

Manage Your Message

Our research shows that many families don't want to take away a resource from a student that may have a greater need. By reiterating that school meals are for everyone, you are able to reach more students and increase participation.

Using your district's social media platforms (or however you reach your community), consider sharing content focused on dispelling myths around taking school meals during this time. These messages can include photos of meals and featured menu items captioned with a positive message. *Use the social media templates in this toolkit to help manage your message (Manage Your Message–Social media templates)!

Your message to families can include:

- 1) School meals are for *everyone!!* Any family can participate in this benefit.
- 2) School meals are time saving, convenient, and budget-friendly! Free school meals help you stretch your household food budget.
- 3) School meals deliver nutrition, taste, and fun! They also help maintain a sense of normalcy and routine to your child's school day.
- 4) School meals provide educational resources! By participating in school meal programs, you are helping to increase federal reimbursements that provide key academic resources for schools.

Classroom Involvement

Student perception of school meals often starts in the classroom! Encourage teachers to begin conversations around food and how participating in school meals can fuel their learning. Unfortunately, stigma around school lunch can be perpetuated when teachers express negative opinions about the food being offered. Here are some ways to help build connections with classroom teachers and promote school meal programs together!

Invite a class into the kitchen!

Offer to give tours of the school kitchen to different classes. If it's an option, think about having students help prepare menu items. When students have a hands-on and sensory experience with food, they are more likely to be excited to eat school lunch.

Distribute Informational Materials to Teachers

This toolkit includes a set of resources aimed to educate teachers and provide them with the tools to start conversations about food in the classroom and facts about Maine school meals!

Here is the link that can be distributed to teachers:

[*Teacher Meal Promotion Materials*](#)

Encourage Student Input

Providing a space where students can talk about food and their preferences helps them form meaningful eating experiences, and lends insight into how nutrition programs can fit the needs of all students.

How to incorporate student input:

Provide a survey students can fill out to express their lunch preferences, or a suggestion box at pick up sites.

This way, students can have input in their school meal experience, and look forward to eating their favorite meals.

Find a template for a student survey in this toolkit as well as a graphic that can be included if shared online. ("Your Voice Matters!--Graphic for student survey" and "Student Survey Poster and Template").

Depending on what works best for your district, surveys can be printed and distributed during meal times and at pick up sites, or can be formatted into an online survey and sent out via email or social media.

Highlight Local Ingredients

Districts across the state are already utilizing and promoting Maine-grown foods in their meals. There is so much opportunity to cross-promote Harvest of the Month efforts alongside encouraging student meal participation!

Maine kids and families care about local food, so continue to highlight the ingredients and products you're using on your district's social media sites and monthly menu updates.

Harvest of the Month resources:

[Harvest of the Month](#)

This page provides specific information on how to utilize each monthly featured ingredient and information about the significance they have to the state of Maine. The resource contains images of the ingredients and beautiful posters that can be shared on social media!

Some districts post short, informational videos on their nutrition program Facebook pages about Harvest of the Month ingredients. These efforts are helping to make informed local citizens here in Maine!

Curate Your Menu

Treat your nutrition programs like a restaurant! Along with highlighting local Maine ingredients, think about presenting your menus with appealing, fun, and creative names. Students are like your customers--we want them coming back day after day excited to eat!

Use restaurant-style names for your menu items!

While we know you all often put together culinary masterpieces, kids and families might need a little more convincing with the help of some descriptive language!

Example: *"Squash bake"* becomes *"Roasted Local Autumn Squash with Macintosh Apples"*.

Make sure the featured entrée items are clearly labeled, and include sources of local ingredients when appropriate.

If it becomes an option, invite parents and family to attend a school lunch so they can also experience the creative work being done in your kitchens.

Collaborate with Community

School districts can consider reaching out and collaborating with local and trusted community partners in their area. This way, families can feel empowered to utilize existing resources and get the nutrition needed for fueling their child's learning.

Reaching out for help can be a difficult step for many families, due to the stigma around needing assistance with feeding their children. We can all make steps toward normalizing this need and getting families excited to participate in school nutrition programs!

How to reach out to community partners:

Drop off resources at local housing communities, teen centers, and after school programs. Talk to leaders in those settings about the information you're sharing and how they can support families in the meal benefit application process.

There are many organizations in Maine who are also working toward increasing school meal participation, such as Maine SNAP-ed, Full Plates Full Potential, and others. By keeping up to date with their efforts, and sharing messages they are sending out, you can reach more of your community and ensure as many kids as possibly are getting access to school meals.

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