

Summer Meals: Serving Kid-Friendly, High-Quality Meals

Developing menus and serving meals that children enjoy are a core part of operating a successful summer meal program. When meals are appealing, nutritious, and responsive to the children and communities being served, children are more likely to participate, sponsors can increase reimbursement, and programs can reduce food waste.

This resource recaps best practices shared during FRAC's [Summer Meals: Serving Kid-Friendly, High-Quality Meals](#) webinar, highlighting strategies from Yuba City Unified School District and the Northwestern Ohio Community Action Commission.

Things to Consider

- **High-quality meals are about more than nutrition.** Sponsors should consider whether meals are appealing, varied, culturally appropriate, and nutritious. Asking children and families for feedback can help sponsors understand what children like, what they want more of, and what may need to be changed.
- **Meal pattern requirements are the foundation for menu planning.** All meals served through Summer Nutrition Programs must meet U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) meal standards. Sponsors should begin by ensuring meals meet the required components for breakfast, lunch, supper, or snack, then look for opportunities to improve freshness, variety, appeal, and cultural relevance.
- **Meal service models should reflect sponsor capacity and site logistics.** Sponsors may use self-prep, vended, or a combination of both models. Menus should also account for each site's location, storage, equipment, transportation, food safety needs, staffing, and whether hot meals, cold meals, sack lunches, or multiple options work best.
- **Cycle menus can make planning easier.** Cycle menus allow sponsors to plan meals in advance, offer variety, manage purchasing, and make substitutions when needed. They also create opportunities to introduce new recipes and incorporate seasonal foods.
- **Fresh, local, and seasonal foods can increase appeal.** Farm to Summer activities, local produce, farmers' markets, and partnerships with local growers can improve meal quality while helping children learn more about where their food comes from.
- **Reduce food waste where possible.** Sponsors should explore options to reduce food waste, such as options that allows children to take home certain

nonperishable meal components, if allowed by the state agency and local health department.

Making It Work: Programs in Action

Yuba City Unified School District in Northern California operates 15 summer meal sites, including school campuses, preschools, a park, and a public library. The district uses seven different summer menus across its sites to meet the different needs of different age groups, service models, and settings. All meals are self-prepared either on site or at a central kitchen and transported to sites. Other best practices include:

- **Tailor menus to different sites**, including high school menus, preschool menus, library lunch menus, park menus, and sack lunch menus for field trips.
- **Incorporate Farm to Summer activities**, such as student and community farmers' markets, to increase engagement and access to fresh produce.
- **Partner with local farmers and offer fresh fruit daily**, including seasonal produce from the surrounding agricultural region.
- **Survey students and families** about menu items and use their feedback to shape summer menus.
- **Build on school-year favorites** and use existing inventory, when possible, to manage costs.

The **Northwestern Ohio Community Action Commission** operates summer meals across five counties in Ohio. The program has 13 summer meal sites, including parks, churches, and libraries, and uses both self-prep and vended meal models. Several sites are volunteer-run, helping the program expand services while strengthening community involvement. Best practices include:

- **Serve meals that reflect children's preferences**, including hot, homemade-style foods, such as spaghetti, lasagna, meatballs, and grilled chicken sandwiches.
- **Use both self-prep and vended models** to balance meal variety, quality, and capacity.
- **Build strong volunteer sites** where volunteers pick up food, take food temperatures, distribute meals, and lead activities with children.
- **Engage community groups** such as local high school sports teams to sponsor days or weeks at meals sites and provide activities for children.
- **Use existing staff relationships and expertise**, including staff who continue working during the summer and the school year.
- **Partner with local funders**, civic organizations, local clubs, and businesses to support meal service and enrichment.
- **Pair meals with activities** to make summer meals more welcoming and encourage participation.

Additional Resources

- [FRAC Summer Nutrition Programs resources](#)
- [*A How-To Guide for Summer Food Sponsors on Purchasing High-Quality Summer Meals*](#)
- [*Fresh From the Farm: Using Local Foods in the Afterschool and Summer Programs*](#)
- [USDA Farm to Summer](#)
- [USDA Procuring Local Foods](#)