



Taste Testing and Feedback: Involving Staff and Students to Improve Meal Programs

May 19, 2026

1:30 PM - 2:00 PM

Professional Standards Learning Codes: 1110, 2430, 4150



Meet Your Host



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HEALTH AND NUTRITION SERVICES SPECIALIST

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. Overview of Taste Tests and Feedback
2. Engaging Staff, Vendors, and Students to Transform School Meals with Marana Unified School District
3. Resources

Overview of Taste Tests and Feedback

Why Is This Important?

Exposure

Children need to be exposed to unfamiliar foods many times before they are willing to try it.

Providing these opportunities for exposure to new foods in a safe environment is important for shaping children's eating behaviors.

Benefits

What are the benefits of conducting taste tests and surveys with staff and students?

- Using student feedback to plan menus can increase participation and consumption and decrease food waste
- Students can be hesitant to try new foods in the breakfast or lunch line when there isn't much time to get their food and eat
- Help students learn what they like and develop their palates
- Help ease the transition by combining the familiar with the unfamiliar
- Repeated tastings have been associated with high acceptability of fruits and vegetables
- Shows students you value their opinions on menu items
- Provides opportunities for nutrition education

Strategies for Success

Determine your "why"

Think about your menus, the foods you plan to introduce, or new foods you want to see the students try.

Examples:

- Test a new recipe
- Allow students to taste a new item being served on the line
- Compare items you consider putting on the menu
- Expose students to a new fruit or vegetable

Strategies for Success

Determine your "why"

Think about the long-term impact of your taste tests.

Examples:

- Shape healthy eating behaviors in children
- Help children get used to trying new foods
- Increased participation in school meals
- Increase popularity of less popular items

Strategies for Success

There are many ways to execute taste tests!

Here are some things to consider when planning your tasting event.

- **Timing of the event** - During meal service, in the classroom, in cafeteria, in the kitchen, after school
- **Frequency** - Try to test on a regular basis
- **Evaluation methods** - Emojis, thumbs up/down, buckets for voting, senses, small group conversation
- **Marketing** - social media, website, menus, advertisement in the cafeteria, parent newsletters, morning announcements, student newscast
- **Procurement** - Utilize Micro or Simplified Acquisition procurement methods

Strategies for Success

Types of Food to Test

- Limit to 1-3 items for tasting
- Students like good sized-samples
- Ensure you have enough samples for all students/staff to try
- Try offering items prepared in different ways
 - Fresh, steamed, roasted
- Provide stickers to students who took a taste

Strategies for Success

Involving Students

- Involve the students with planning the event
 - What foods to sample
 - Preparing the samples
 - Marketing
- Plan your testing days when the menu is less labor-intensive
- Choose items you know will be cost-effective and easy for staff to prepare if added to the regular menu

Strategies for Success

Involving Staff

- Involve food service staff
 - Allow them to have a voice in the items to be sampled
 - They will probably be helping you with setting up, so you want their buy-in!
- Invite the principal, teachers and other staff to join the event
 - Be involved, provide feedback, encourage students to try the foods

Strategies for Success

Utilize your brokers to support you with taste testing

- Provide products for sampling at your event
- Be onsite the day of testing
- Prepare the food according to manufacturer recommendations
- Share best practices and feedback from other schools

Engaging Staff, Vendors, and Students to Transform School Meals with Marana Unified School District

Marana Unified School District

School Profile:

- 18 Schools
 - Self-Op Kitchens
- Public school district
- Urban
- Enrollment: >10,000
- Free/reduced %: District 38%, ranges from 19%-73%

Meal Statistics:

- Breakfast and Lunch ADP: 55%

Team size:

- 90 School Nutrition Staff Members

Food Service Director:

- Crystal Kalahar



Professional Development Food Shows

Program Overview



- Marana's professional development (PD) program features two full-day sessions annually. Support services staff are encouraged to attend instead of using leave time, maximizing participation.
- During each PD day, staff rotate between two groups: one in the auditorium for learning sessions, and one in the cafeteria for vendor food shows and tastings. This structure ensures all staff experience both educational content and hands-on menu exploration.

Professional Development Food Shows

Key Goals of the PD program

- 1 Combat negative perceptions about school food occurring outside lunch lines.** - Change how administration, staff, and community view school meals through direct engagement and positive experiences.
- 2 Increase Average Daily Participation (ADP).** - Drive higher student engagement by offering appealing, student-approved menu items developed through collaborative taste testing.
- 3 Build buy-in across all stakeholder groups, including support staff -** Create grassroots advocates who can share positive messaging about school nutrition programs.

Professional Development Food Shows

Current Food Show Structure



- Food shows are currently designed exclusively for the nutrition services department. Vendors present potential menu items for consideration, showcasing their best offerings.
- Staff members participate in taste testing and evaluate each vendor's products, providing valuable feedback that helps shape the menu decisions and ensures quality standards are met.

Professional Development Food Shows

Future Food Show Expansion



Two separate food shows envisioned: one exclusively for nutrition services staff, and another including support staff to build broader buy-in across the district.



Strategy to "sell" the governing board and frontline staff who interact with parents daily. Goal: expand advocacy and positive messaging about school meals beyond food service.

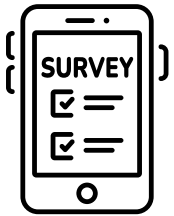
Menu Planning with Feedback

Menu Development Process

- 1 Vendors showcase potential menu items during food shows, presenting a variety of options for staff to experience and evaluate firsthand.
- 2 Top items are selected by nutrition services staff following each food show event, narrowing down the best options based on quality, taste, and feasibility.
- 3 Student taste tests at schools use a simple thumbs up/thumbs down evaluation system to determine final menu selections based on student approval and feedback.

Getting Feedback

Evaluation Methods



Google Poll surveys collect comprehensive feedback from staff following each professional development day, enabling continuous program improvement and measuring engagement levels across all participants.



Student taste tests utilize a simple thumbs up/thumbs down evaluation system, providing clear and actionable data on menu item approval that directly informs final menu selections.

Operations

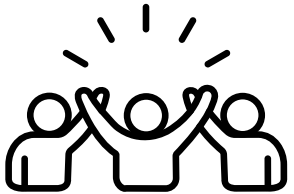
Operational Context and Constraints

- Local produce sourcing through Yuma supports fresh ingredients, ensuring students receive quality meals with regional products.
- Limited equipment for scratch cooking available due to fire suppression removal (no open flame allowed), with time constraints further limiting scratch cooking methods.



Impact of Food Shows

Strategic Impact



Engages support staff who communicate daily with parents, creating grassroots advocacy for school meal programs. Builds positive perception change among administration and food services department through direct involvement.



Increases student participation rates in meal programs through improved ADP growth. Strengthens collaboration with vendors and local suppliers for better menu offerings.

Benefits

Creating Meaningful Connections

- 1 Increases Student Excitement** - Students become actively involved in school meals, showing genuine enthusiasm for trying new foods and sharing their experiences with classmates.
- 2 Boosts Daily Participation** - Districts see consistent month-over-month increases in ADP as students look forward to featured menu items.
- 3 Creates Positive Buzz** - Taste tests generate excitement throughout the school community, with students eagerly discussing popular items.
- 4 Empowers Student Voice** - Students feel valued when their feedback directly influences menu planning, creating ownership and pride in their school meal program.

Challenges

Working with Operational Challenges

- **Enthusiasm vs. Sales Gap** - Student enthusiasm doesn't always translate to consistent sales—items like enchiladas get approval but don't sustain popularity.
- **Complex Prep Requirements** - Items like California burritos require heavy prep and assembly work, straining kitchen resources and staff time.
- **Logistics & Workload Impact** - PD day food shows create group flow and timing challenges, with significant workload impact on office and kitchen staff.

Top 5 Tips for Success

- ✓ **Keep an Open Mind** - Test surprising or uncertain items, not just favorites. You might discover unexpected student hits.
- ✓ **Keep Tastings Simple** - Avoid complicated assembly items that slow down service. Simple preparations work best.
- ✓ **Introduce Thoroughly to Principals** - Communicate clearly with principals using calendar invites and program overviews to ensure smooth coordination.
- ✓ **Dedicated Tasting Team** - Have a separate team handle tastings so kitchen staff workflow remains uninterrupted during service.
- ✓ **Keep It Fun & Adventurous** - Maintain a spirit of adventure with your taste tests! Prepare photos and recipes ahead of time to ease adoption.

Contact Info



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Marana Unified School District

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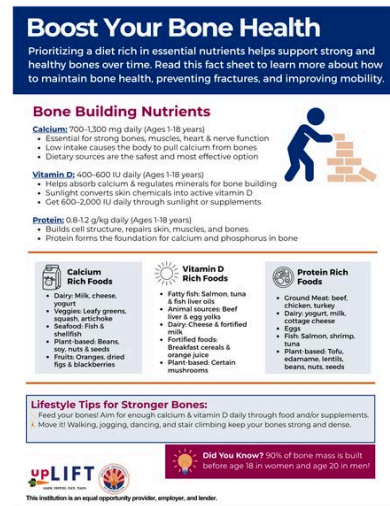
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Resources

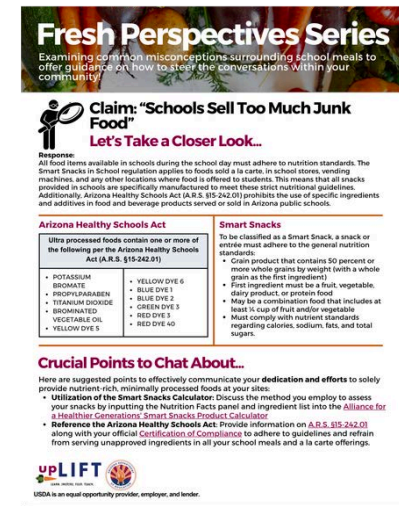
Resources



Taste AZ



Nutrition Knowledge
Fact Sheet



Fresh Perspectives

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

June Webinar

Join us in June!

Parent Involvement: Encouraging Family Participation in School Nutrition

June 16, 2026

1:30 pm - 2:00 pm

Join us next month for a webinar session on exploring how to engage parents with your school nutrition program. Learn ways to spark parent interest, build supportive habits at home, and strengthen your school's nutrition efforts. You don't want to miss this opportunity to learn how to gain ongoing support from your community!



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: [Taste Testing and Feedback: Involving Staff and Students to Improve Meal Programs](#)

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:

Training Title: [Taste Testing and Feedback: Involving Staff and Students to Improve Meal Programs](#)

Professional Standards Learning Codes: [1110, 2430, 4150](#)

Length: [0.5 hour](#)

Please Note:

- 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: **Taste Testing and Feedback: Involving Staff and Students to Improve Meal Programs**

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