



Just the Facts!

Meeting the Challenge of Rising Food Costs *for Healthier School Meals*

KEY ISSUES:

- Providing healthy and appealing school meals when food prices are increasing can be a major challenge.
- Savvy school foodservice directors can manage tight food budgets and provide nutritious meals to their students.
- USDA Foods are available to help schools meet their nutrition and financial goals.

Many school districts are feeling the squeeze of increasing food costs. It can also be challenging to provide healthy meals and snacks. What can schools do to meet these challenges? Some strategies include: maximizing use of available foods from USDA, using standardized recipes, buying foods in season, focusing on lower cost foods, tightening procurement practices, serving appropriate portions, and sharing cost-saving strategies with others.

Recipe for Success

The following strategies may be helpful in controlling costs:

- **Use cycle menus to keep variety in your meals** while simplifying food purchasing and budgeting. Revamp cycle menus to serve less expensive, popular items more often.
- **Serve low-cost beans or other legumes more often** as a meat alternate or vegetable choice. For example, serve a bean and cheese burrito or substitute kidney beans for some of the meat in chili.
- **Train staff to follow standardized recipes precisely.** Every extra scoop costs money! For example, don't add extra ground beef to the spaghetti sauce recipe.
- **Serve portion sizes according to the recipe.** For example, serve a level ½-cup scoop of mashed potatoes, instead of a heaping scoop. Compare product prices among various vendors. Obtain price lists from wholesale and retail vendors.
- **Join a purchasing co-op to help maximize your purchasing power!** Combine bids with neighboring school districts to purchase larger quantities at lower prices.
- **Buy fresh fruits and vegetables when in season** to get the best price and peak flavor.
- **Use canned or frozen fruits** and vegetables more often.
- **Market your program as a good value to students, teachers, staff, and parents to boost participation.** Compare the cost and nutritional benefit of a typical lunch brought from home to one served at school.
- **Create new customers through catering!** Showcase healthy menus at board meetings and other school events. Have tasting parties in classrooms or as part of other school activities.

USDA Foods Program

USDA continually explores better ways to help schools offer healthier meals consistent with the *2010 Dietary Guidelines for Americans*. Whole grains, reduced-fat and reduced-sodium meats and cheeses, lower sodium canned vegetables, and canned fruits with less sugar are some examples of these healthier offerings. Information about the USDA Foods Program is available in the USDA Foods Toolkit at: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/fdd/foods/healthy/Professional.htm> to review the Foods Available List for Schools.

- **Start a farm-to-school program to obtain fresh produce locally.** To get started, go to: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/F2S/>
- **Complete an annual procurement plan** based on your menu to maximize the use of commodities, especially for the more expensive items.
- **Order bulk USDA Foods** for further processing to help stretch your entitlement dollars.
- **Become a partner with your State Distributing Agency** to ensure the most cost-effective ordering.
- **Raise the cost of meals for paid students and school staff to help offset increasing costs** of food and labor. Ensure second meals and adult meals are priced to fully cover their cost of production.
- **Meet the school meal pattern standards** and earn the performance-based reimbursement.

For More Information:

Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) provides information on the regulation, as well as technical assistance and guidance materials on the nutrition standards for school meals:

- www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/governance/policy.htm
- www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/governance/Legislation/nutritionstandards.htm

Food and Nutrition Information Center Healthy Meals Resource System at <http://healthymeals.nal.usda.gov> provides:

- [Purchasing and Procurement resource list](#)
- [Menu Planning and Preparation resource list](#)
- [Web site links to materials developed by State agencies, other government agencies, and food product associations](#)

National Food Service Management Institute (NFSMI) at www.nfsmi.org provides:

Training materials on Financial Management, including:

- **First Choice: A Purchasing Systems Manual for School Food Service** (<http://www.nfsmi.org/ResourceOverview.aspx?ID=64>)
- **Food Buying Guide Instructor Manual and Participant Workbook** (<http://www.nfsmi.org/ResourceOverview.aspx?ID=68>)
- **Food Buying Guide Calculator for Child Nutrition Programs** (<http://www.nfsmi.org/ResourceOverview.aspx?ID=400>)
- **Measuring Success with Standardized Recipes** (<http://www.nfsmi.org/ResourceOverview.aspx?ID=88>)

Webcasts on effective financial management, procurement, and inventory control, including:

- **Webinar: Financial Management: A Course for School Food Service Directors** (<http://www.nfsmi.org/ResourceOverview.aspx?ID=338>)
- **Financial Management: A Course for School Food Service Directors** (<http://www.nfsmi.org/ResourceOverview.aspx?ID=63>)

Fact sheets on research related to cost control, purchasing, and financial decision-making, including:

- **Financial Management Benchmarks for School Nutrition** (<http://www.nfsmi.org/ResourceOverview.aspx?ID=142>)
- **Financial Management Issues and Practices in School Nutrition Programs** (<http://www.nfsmi.org/ResourceOverview.aspx?ID=143>)

