

Promising Practices of State Child Nutrition Programs

State Agency Directors work to ensure that their state staff, schools, and school districts have the training and resources they need to prepare healthy, appetizing meals every day. Promoting healthy and delicious food while ensuring nutrition programs' accountability is challenging, but many agency leaders have found effective strategies that may also help their peers achieve similar goals.

The following information reflects state agency leader insight on what has worked for them in building strong and successful programs. Since program costs, resources, and challenges vary from one state to the next, these suggestions may be more or less applicable in the context of different states.



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Training Content

There is a broad range of material that state agencies need to cover to ensure that district and school staffs are prepared to do their jobs. Be flexible and responsive in your planning of training content to make sure you are meeting actual needs.

- Offer regular trainings such as annual updates or summer workshops that include special tracks for new employees, business managers, and administrators. Targeting sessions for different audiences is critical, especially when addressing specific parts of the program that are handled by staff who might work outside of the cafeteria, such as school principals. Agencies may be more successful engaging these groups if they offer options specific to their interests rather than trying to include them in broader trainings.
- Consider offering training on marketing of the meal programs in order to help districts boost participation. Marketing is often an over-looked aspect of meal programs, but it can be key in changing the perception of school meals and increasing program success.
- Reach out to local chefs and other non-traditional partners in the restaurant industry; they might be willing to help you host a training focused on culinary skills.
- Conduct short and simple surveys to assess training needs and interests and use results to guide training and new program development for the next school year.
- Bring together food service directors from across the state to form a consulting committee. States that have done this successfully hold regular meetings to discuss training programs and other concerns and needs that local directors may have.
- Think outside the box and be aware of the specific needs in your state. Many aspects of program administration, including communicating effectively and charging accurate prices, may need improvement.
 - There might be language barriers in certain parts of your state that could be addressed by translating your trainings or even providing language classes.
 - Some states have found resources to provide adult literacy or basic math trainings, in the name of decreasing error rates that lead to program inefficiency.
- Determine the most common findings in your state's Administrative Reviews (ARs), and create short step-by-step trainings to address these. Make them accessible on your website for on-demand viewing, and point food service directors to them when needed.
- Consider offering educational "efficiency reviews" that are not part of official ARs and help programs analyze their cost per meal, utilization of procurement, monthly financials, and menu planning. These tend to appeal to administrators, and they can be a way to build more collaborative partnerships with district leadership.

Think creatively about how to package your training. The Nutrition Services Division of the California Department of Education created Fresh Meals at Schools by recruiting strong, innovative Food Service Directors (FSDs) to be ambassadors. These FSDs create and demonstrate healthy recipes because they have found that it helps to have other FSDs learn from their peers. The Texas Department of Agriculture has the Boost Meal Appeal campaign to help with menu planning.

Training Delivery

Format the training to ensure that staff will get the most out of content that is presented.

- Consider posting an archived webinar or a narrated PowerPoint for trainings on topics that are likely to change frequently over time. This approach allows for training updates with a minimal investment of time and resources.
- Some states have found it helpful to create a predictable calendar for webinars. The topics can change each webinar, or be presented in a series that builds on previous sessions.
 - Be sure to get feedback about what times work best for the food service directors in your state, such as the hours after their lunch service.
 - Archive webinars on the state agency website for later viewing and send links to remind people they are available.
- Set up satellite locations where attendees can gather in groups to participate in trainings that might be difficult or expensive to attend otherwise. Universities can be a great partner for this delivery approach, since they often have the equipment needed and may be willing to assist agencies with its use for free or just a small fee.
- Be aware of state regulations concerning accessibility when it comes to your trainings. Additionally, there might be resources available in other departments that can help you comply and make sure you are reaching all populations.
- Make training available to partners who are interested whenever possible. Encouraging the interest of administrators and other stakeholders can ultimately lead to broader program support, especially when these individuals have a better understanding of the rules, processes, and requirements.
- Consider inviting administrators such as district business officials to certain trainings or requiring food service staff to bring their administrators with them. Ensure the entire training is relevant to this broader audience.
- Try to make the same content available on multiple platforms so that participants can choose what fits their needs. In one state, for an important training, program administrators have the option to take an online course, but if they do not meet a certain score on an assessment at the end, they have to attend the training in person.



Professional Development

Prioritizing professional development and continuing education at the state level is a way to demonstrate that you value investments in food service staff.

- Determine what certification programs are available and popular in your state, such as the School Nutrition Association (SNA) Certification Program. Encourage food service directors to take advantage of them.
- Consider creating mentoring programs, or encourage informal mentoring between local directors. Those that are new to the position or facing challenges may find it especially valuable to learn from their peers.
- Talk to the colleges and universities in your state about how they could help with professional development through their undergraduate and graduate-level course offerings.
- Encourage credentialing as it is an objective way to ensure that qualified candidates are filling important positions. One state has found it useful for the credentialing of food service staff to be handled by the same agency that credentials classroom teachers.



Recognition Programs

Recognizing food service professionals who are successful provides incentives for programs and individuals to achieve important goals, encourages professionals to learn from each other, and may attract positive media attention.

- Consider including the sharing of success stories in communications plans, utilizing social media, trainings, listservs, and websites.
- Create special themed weeks and highlight the schools that participate.
- Invite successful food service directors to present during training sessions to highlight their programs' achievements.
- If possible, create an online database, library, or other way to share best practices.
- Arrange for your department's commissioner to send letters to school and district administrators that receive excellent Administrative Reviews.
- Encourage participation in the Healthier US School Challenge (HUSC) and/or Alliance for a Healthier Generation recognition programs as a way to incentivize food service directors to meet high standards, as well as share their success with other audiences. Consider inviting representatives from these programs to present at trainings so that directors fully understand how to apply and the benefits of participation.

Cross-Department Collaboration

Collaborate with other Departments in your state as they can be valuable partners and a way to leverage additional resources. They may have shared priorities, over-lapping populations to serve, or similar missions and goals.

- Find out if your state government employs experts that can help you design and deliver professional development and training programs.
- Utilize colleagues from different departments to help communicate with business officials, administrators, and other stakeholders such that you can speak to them in “their language.” Consider tapping other state departments for assistance if there is a gap in expertise among child nutrition staff.
 - Having access to a Certified Public Accountant (CPA) can help with resource management training and technical assistance. They may be able to easily relate to and engage district business managers.
 - Many states partner with their Department of Health to host Coordinated School Health Institutes, which can include child nutrition and local wellness policies.
- Explore partnering on technology purchases or other resource investments with other departments that also do a significant amount of training.
- Present to your State Board of Education. If possible, try to get on their agenda at least once a quarter to give updates about how state regulations are being implemented.
 - Include data in your presentation, such as financial trends or survey results.
 - Offer to cater their lunch or breakfast with a meal that meets school nutrition standards.

The Tennessee Department of Education has partnered with the Governor’s Foundation for Health and Wellness’ Healthier Tennessee initiative. As a result, they have been able to create some training videos and breakfast promotion videos that feature principals as child nutrition champions.



Administrative Reviews (ARs)

Use ARs as a time to connect with food service directors and other district staff. The tone of the review should be collaborative, not intimidating.

- Be careful about the language used to frame the review. For example, consider describing it as a chance to discuss their “program excellence.”
- Many states have seen success with an optional or mandatory pre-review workshop that explains to district staff what will happen during the AR and how best to prepare.
- Complete as much of the review as possible before arriving at the school, such as accessing basic data, like how meals are counted and claimed, and reviewing school policies, previous findings and supporting documentation. States that are able to access key information from their offices via data sharing have found that they can arrive on site with more time to talk to freely with school and district staff and observe program operations.

The Kansas Department of Education (KSDE) has received funding from a statewide foundation to hire wellness coaches who meet with schools before ARs to help them prepare and provide follow-up support to address review findings. KSDE has also created the Healthier Kansas menu cycle, which new directors can adopt until they get certified since it meets the necessary basic criteria, and then these directors can adapt or move onto other menus if they choose.

Partnerships

Build strong relationships with state and community partners that have shared goals and priorities in order to strengthen child nutrition programs.

- Possible partners to consider include:
 - State affiliates of national membership organizations, such as:
 - Action for Healthy Kids
 - American Heart Association
 - American Cancer Society
 - National Association of School Nurses
 - National PTA
 - SHAPE America (physical education professionals)
 - School Nutrition Association (see below)
 - YMCA
 - Service and civic groups (Kiwanis, Rotary, Junior Achievement, Lions Club, etc.)
 - Food banks and hunger organizations
 - Extension agencies
 - Health-focused organizations and foundations
 - Hospital and/or hospital foundations
- As the main membership association for food service directors at all levels, SNA can be a great partner to state agencies. Consider taking a leadership position and/or

encouraging your state staff to get involved. Also, talk to your state SNA chapter about opportunities to present at its trainings and vice versa.

- Set clear goals about what will be accomplished with different stakeholder relationships and track your progress.
 - Consider categorizing partnerships/relationships so that there are clear expectations. Some may focus on information sharing or be short-term or issue-specific. Others may be broad collaborations on an ongoing basis.
- Think strategically about gaps or challenges that you face and how partners might help.
 - Some organizations are particularly strong at grassroots or other types of advocacy. Provided that you follow applicable laws and rules governing state employees, it may be appropriate to help educate these groups so that they are sharing accurate information with their members and the public.
 - Some states have created councils or advisory groups of mayors or other non-traditional stakeholders. Engaging these groups may make it easier to gain broader support for programs at the local level.
- Explore the major sources of philanthropic funding in your state. If you are interested in receiving funding or support from a foundation for school or district needs in the state, look to build a relationship. One approach is to identify current or past grantees of targeted funders and determine if you have shared or complementary goals.
- Give industry groups the opportunity to talk to food service directors, businesses, and others about their products as well as the product development process. This can be a great chance for industry to hear about challenges and strategies used at the local level.
- Attend your partners' conferences.
 - If possible, create a way to recognize partners' outstanding contributions to child nutrition in front of their peers at these events.
 - Work with a nutrition program in the state to cater a meal for conference-goers as a way to demonstrate what is possible under school nutrition standards.
- Talk to universities in your state about opportunities to collaborate.
 - Students may have access to resources that your department does not provide, such as certain statistical programs or other types of software.
 - Working closely with dietetic programs can help to recruit qualified nutrition directors who might not have otherwise considered that career path.
 - Working with extension services and other regional training centers may give you access to additional dietitians who can help with training development or nutrition analysis.

Principals want to know about their expected role and what they will be held accountable for with regard to child nutrition programs. When agency staff in one state realized that principals were holding regional meetings, they secured opportunities to speak at these gatherings and brought along a supportive principal who could speak to attendees as a peer.

Communications

Communicate regularly with school and district staff, the media, and partners in order to build relationships and ensure that everyone is up to speed on the work of your agency.

- Issue a weekly media release. Work with your department’s communications team, or build your own listserv. Be sure to share each release with partners that may have useful media contacts and/or communications vehicles, such as newsletters, of their own.
- Create a monthly newsletter that highlights success stories, upcoming trainings and events, new resources, and other important announcements.
- Make it easy for journalists—especially small papers or news outlets—to cover the issue by creating a speakers bureau of innovative food service directors who are willing to share their stories with their peers and the media.
 - Also consider creating a “virtual speakers bureau” on your website by sharing success stories and appetizing pictures of school meals along with contact information for the food service directors contributing each one.



The West Virginia Department of Education’s Office of Child Nutrition has started to publish an annual score card that includes information about the impact of each of its programs. Staff have found that they can use the score card in many ways, making the investment to create it more than worthwhile. It gives them one central place to look for and share all of the data that they need such as participation rates and trends broken down by county and school.

Gaining Public Support

Learn to navigate the context in which your department must operate and train others in school nutrition to better navigate their environment as well.

- Empower all school nutrition professionals through training to play a role “at the table.”
 - Help make sure your staff and district directors feel confident enough to participate appropriately in the entire operation of the education system. For example, they should be comfortable with their role in school health advisory council meetings as well as school board meetings.
- Refine communications to address topics potentially of greater interest to a wider audience. For example, rather than just focusing on child nutrition, frame your responsibilities as addressing “child wellness.”

- Do your homework before meeting with decision makers and key stakeholders to understand their experience and perspectives. Try to address any known concerns upfront, and back your stories with data whenever possible.

Technology

Assess technology needs and identify ways to get maximum productivity with reasonable investments.

- Encourage districts to work with their IT staff to ensure that school and district staffs have access to the technology they need to participate in training and professional development. This may mean keeping computer labs open and available when food service professionals are able to use them. It may also mean providing basic training in computer literacy.
- Focus on improving and streamlining data in order to improve the Administrative Review process. Do a careful assessment of your state systems to determine if they meet your needs for the Administrative Review process, and determine if there are resources available (including State Administrative Expenses funds) to make changes. Simple changes may lead to greater efficiency and cost savings that can help build the case to justify investing in changes.
 - Many states have had success tailoring their IT systems. Talk to other state directors to see what has worked for them.

West Virginia's statewide data collection system allows Office of Child Nutrition staff to view from their computers much of the information needed for ARs, reducing monitoring time in the field by 50 percent. The system also allows them to work more closely with the Department of Health to track which students are eligible for free or reduced price meals. Because this information is housed at the state level, it easily follows students as they move from school to school and cuts down on the need for families to re-apply. This means eligible families are less likely to experience a possible gap in meal benefits for their children. Nutrition staffs also credit the system with an increase in the state's reimbursement revenue and a decrease in unpaid meal balances.



Develop Comprehensive USDA Foods & Procurement Programs

Help districts be strategic about their use of the USDA Foods (Commodity) Program and take a close look at how your administration at the state level can contribute to their success.

- Survey your districts to determine which products they are interested in and consider only offering those that are the most popular. Focusing on these items can help you make the best use of your statewide distribution systems.
- Keep districts informed of when to expect delivery of different products. This practice can go a long way to help schools with menu planning.
- Invite vendors to share their products with directors as a taste test. This may help you to build relationships with vendors and narrow procurement lists to ensure you are providing what is most popular.
- Ensure districts understand their rights and responsibilities within buying cooperatives. Training and technical assistance on this topic can help make sure that all schools understand how to be responsible purchasers, which helps build stronger collaborative relationships with industry.

North Dakota orders USDA Foods based on the results of an annual survey completed by school districts. Previously, because there are hundreds of USDA Foods to choose from, they were finding that the volume of many of the items ordered was too low to have delivered to their state warehouse.

Special Populations

Be sure to address any groups or types of programs that require special attention.

- Consider designating one staff member to be the specialist or liaison for schools with unique needs, such as charter schools or Residential Child Care Institutes (RCCIs).
- Consider Food Service Management Companies (FSMCs) operating within your state as potential partners. Give them access to training and resources, if needed. Make sure that school districts understand their roles and responsibilities under these contracts.
- Develop training to address the needs of schools with low numbers of students who qualify for free or reduced price meals. These schools may benefit from training or technical assistance on marketing and other strategies to attract students from families with higher incomes.
 - Some states have encouraged school districts to price reimbursable meals and a la carte items so that the former offer more value to students paying full price for their food. This strategy can help attract more students to healthy, balanced meals, while increasing the nutrition program's revenue.
- Develop strategies to address the needs of schools in rural areas that face staff recruitment challenges, are difficult to reach for Administrative Reviews, and/or have a harder time procuring certain products. One state distributes its nutrition staff across

multiple locations, enabling them easier access to the schools they assist and monitor and strengthening relationships with districts.

- Encourage school districts to host taste tests and other ways to gauge student opinion.
- Consider designating a staff member in your agency to specifically pay attention to the ways that students are being engaged in your state.
- Take advantage of events like “Take Your Child to Work Day” or state-sponsored activities and site visits as a way for your agency staff to directly ask students for their opinions about school meals.



Seeking additional resources:

Explore grant opportunities or other outside funding opportunities that may benefit the program.

- Invest in a grant writer position, if budget allows, or train a staff member to serve in that role.
- Find out which districts are in need of equipment to sufficiently upgrade their kitchens, and what they need. This will help you work with them to create a plan for funding new purchases through donations or fundraising.
- Support districts in seeking or securing federal or state grant opportunities, such as farm to school, equipment, and nutrition education grants.
- Require some reporting on grants administered by the state and develop a tracking system in order to demonstrate the value of the grant funds.

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