



NATIONAL
SCHOOL
LUNCH
PROGRAM

MEAL APPEAL TOOLKIT



Food and Nutrition Division
National School Lunch Program



TEXAS DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Menu Planning	3
Food Preparation	7
Food Presentation	11
Customer Service	13
Evaluate	14
Marketing and Promotion	18
Resources	21



MENU PLANNING



Menu planning balances many factors that go into successfully planning school meals including:

1. Federal Compliance Requirements
2. Budget
3. Equipment and Personnel
4. Student Acceptance

Cycle Menu Advantages:

- ✓ Saving Time
- ✓ Allowing More Flexibility
- ✓ Increasing Quality Standards with Familiar Recipes
- ✓ Streamlining Planned Numbers and Procurement

Menu Planning Considerations:

- ✓ Food and Labor Costs
- ✓ Kitchen Equipment
- ✓ Staff Skill Level
- ✓ Student Preferences
- ✓ Product Availability

Tips for Planning a Menu Cycle

- Collect a list of student favorite menu items, USDA foods, existing inventory, and available items to order.
- Start with Lunch.
- Label menu days with a protein such as beef, pork, chicken, beans, cheese to ensure a variety each week.
- Plan entrees based on assigned proteins using recipes of students' favorites, USDA foods, inventory.
- Pair vegetables with specific entrees. Assign your most difficult subgroup of vegetables first.
- Choose fruits based on texture, color, and shape.
- Start with a 3-week cycle.
- Move to breakfast.
- Plan main items.
- Pair with a fruit. If only serving one fruit option, don't menu the same fruit as lunch.
- Add any condiments.
- List milk choices.



Other Considerations For Menu Planning

Evaluate colors, textures, and flavors.

Color Variety

Use fruits and vegetables to add color. Avoid meals that are all brown or yellow. Color variety makes menu items stand out on the line, as well as on a tray. Color variety also conveys the impression of freshness.

Example, after setting your menu, review the food items for each meal to check for color variety and swap a fruit or vegetable to complement the entree.



Shapes

Different shapes can make food items really stand out on the line, and on a tray. Fun shapes can create intrigue and interest, especially among younger customers. Use cookie cutters to offer fruit shaped like stars, flowers, animals or seasonal characters.

Example, serve multiple fruits such as round cherries added to the pineapple to offer some diversity.

Flavor balances & complementary tastes

Heavy entrees are best paired with lighter, fresh sides. Try not to get so singularly focused on meeting vegetable subgroup requirements that you forget to make sure combinations work well together.

Example, salad is a great complement to the cheesy pizza entree.

- **Offer variety with seasonal menus.**
- **Plan promotional days each month. Replace your normal cycle day with a special menu.**
- **Pair high-cost items with low-cost items to balance food cost.**
- **Consider how much equipment is required for meal serve. Avoid a lunch menu with four recipes that all need to be baked if only one oven is available.**

Plan for Student Choice

Encourage students to try new items and participate in the school meals program by allowing them to make individualized choices about their meals. This can be as simple as planning a menu that offers a daily variety of entrée items and side dishes. Salad bars are an excellent way to offer a colorful variety of fresh choices for students to build their own meals.

Menu Planning Resources:

- Farm Fresh Resources (TDA)
 - Cooking for the Seasons Recipe Book
 - Seasonality Wheel
- Recipes for USDA Foods (TDA)
- Child Nutrition Recipe Box (USDA)



FOOD PREPARATION

Create appealing menus with these tips.

Knife Skills

Students “eat with their eyes” first. How fruits and vegetables are cut can determine if students will choose an item.

Fruits

Consistent cuts of fruits provide appealing shapes.

For example, instead of slicing oranges along the core vein, cut them into quarters across the core vein.



Vegetables

Uniform pieces provide consistent texture.

For example, cubed sweet potatoes that vary greatly in size will cook differently in the oven such that some pieces may be overly soft, and others may not yet be fully cooked.



Textures

Texture plays a significant role in our taste experience of food, so it is important to preserve the texture integrity of menu items. Use these tips to avoid overly hard, mushy, soggy textures.



Fruits

Flexibility to serve fruits when ripe

- Bananas ripen quickly. Allow service flexibility based on color when delivered. Place bananas in a brown paper bag to get them to ripen faster.

Serve fruits at different temperatures

- Frozen fruits may become too mushy when thawed. Serving some fruits with ice crystals maintain their shape. Students may enjoy slightly frozen fruits, such as grapes, strawberry cups.

Use lemon juice to prolong browning

- Sliced apples or pears make it easier for smaller children to eat but the fruit will brown when exposed to air. Prevent browning by soaking cut fruit in 1 Tablespoon lemon juice and 1 cup water for 3-5 minutes.

Vegetables

Try different culinary techniques

- Different vegetables require different cook times and are best offered using a variety of cook methods such as baking, roasting, sauteing and boiling. Follow directions or the recipe for correct cook time and temperature.
- The cook method and time used to cook vegetables affect appearance. For example, green vegetables cooked too long or with acid can lose their vibrant colors.

Ensure temperature control of vegetables

- Fresh salad bar items may wilt if they sit in warm temperatures for too long. Hold salad bar items in refrigerator until service.
- Vegetables hot held prior to service can begin to dull in color, such as bright green broccoli turning a dull green as it sits in the warmer for long periods of time.

Entreés

Calibrate oven temperatures

- Ensure that foods are cooked and browned, glazed or crisped properly to enhance visual appeal and produce desirable textures. Make sure that oven temperatures are calibrated and checked by using working oven thermometers. Check with your oven manufacture for calibration steps.
- For example, if breads that are to be cooked at 350°F are coming out of the oven unevenly browned, over cooked or under cooked, an oven thermometer may show that the oven temperature is actually above or below 350°F.

Avoid overcrowding of pans

- Too many baked items in one sheet pan won't allow items to crisp appropriately. Baked items should be baked in single layers.



Just in Time Service

Prepare foods items using just-in-time service

- Fruits prepared with just-in-time service ensures freshness and reduces the browning effect of oxidation. Another way to prevent browning is to toss cut fruits with a vitamin C-rich fruit juice (such as lemon, orange or pineapple juice)
- Ideally foods should not be in a warmer longer than 45 minutes. Hot vegetables held in the warmer too long may become too mushy. If you are holding cooked vegetables in a warmer before service, make sure the warmer is not set too high or too low for the vegetables to maintain their vibrant color and quality.
- Perfectly cooked entrees may become soggy with long times in the warmer. Prepare uncooked items on sheet pans to be ready to be baked off before service.

Food Preparation Resources

- Whole Grain-Rich Pasta Cooking Resources (TDA)
- Whole Grain-Rich Best Practice (TDA)
- Reducing Sodium Best Practices (TDA)
- Culinary Institute of Child Nutrition (ICN)

(Links are available in resource appendix)



FOOD PRESENTATION

Visually appealing food presentation and meal service lines help to increase participation and student exposure to new tastes and textures.

Plating

Consider the consistency of food items

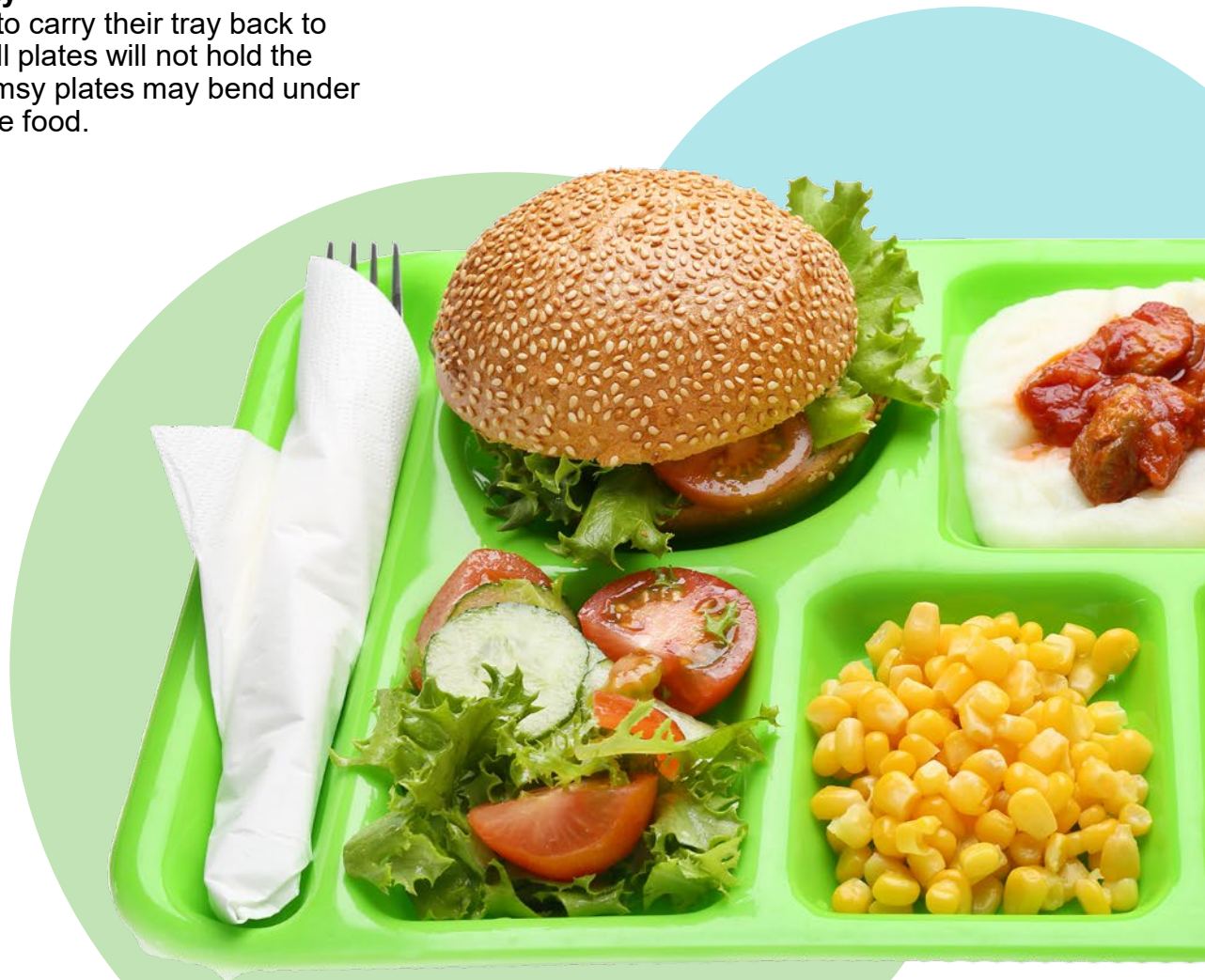
Serve runny foods in high-rimmed containers or stand-alone containers. Note that younger students may prefer their menu items separated.

Evaluate the look, size and strength of the plate/tray

Students need to carry their tray back to their seat. Small plates will not hold the entire meal. Flimsy plates may bend under the weight of the food.

Display sample trays

A pre-plated example of the meal is a great way to show appeal and attract students. Position the plates and trays at the beginning of the serving line, at eye level, and in a well-lit area to increase visibility to your students.





Serving Lines

- The serving line is an opportunity to feature food offerings. It is important to make food items visible and easily accessible. Before service, walk the line to ensure it looks appealing from the students' perspectives.
- Decorate the line with age-appropriate decorations for holidays or theme days. Display student artwork to encourage students to come through the line.
- Maintain a clean line. Wipe up spills immediately to prevent build-up and unsightly dried food.
- Refill pans when there are few servings left. When hot held items get down to only a serving or two, they can appear crusty or burnt.
- Ensure students can see the food on the line. Don't hide food underneath foil or metal covers. Use clear plastic containers if items are pre-packaged so the contents of the package can be seen.
- Avoid stacking food items that could get "smashed", such as sandwiches. An alternative is to arrange them horizontally, leaning up against one another instead of pressing down onto each other.
- Display items to highlight color and shapes. Alternate different fruits and vegetables to create a rainbow. Garnishes provide an opportunity to introduce fun shapes, as well as color variety, into school meals.
- Spotlight fruits and vegetables! Grab students' attention by cutting fruits and vegetables into fun or visually appealing shapes. Place these healthy choices in visible areas, such as the beginning of the line or at the point of sale. Elevate fruit and vegetables on a tiered stand in order to increase visibility and convenience.



CUSTOMER SERVICE

Preparing delicious meals and attractively presenting them in an overall pleasing cafeteria environment is key to providing excellent customer service.

A pleasing cafeteria environment will enhance students' experience of school meals. This includes the serving area, trays and food, servers, and the dining room. Clean and organized facilities, friendly servers and attractive food all send the message that you value your students.

These are ways that servers can enhance their customer service skills:

- Smile and treat students respectfully.
- Maintains good hygiene and keeps uniforms clean and fresh-looking.
- Present with a pleasantly calm demeanor.
- Encourages selection of healthy choices by asking students questions, such as “Would you like to try a delicious Italian vegetable medley?”
- Prompt students to select fruits and vegetables by using fun names or descriptive words. “Can I offer you grapefruit grown right here in Texas?”
- Participate in theme days or school spirit days.





EVALUATE

Successful child nutrition programs evaluate their programs regularly through both student and staff feedback to measure student satisfaction and identify areas for improvement.

Nutrition Staff Feedback

Student taste preferences can vary by school. Communicate with nutrition cafeteria staff for valuable feedback on their students' preferences. Refer to past food production records to evaluate popularity of menu items. Encourage staff to provide feedback on student plate waste by reporting what is being thrown away on the trays. Program operators can also conduct self-surveys to evaluate the menu, food preparation techniques, meal service presentation and customer service.



Student Feedback

Seeking student input can be simple and fun. Not only can you receive helpful information to improve menu items, but students feel more engaged with their school meals when they are given a voice and a choice. Methods of collecting student feedback include:

- **Comment cards** are a quick and easy way to collect information from your customers. A simply designed basket can be put at the cafeteria entrance/exit next to a pile of comment cards. Ask students what they would like to see or what they find pleasing about their lunchroom experiences and where they believe the opportunities are for improvement.
- **Focus groups** allows more in-depth information. Work with the leadership committee, such as Student Council, or randomly send invitations to a certain number of students from each grade level. During focus groups, ask 1-on-1 questions, provide them with food samples, ask for specific ideas to improve the dish.
- **Taste tests** are a great way to quickly assess student's potential acceptance of food items. You can offer them alongside comment cards in order to capture more information.
- **Student surveys** are another in-depth way to collect information. Student surveys can be distributed easily for students to take home, then return to you completed. They may also be conducted quickly as students are finishing their meals or leaving the cafeteria, as a series of 3-4 questions.

Follow these steps for collecting student feedback:

1. Decide which part of your menu you would like to evaluate such as new menu item or existing item that is not selling well.
2. Select an evaluation method including comment cards, focus groups, taste tests or student surveys.
3. Establish a time frame and participation goal.
4. Assign staff to conduct and collect the evaluations.
5. Review the results and build a list of possible action plans to address findings.
6. Taste Testing is great way to introduce students to new or unusual foods. One small sample size portion is much less intimidating than an entire serving of an unfamiliar food. In addition, children respond favorably to repeat exposures of new foods and are more likely to consume school meals if they're familiar with the foods being offered.

Benefits of Taste Testing Menu Items:

1. Raises awareness about healthy foods.
2. Involves the school community.
3. Builds a culture of trying new foods.
4. Encourages students to try new foods with multiple exposures.
5. Integrates nutrition education into taste tests.



Taste Testing Methods:

1. Anonymous Ballot Boxes
2. Visual Counts/Tally Sheets
3. Age-appropriate Paper Surveys
4. Mobile App

Utilize TDA resources to help get started with evaluating your program:

1. [I Tried Local Taste Testing Manual \(TDA\)](#)
2. TDA Survey & Evaluation
 - Elementary School, Student Satisfaction Survey
 - Elementary school Taste Test
 - Middle School and High School, Student Satisfaction Survey
 - Program Evaluation for Program Operators





MARKETING AND PROMOTION

Marketing and promotion contribute significantly to the lunchroom experience and can positively impact students' willingness to try and likelihood of enjoying school meal offerings.

There are many stereotypes and misconceptions about school lunches. To change perceptions and grow participation, look to new ways to serve meals. You can build your customer base by adding new, innovative services to your program based on students' dining needs and interests.

Don't wait for people to make their own judgments, you can determine how people see your food service operation by asking your team these questions:

- What is your vision?
- How will you brand your program?
- How will you build and maintain interest?

Vision

Establish a vision for your food service program. Add elements of your program to your vision statement such as local foods and healthy offerings to all students. Include input from your kitchen staff. Display the vision statement in your offices and kitchens.

Branding

Branding includes color schemes, a name or slogan, an identifying icon or logo and any additional designs that identify and distinguish your school nutrition program.

Create a cafeteria name and/or slogan. Connect to themes already present at your school such as the school culture, location, and history. For example, if the school mascot is a bear, then the cafeteria could be "The Den".



Create Interest

Offer promotional events and theme days.

Special menus peak interest and increase participation. Use familiar recipes with exciting names. Aim for at least one theme day each month.

Debut new meal items.

Create coming soon flyers for new meal items. Offer mini taste testing portions on the line to create interest and evaluate student preferences.

Establish a strong social media presence and current website.

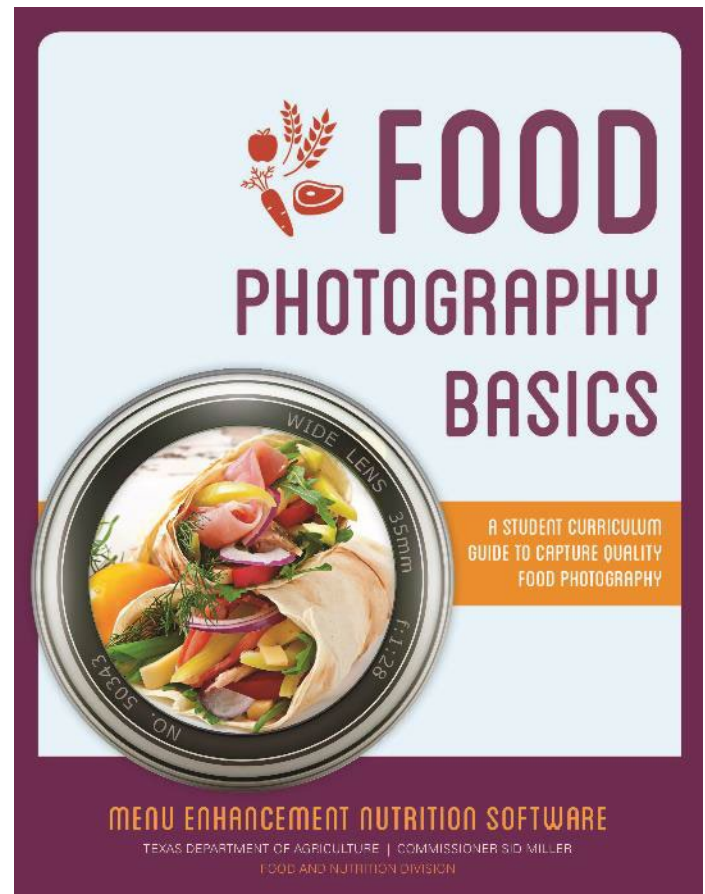
Promote updated menu information, parent communications, fun promotional events/activities, and real school pictures from your cafeteria on both social media sites and foodservice website. Use TDA's Food Photography Resource to take share worthy images.

Publish menus online with programs such as School Café.

By using TDA's no cost MENU module, you also have access to School Café. Upload menus and pictures for your actual meal. Students and parents can access your information from their phone or computer.

Build a school garden.

Children respond positively to being in the garden and are more likely to try foods that they had a hand in growing. Fresh food from the garden can be incorporated into school meals or used to introduce students to unfamiliar produce through product tastings.



Marketing and Promotion Resources:

- [Food Photography Basics \(TDA\)](#)
- [Farm Fresh Getting Started \(TDA\)](#)





RESOURCES

Menu Planning

1. Farm Fresh Resources (TDA)

[Cooking for the Seasons Recipe](#) book help menu planners meet specific meal patterns Refer to your program guides when planning your menu to ensure selected recipes credit appropriately for the designated meal component. The recipes in this cookbook are designed to help you serve healthy, seasonally focused meals that will appeal to your young customers.

[Seasonality Wheel](#) Use this tool to identify the seasons that match your favorite Texas grown fruits and vegetables.

2. Recipes for USDA Foods (TDA)

The Texas Department of Agriculture (TDA) identified four underutilized USDA Foods in Texas, canned black-eyed peas, canned chickpeas, IQF pepper and onion mix, and canned kidney beans. To promote the use of these items, TDA with the Education Service Center Region 13 Chef created and tested multiple recipes. [TDA's USDA Recipe Suggestions](#) contains these standardized recipes and compliance information for planning menus for the NSLP, SBP and SFSP.

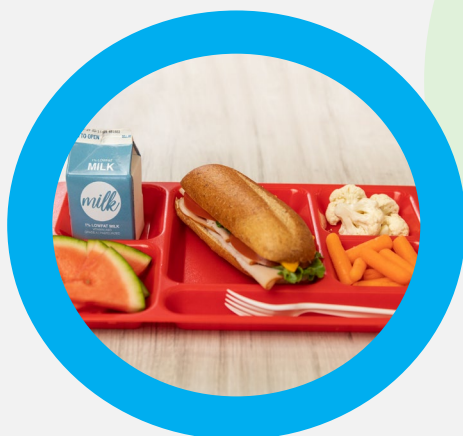
3. Child Nutrition Recipe Box (USDA)

USDA offers recipes that are kid-approved and credited to support the new meal pattern requirements. Click on the image below or [visit the Child Nutrition Recipe Box by clicking here.](#)



Food Preparation

- Whole Grain-Rich Pasta Cooking Resources (TDA)
Refer to these resources for recommended cook times and best practices when preparing whole grain-rich pasta. All are suitable for display in the kitchen for quick reference during meal preparation.
 - [Whole Grain-Rich Pasta, Gold Standards for Cook Times](#)
 - [Whole Grain-Rich Pasta, Best Practices to Cook on the Stovetop and in a Tilt Skillet](#)
 - [Whole Grain-Rich Pasta, Best Practices to Cook in a Steamer and in an Oven](#)
- Whole grain-rich products cook differently than refined white grains, and may also appear darker in color. The one-page resource, [Tips to Prepare Whole Grain-Rich Items](#), offers strategies in order to address common challenges associated with preparing and serving whole grain-rich products.
- [Whole Grain-Rich Best Practices \(TDA\)](#)
- [Reducing Sodium Best Practices \(TDA\)](#)
- [Culinary Institute of Child Nutrition \(ICN\)](#)
- Culinary Techniques for Healthy School Meals provides food preparation techniques, such as stir-frying vegetables, preparing salads and cooking dry beans.



Evaluate

1. [I Tried Local Taste Testing Manual](#)
Simple steps for launching your first taste test. Recommendations to make taste tests part of regular programming. Tips to plan and promote a special tasting event. In-school promotional assets to encourage participation. Tools to help collect feedback and more!
2. TDA Survey & Evaluation Examples

Marketing and Promotion

1. [Food Photography Basics \(TDA\)](#)
A student curriculum guide to basic food photography. This curriculum will guide readers on how to capture professional-looking food. These appetizing pictures can be incorporated into School Café (MENU Module) mobile app menus and can quickly encourage student engagement.
2. [Farm Fresh Getting Started \(TDA\)](#)
Resources to getting started with incorporating local foods into your program and creating your own school garden.





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