



## Top five K-12 school foodservice trends.

School meals made better.

From flavor stations to from-scratch cooking, school districts are taking steps to make school food healthier, more practical and more fun. The gains in participation have been significant.

### Breakfast after the bell

National studies show that children who eat breakfast do better academically. Yet participation in traditional before-school breakfast programs is only 53% on average, due to factors including late bus schedules, hectic morning routines and the stigma attached to it for low-income students.

The Breakfast After the Bell Program, mandated in more states each year, is slowly changing this, with schools that serve breakfast in the classroom during teaching hours reporting major gains in participation.

For example, at Parker Middle School in the Taunton District in southern Massachusetts, student breakfast participation grew from 26 percent to 95 percent after it was offered during the school day, according to Children's HealthWatch. School officials also reported that the number of nurse visits dropped by 24 percent.

### Smart snacks

Children tend to eat up to three snacks per day, accounting for about 27 percent of their overall daily calories. And while there's no stopping students from bringing in their own less-than-healthy snacks, the USDA's 'Smart Snacks' legislation, the national standards for food sold outside of school meal programs, has gone a long way towards reining in the consumption of junk

food and sugary drinks in favor of fruits, vegetables and packaged treats low in fat, sugar and sodium.

27%

of overall daily calorie intake comes from snacks

Roswell Independent School District in the state of New Mexico consists of 20 schools and serves over 38,000 meals each week. But Director of Food Services Lyman Graham also believes in the importance of providing healthy options outside of meal times.

Roswell provides an eclectic mix of meals that evolves continuously – including burritos and cinnamon rolls for breakfast and pulled pork sandwiches and grilled chicken for lunch – and regular nutrition breaks. As Graham says: "It's important to provide students with healthy meal options throughout the day."

### Family-style meals

More schools are swapping the serving line for sharing platters, implementing family-style approaches to cafeteria dining to encourage interaction among students, foster a greater sense of community and increase participation in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP).

One school that has seen success with this approach is Austin's Winn Elementary. "Students want to be a part of it," said Christine Steenport, assistant director of operations at Austin (Texas) Independent School District. "They want to be with their peers. They want to pass the plates. They want to be involved."

It's an approach also being tried at Franklin High School in Virginia to help alleviate long lunch lines and give children more time to enjoy their meals. There, staff have seen the students become much calmer both in the dining hall and the classroom.

### Cooking from scratch

From-scratch cooking can improve participation in lunch programs and reduce costs, as four East Boston grade schools found in 2017 when their kitchens were updated so food could be cooked on-site.

So successful was the My Way Café pilot program, which boosted lunch participation by 15% and reduced cost per plate by as much as 40 cents, that in 2018 it was rolled out to an additional 26 schools and – is expected – to expand to another 25.

The My Way Café menus are centered on dishes that kids can customize – such as build your own tacos – and feature fresh fruit and vegetable bars every day.

Boston isn't the only place taking a fresh look at fresh ingredients. After a similarly successful 2017 pilot in Virginia Beach City Public Schools, the district plans to transform all 82 of its school cafeterias into fully operational scratch kitchens over the next five years.

### Flavor stations

In the last year or so, 'flavor stations' have been catching on at schools. In the Merced City School District for example, students have the choice between adding cinnamon sugar, low-sodium-Tajin, salt-free lemon pepper and garlic jalapeño to their meals.

Said MCSO Nutrition Services Supervisor Mary Williams, "Our flavor stations are an area where students can self-select low-to-no sodium spices and sauces to add pizzazz to their food. Students love having the ability to personalize their meals, and the stations also actively encourage them to eat more fruits and vegetables."

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Cincinnati school cafeterias also offer spice stations, which they say drive traffic to salad bars and cost the state less than one cent per meal. There are five different spices per day, rotating among options such as an Italian blend, a Mexican mix, maple cinnamon, crushed red pepper, garlic herb, Butter Buds, Sriracha sauce and ranch powder.

If your school or district is seeking to increase food program participation, consider one or more of these five popular and proven ways to appeal to your student population.



Find out more: [k-12-foodservice.com](http://k-12-foodservice.com)

