managers in the development of new menu offerings.
- Establish student advisory councils to test and refine meal options.
- Investigate successful strategies from other programs to adapt for your district.

SNA School Food For Thought: How Can Schools Innovate Meal Programs to Meet New Nutrition Guidelines? with Director Patti Bilbrey

USDA Guidelines and Flexibilities

Leverage New USDA Nutrition Standards to Enhance Your Innovation

- New Added Sugar Limits
 - Explore creative flavor combos to replace sugar and enhance taste.
 - Collaborate with food manufacturers to create innovative solutions that align with students' preferences.
- Sodium Reduction Targets
 - Introduce flavor stations that allow students to customize their meals with various toppings. (ex. Offer higher sodium ingredients as optional toppings for added choice.)
- Flexibility in Whole Grain Requirements
 - Take advantage of flexibility to provide whole grains in more appealing forms, such as whole wheat bread in place of pasta.
- Smart Snacks Standards
 - Utilize Smart Snacks guidelines to present unique yet enticing options for students.

Summary

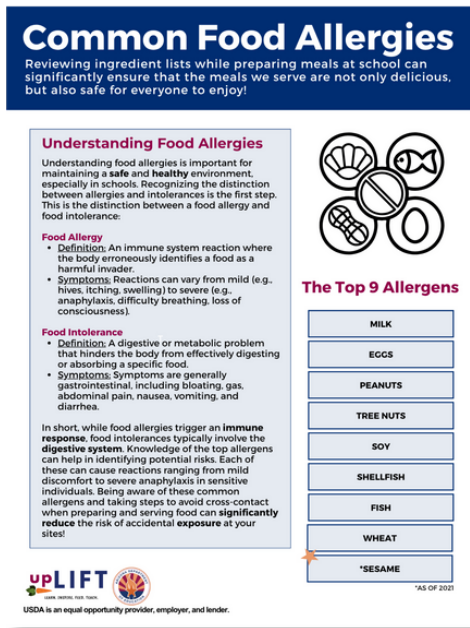
Innovation in School Meals

- Innovation in school meals can enhance both participation and nutrition by prioritizing student input and keeping their needs at the heart of every decision.
- Even small changes can significantly impact the overall experience, emphasizing that innovation is an ongoing journey rather than a final destination.
- Collaboration among educators, chefs, and students fuels creativity, allowing for the exploration of new ideas and trends in meal planning.
- By offering appealing and nutritious meals, schools can encourage lifelong healthy eating habits, nourishing both minds and bodies with creativity and care.

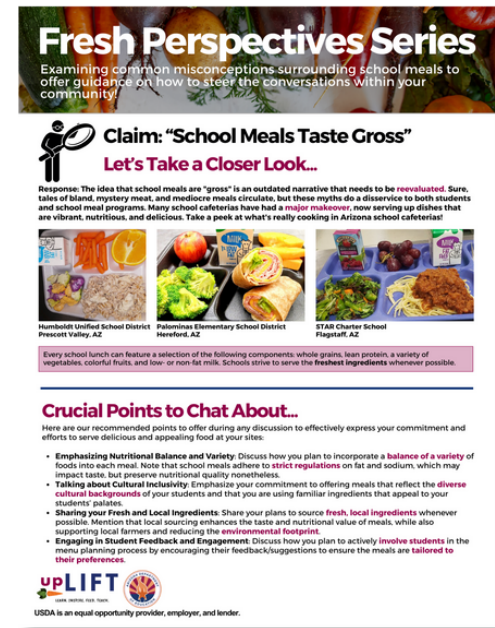
Resources



Taste AZ



Nutrition Knowledge
Fact Sheet



Fresh Perspectives

<https://www.azed.gov/hns/nslp/uplift/>

Looking Ahead

Join us next month!

upLIFT Webinar - From Farm to Cafeteria: Sourcing Fresh, Local Ingredients for Schools

November 18, 2025

1:30 pm - 2:00 pm

Join us next month, where we will discuss procurement of local foods from a different lens. Procurement is successful when all parties involved are committed to the goods and services you want to purchase. In this webinar, we will discuss how you can leverage your stakeholders, including parents, teachers, and administrators, to achieve maximum success in your ventures to purchase from farms and aggregators, while also changing the perception of your menus!



Thank you!

Any questions?
Please type them into the Q&A now.

If you are attending the live webinar, you will receive an email once attendance has been completed. Once you have received this email, your training certificate will be available in Arizona Professional Learning Development (APLD).

If you are watching the recorded webinar, you can access the survey link and certificate of completion at the end of the webinar slides.



Congratulations!

You have completed the recorded webinar: Innovative Menu Design: Creating Tempting and Nutritious School Meals

To request a certificate, please go to the next slide.

In order to count this training toward your Professional Standards training hours, the training content must align with your job duties.

Information to include when documenting this training for Professional Standards:

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Professional Standards Learning Codes: 1110, 1120

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- Attendees must document the amount of training hours indicated regardless of the amount of time it takes to complete it.

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*This will not appear in your ADE Professional Learning Development (APLD) Account.

<https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/upliftrecordedwebinar>

The information below is for your reference when completing the survey:

- Training Title: Innovative Menu Design: Creating Tempting and Nutritious School Meals

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