

7 Ways to Increase Meal Participation in K-12 Schools



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Boosting Meal Participation: A Top Initiative for Schools



If you're looking to minimize food costs and boost meal participation in your K-12 school, you're not alone. In fact, 88.5% of meal program directors said this is a top initiative for 2023, according to the Student Nutrition Association. With universal meals coming to an end—for most states—the burden of achieving high or sustainable meal participation rates is back in the hands of administrators.

But is it all about student finances? **The evidence says no...**

62%

Did you know, only 62% of children participate in school food programs, according to the Toronto Foundation for Student Success.

Ready to uncover seven proven strategies to overcoming
low participation rates?

LET'S GET STARTED —————>

Common Causes of Low Meal Participation

1

Insufficient opportunities:

Students often have strict schedules, leaving them with no time to return to the cafeteria between classes to grab pick-me-up snacks or meals.

2

Lack of locations:

Students with only one or two food access points may skip eating if it's out of their way or inconvenient.

3

Labor shortages:

If schools don't have enough staff to operate the current meal options, it can result in long lines, fewer food options, and shorter service hours, all of which negatively impact meal participation.

4

Limited meal options:

Let's face it, kids are picky eaters. If they don't like the options, the food is bland, and there's no excitement around meals, they are less likely to make an effort to attend meals or grab snacks.

5

Lack of awareness:

Do the students know about all the meal options available? Lack of student awareness and poor communication can lead to low participation as students don't know where and what is available.

6

Underutilizing marketing tools:

Marketing tools are highly effective at promoting and encouraging meal participation. Schools should view themselves as a small business trying to make food as appealing and desirable as possible.

In many cases, school meal programs aim to be financially self-sustaining, where the revenue generated from meal sales covers the program's costs. **However, when participation is low, it doesn't just affect your ability to offer healthy meals, but the deficit can cut into education budgets, limiting funds for teachers, textbooks, and technology.**

In this guide, we'll give you **seven** ways you can boost meal participation to drive school revenue, increase academic performance, and promote better student health.

The Impact of Boosting Meal Participation



Student Benefits

Better health:

Students receiving their daily needed nutrients and calories will be healthier, more energetic, and happier because they don't have discomfort from an empty stomach or low energy.

Improved classroom performance:

Food nourishes the brain while reducing distractions like hunger pains, allowing students to focus more in the classroom, retain more information, and perform better on projects.

Improved grades:

Students have consistently positive classroom experiences fueled by regular healthy meals. This allows them to maintain higher grades for longer-term success.



School Benefits

Higher revenue:

Increased meal participation boosts your school's revenue, allowing you to invest more in your students to improve their educational experience. Sales of snacks and full meals beyond free school offerings create another source of income for the school.

Higher average test scores:

Proper nutrition supports cognitive abilities, so your students will score higher on tests. As a result, you'll see your school's performance score increase.

Improved student behavior:

Your teachers can focus more on helping and instructing students and less on classroom management because students concentrate better. Additionally, fewer students may act out, which is often the result when they're hungry or lack proper nutrition.

Happier staff:

More meal options and improved participation also benefits staff. Teachers can conveniently access snacks and healthy meals between classes for consistent energy and better health.



7 Ways to Increase Meal Participation

Despite what you may think, achieving a higher meal participation rate doesn't require additional stress. Instead, it takes an action plan for success. For years, we've helped schools build action plans by recommending alternative breakfast and lunch models, including:



LET'S GET INTO IT →

1. Mobile Feeding: The #1 Difference Maker

The School Nutrition Association surveyed participants and found that only one in seven students receiving free meals participated in the meal program before mobile feeding. However, after introducing mobile feeding, there was a 21% increase in meal participation compared to the previous year.



What is Mobile Feeding?

Mobile feeding creates new mealtime opportunities. Students can access meals and snacks throughout the day, in classrooms, and in the hallway between classes. It's ideal for busy schedules and large facilities, which may create extra challenges for meal access restricted to a cafeteria.

What Challenges Does Mobile Feeding Solve?

Mobile feeding addresses several primary barriers to meal participation:

- **Insufficient opportunities:**
Mobile feeding can run throughout the day, even when students wouldn't usually be able to return to the cafeteria or arrive too late for breakfast.
- **Lack of meal locations:**
Mobile feeding makes meal access easier, as staff brings the food to the students.
- **Lack of awareness:**
Students often don't know when and where to find additional food options. With mobile feeding, carts come to them.

Before starting the hallway breakfast program, we had about 40 of our 818 students eating in the cafeteria. By implementing two hallway carts and utilizing them before school and after the bell for breakfast, we now average more than 200 students daily through all channels.

CHRISTY GWYN
Bandys High School
in Catawba, NC

Common Products for Mobile Feeding

- [Breakfast Carts](#)
- [Hallway Carts](#)
- [Insulated Bag Kit](#)

2 Grab & Go Meals: The Simple Solution

Grab & go meals are prepackaged meal options students can quickly grab rather than traditional sit-down or made-to-order meals.

Grab & go options in food service increased in popularity by 72% over recent years, and not just in schools. COVID-19 was the primary contributor to the format's growth, but it remains popular as people realize its convenience.

What Challenges Does Grab & Go Solve?

Grab & go solves several common meal participation challenges in schools, including:

- **Insufficient opportunities:**
Students don't always have the time or ability to sit down for a full meal, often leading to skipped meals. With grab & go options, students can fit a healthy meal into their schedule. It's especially convenient for students who don't arrive in time for a traditional cafeteria breakfast.
- **Labor shortages:**
Grab & go meals cut down on the amount of labor you need to support mealtimes. Instead, you can prepackage meals and allow students to grab them at their convenience.



Essential Products to Offer Grab & Go Meals



Disposable
Utensils & Bowls



Food transport options:
bowls and lids, and
packaging to maintain
food temperature for
added convenience



Food Labels



The Adoption of Micro Markets

Micro markets are quickly becoming popular for grab & go meals. They offer all the convenience of vending machines with the luxury of extensive market options. You can choose the size of the micro market to fit your space and needs, whether it's an entire store or just a refrigerator and shelf for a quick snack.

Students choose and check out completely by themselves, reducing labor costs while boosting meal participation and school revenue. Micro markets also generate a much higher monthly profit than vending machines, with an average of C\$26.78 per person versus C\$9.37 per person for vending machines.

In response to the growing need for convenient feeding options for busy students, we collaborated with a local university to introduce a micro market in their dining hall. ***The results were almost instantaneous:*** within a short span of a few months, the micro market not only alleviated the workload for their staff, but also provided an opportunity to diversify their menu offerings. Most notably, they experienced a significant boost in sales and witnessed a substantial increase in student engagement and meal participation.

Check out this free, interactive tool to [build your own micro market.](#)

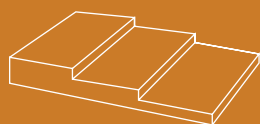


3 Food Merchandising: The Creative and Impactful Solution

Visual merchandising is all about making food look appealing, and convincing students to buy it. Go a little deeper and you'll see it's a combination of great food, visual marketing, and common design principles.

You don't need to be an expert in shopper marketing to better present food, drive more impulse purchases, and boost your average revenue. Instead, just learn the basics of food merchandising and implement them in your school.

What are the 6 elements of food merchandising?



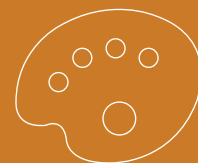
Landscaping

Creatively use different levels, shapes, and forms to display your food.



Texture

Mix up the texture of your food display to add another design element.



Color

Use bright colors to attract attention or mood colors to evoke an emotion



Décor

Add decorative elements to your display to level up your options' attractiveness and apparent value.



Communication

Use signage to communicate with customers.



Cleanliness & Sanitation

Keep the area clean and sanitary so students feel safe and comfortable eating the food.



For a full step-by-step guide on how to implement these elements, [check out our complete guide here.](#)

What Challenges Does Food Merchandising Solve?



- **Lack of awareness:** Are your food options going unnoticed? With strategic food merchandising, you can effectively (and tastefully) create enticing food displays, spurring more impulse sales that'll boost meal participation.
- **Underutilizing marketing tools:** Do you need to market food? Yes! Over 50% of purchases are impulse buys rather than preplanned purchases. As most students probably don't plan their meals in advance, impulse purchases can be one of your primary sources of income. Use impulse purchase techniques to capture students' attention and encourage them to quickly grab a bite to eat on their way to class.

Common Products to Implement the 6 Elements of Visual Merchandising

LANDSCAPING:

- Risers
- Bowls
- Display Stands

TEXTURE:

- Displayware

COLOR:

- Décor Objects
- Colorful Replica Food

DÉCOR:

- Lighting
- Fake Food
- Props

COMMUNICATION & SIGNAGE:

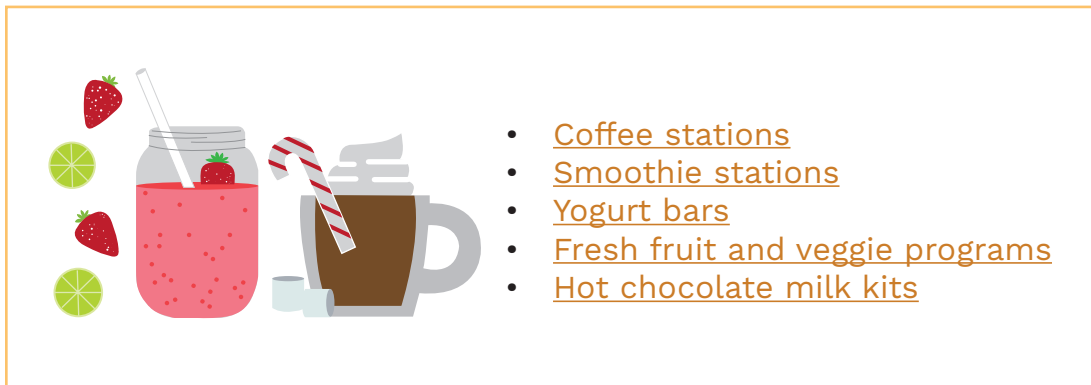
- Countertop Signs

CLEANLINESS & SANITATION:

- Spray bottles
- Cleaning gloves
- Microfiber towels

4 Offer Students Unique Food Options

The 2022 No Kid Hungry survey explored factors that might encourage students to participate more in mealtime. The top response was having offerings students enjoy. To get you started, here are a few food options that are big hits in schools:



These options are not only unique, but also promote healthy food habits, like encouraging milk consumption and eating daily fruits and veggies.

At the end of the day, ROI is always top of mind. How much revenue will a coffee or smoothie program really drive?

Consider this.

The average coffee drinker has three cups a day, and the average cup of coffee is nearly C\$6.69—specialty lattes can bring in even more—according to Insider Magazine. While the number of cups per day would be lower for students, it still shows potential revenue opportunities as students and staff consume coffee before, during, and after school.

For smoothies, schools can charge anywhere between three and five dollars per cup, which can be a big revenue driver for schools. Smoothies can be enjoyed on the go, between classes, and at other times when students may not be able to sit down and eat.



What Challenges Do Coffee and Smoothie Programs Solve?

- **Limited meal options:** Students with few bland food options are more likely to grow tired of them. This leads to skipped meals and a decline in overall meal participation. However, offering more variety can help students regain excitement for mealtime so they make more effort to participate.
- **Underutilizing marketing tools:** A unique selling point is crucial to any marketing strategy. What do you offer that no one else does? *Ask yourself this: why should coffee shops, smoothie bars, and external vendors profit off your students and staff when you can offer a more convenient offerings at your school?*

Check out these easy to implement kits for unique food offerings

- [Coffee Kit](#)
- [Smoothie Kit](#)
- [Hot Chocolate Kit](#)

5 Summer Feeding

12%

About 12% of Canadian households with children experience food insecurity, according to the Government of Canada.

So, school may be the only time 15.3 million students receive full, healthy meals. But meal participation doesn't need to end with the school year. [Summer Meal Programs](#) encourage meal participation even when school is out.

What Challenges Does Summer Feeding Solve?

- **Insufficient opportunities:** Without the support of school programs, many students who don't attend summer school are left with limited to no opportunities for a healthy meal. By implementing a summer feeding program, you can bridge this gap and ensure every child has access to nourishment and the chance to thrive.
- **Lack of locations:** As the regular school year programs come to an end, the number of locations available to feed students during summer diminishes significantly. But—by offering mobile meal solutions—you can overcome the hurdle of static locations, and guarantee that no child goes hungry.



Essential Products for Summer Feeding

- [Mobile Meal Carts](#)
- [Food Storage](#)
- [Disposables](#)

6. Leverage Communication to Increase Meal Participation

Communication is a crucial element to several factors of meal participation, according to No Kid Hungry. About 80% of student survey participants want a website with school meal information, and 73% want to see meal updates on social media. Communication doesn't just have to be virtual. Place signs around your cafeteria to help inform students of your meal options and health benefits.

What Challenges Does Communication Solve?

- **Lack of awareness:** Students are often in the dark about food options. Providing them with more information can result in higher participation.
- **Underutilizing marketing tools:** Strong communication is crucial for successful meal marketing.

Essential Products for Better Communication

- [Signage](#)
- [Cart Signage](#)
- [Point of Purchase Display with Signage](#)



Pro Tip:

Use your school's regular communication channels, like newsletters or flyers, to communicate about your school's meal programs. This method is especially important for younger students who don't have access to social media and rely on in-school communication for meal news.





7 Mobile Ordering Incentivizes Students to Buy

A lack of meal convenience in busy student schedules is an underlying theme in meal participation challenges. Mobile ordering helps combat this by allowing students to order on the go. According to a Common Sense survey, 94% of teens between 8 and 18 have access to a smartphone, making it a convenient way to reach and incentivize students while boosting sales.

What Challenges Does Mobile Ordering Solve?

- **Insufficient opportunities:** Students who usually don't have the time to eat can now conveniently order food from anywhere. They can either have it delivered or ready for pick up, pending their availability.
- **Lack of awareness:** Mobile ordering allows students to browse food options online and see more information about the food to improve their awareness.

[Learn more about mobile ordering apps and services here.](#)

Mobile ordering can be implemented in several ways. If you offer mobile meal options, students could order through their phones, and an employee can deliver it directly to the classroom. Alternatively, students can pre-order and pay for their meals through their phones and grab the food between classes without standing in long lines.

Essential Products to Support Mobile Ordering

- [Meal Transport](#)
- [Disposables](#)
- [Food Storage](#)

Start Boosting Your Meal Participation

With these seven ways to boost meal participation, you might be wondering where to start. The best approach is to start small and see what works best for your school. Then expand your meal participation programs as you see a return in revenue and student engagement.

Hubert is here to help you get started. Our trained professionals have supported the education industry for more than 20 years and can help you find tailored solutions for your school's unique needs.



Schedule a meeting

with sales to build your action plan for increasing meal participation.

