

School Cafeteria Operations: Separating Myth from Reality

When it comes to managing school cafeteria operations, school business managers must distinguish myth from reality.

By Richard Weeks, RSBA



In his book *How to Get Rich*, Donald Trump says, “If you don’t know every aspect of what you’re doing, down to the paper clips, you’re setting yourself up for some unwelcome surprises” (2004).

School officials often assume that the food service director or management company should be the one concerned with the cafeteria program’s management details. But of course that’s not the case. Cafeteria operations affect the school business bottom line, so they indeed fall under the purview of school business officials.

Not only should school business officials be familiar with the food service budget, they should also know the cost of school meals, the path food takes from supplier to cafeteria tray, and even the names of the “lunch ladies” in the district.

When it comes to managing school cafeteria operations, school business managers must also distinguish myth from reality. Let’s explore some myths surrounding the cafeteria operation and how school business officials can ensure effective program management.

Myth: School Cafeteria Operations Must Be Profitable

The careers of many food service directors and management companies have been sidetracked because they didn’t run profitable cafeteria operations.

But, let’s get real. After you tally the costs of operations, including food and beverages, utilities, paper products and supplies, equipment purchases and repair, property and liability insurance, and labor costs, you quickly realize that the program’s income will rarely match or exceed expenses. This consequence is due to the remarkably low prices schools charge for meals, the meager cash reimbursements from government for students enrolled in the free and reduced-price meal program, and write-offs for students who don’t pay for meals for whatever reason.

Many school districts are willing to subsidize cafeteria operations at a financial loss if the trade-off is that warm food at breakfast and lunch help improve student learning and provide adequate sustenance so students can participate in after-school sports and activities. We all know that the only hot meal some children get each day is at school.

School business officials should include in their schools’ operating budgets line items for expenses that cannot be handled in the revolving accounts for school cafeteria operations.

Myth: Cafeteria Food Makes Kids Obese

For decades, school cafeterias throughout Canada and the United States have prepared fresh, home-style meals daily using retail store-quality ingredients, including freshly prepped vegetables, varieties of wholesome bread, and

baked (not fried) chicken. Unfortunately, some schools don't, and it's these few that garner the media's attention.

We can do our part by reducing or eliminating foods that are high in sodium, sugar, and triglycerides from the cafeteria and vending machines, but we need help. Students are with us for about six hours a day. That means our mission to combat poor nutrition and obesity must include the parents and students themselves.

The National PTA can provide assistance. Its Website offers guidance on health and wellness and nutrition, including discussion papers, such as "Helping Your Overweight Teen" and "Healthy Grocery Shopping Tips." (Go to www.pta.org; select **Topics**; then click on **Health & Wellness**.)

The School Nutrition Association and its state affiliates are an excellent resource for information. Visit SNA's Website for position papers on topics that you can present to parent groups and the media (www.schoolnutrition.org).

Myth: Quick Fixes Are Viable Solutions

Among the current quick fixes being bandied about the media are calls for schools to purchase all their food from local farmers and for local chefs to spend time with school cooks to help them make their menus more nutritious. This would be great, but it's not the whole solution.

In reality, one of the keys to a well-run school cafeteria is retaining the best food service director you can afford. You can hire your own director or outsource the position to a food service management company.

"Managerial ability is the fourth most important characteristic that we look for when hiring chefs or cooks," food service writers Peter Rainsford and David Bangs state in their book, *The Restaurant Start-Up* (2001). "More importantly," they say, "we hire personnel for their attitude, demeanor and experience." Why shouldn't these be the most important traits of your food service director?

It's highly unlikely that quick fixes will serve you better than time-tested methodologies. Don't lose sight of the fact that your school cafeteria operations are *your* operations.

References

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