Cafeteria Activity Guide

EASY IDEAS FOR YOUR CAFETERIA PRESENCE
CONTENTS

OVERVIEW ............................................. 4
REGULAR SERVICE MEMBER CAFETERIA PRESENCE ............. 5
TIPS FOR BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH CAFETERIA STAFF ... 6
ACTIVITY IDEAS ..................................... 8
  Entering the Cafeteria .................................. 8
  Waiting in the Meal Line ............................... 9
  Selecting & Choosing a Meal ......................... 10
  Eating at Tables ...................................... 12
  Exiting the Cafeteria .................................. 16
  Cafeteria Club/Team Ideas ........................... 17
  Cafeteria Look and Feel .............................. 18

FOODCORPS LESSONS WITH COOKING & TASTING OPPORTUNITIES ...... 19
LOCAL FOOD & PROCUREMENT-RELATED RESOURCES ............. 21
FoodCorps seeks to build a movement that helps inspire schools across the country to re-imagine school cafeterias. We believe all cafeterias have the potential to be powerful educational and community spaces, where students learn social skills, develop a sense of community, and have the opportunity to eat a healthy meal.

The goal of this guide is to support service members in having a positive transformative regular presence in the cafeteria. Here you will find quick, easy, and adaptable activities that you and your school community can do to create a safe, inclusive, and joyful dining experience where making the healthy choice is the easy (and cool) choice.
We know that a student’s cafeteria experience can get them excited about trying new healthy foods and steer them toward the healthiest options. That’s why the Healthy School Meals area of the FoodCorps Healthy School Progress Report includes a list of best practices and activities that are shown to encourage and support students making healthy food choices. These activities include salad bar and lunch line design, taste tests, cafeteria role modeling, local sourcing and recipe development, and breakfast and after-school meal promotion. All of these activities also have the power to make the cafeteria a welcoming and inclusive space for students.

**FoodCorps service members play an important role in this area by having a regular presence in the cafeteria and engaging students through these activities.** We have created this guide as a way to support service members in identifying simple and easy activities they can start doing this year.

Additionally, it is important to connect what happens in the cafeteria with the classroom. On p. 19 of this guide you will find *FoodCorps Lessons* that highlight cooking and tasting activities. Although these lessons have been developed for a classroom setting, consider how these activities connect to cafeteria efforts, or could even be scaled up to lead in the cafeteria setting.

Finally, at the end of the guide you will find selected resources for procuring local foods that can served to students in the cafeteria. This includes FoodCorps-developed webinars and important USDA resources. A reminder that you can find all of this (and more!) on the FoodCorps Toolshed.
TIPS FOR BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH CAFETERIA STAFF

In addition to building a relationship with the principal and other key school staff, developing a strong relationship with cafeteria staff is one of the most important things you can do in the Healthy School Meals area of service. These staff are in charge of navigating child nutrition programs—including the National School Lunch Program, School Breakfast Program, and others—to develop a menu for students, and they have great influence in how students make choices in the cafeteria line. Just as a teacher sets the tone for expectations in the classroom, cafeteria staff have great influence on the tone during meals. Building good relationships with cafeteria staff is key to everything from leading successful taste tests to the ability to borrow equipment such as trays needed for classroom-based cooking lessons. Cafeteria staff are sometimes undervalued within a school’s culture, and acknowledging their hard work and essential role in student health is key to supporting healthy school food environments. Here are some tips for success:

- Spend time in the kitchen to build relationships
- Collaboratively set expectations for working in the cafeteria
- Be consistent and reliable with how you show up to help
- Listen to challenges, ask questions and identify opportunities for your service to support these efforts
- Give assistance (not demands)
- Be humble, not the expert
- Acknowledge barriers AND successes
- Connect and relate personally
- Eat the food served in the cafeteria
- Be appreciative!
As you are building your relationships, consider asking these questions:

- How can we stay in touch? (Email? Best time to call?)
- What are your important kitchen logistics?
- What foods do you want to serve?
- How do you plan your menu?
- How are contracts and decisions made?
- Are there opportunities for a FoodCorps service member to have a regular presence in the cafeteria? If so, how would this be helpful?

Just as it’s important to understand how learning standards influence classroom curriculum, a key part of doing your research when building relationships with cafeteria staff is understanding the school meals program. This program provides the basic structure and parameters under which cafeteria staff operate. Find out more on the Toolshed and in the resources highlighted in the local food and procurement related resources at the end of this guide.
These ideas were adapted from service member ideas and existing best practices.

## ENTERING THE CAFETERIA

What is this experience like for students? Do they trickle in, or are they required to enter in straight, silent lines? Is there someone welcoming them to the cafeteria and making this time of the day feel special?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cafeteria greeting</th>
<th>Service member with selected students form a welcome tunnel and high-five students as they enter the cafeteria. Along the way they share positive, encouraging words such as, “welcome to lunch,” “awesome seeing you,” etc.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Post positive messages</td>
<td>Post visuals with cafeteria rules and expectations as well as other positive and encouraging messages.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
WAITING IN THE MEAL LINE

What experiences do students have in line? Does it move quickly? Are they socializing, or is the line supposed to be silent? Are there opportunities for students to engage in any activities related to the cafeteria such as tastings of the day’s meal, voting for their favorite harvest of the month ingredient, or creating names for new menu items?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Menu emcee</th>
<th>Get on a microphone or use your outdoor voice to show excitement about today’s meal by giving kids a overview of the menu and highlighting any local produce/farms where the food might come from.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student voting</td>
<td>Place a flip chart, easel, markers and stickers for voting at the cafeteria line with a vote of the day or week that students can answer, as a way to elevate their voice. For example, you can have students vote for their favorite seasonal vegetable (e.g., squash vs. carrots). Or you can have students suggest and/or vote on cool names for common menu items (e.g., renaming macaroni and cheese) in partnership with cafeteria staff.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meal samples</td>
<td>In partnership with cafeteria staff, bring samples from the meal line out to kids to highlight and build excitement for that day’s meal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mystery fruit or veggie or grain</td>
<td>As a way to get to know students, circulate around the lunch line with an unusual fruit or vegetable- something not commonly seen by students, like kohlrabi. Allow them to take a look and smell/feel the item to guess what it is. Consider an herb like lemon balm that has a strong scent. Or a &quot;guess the grain&quot; where students can feel the difference between a grain being served at lunch or something more unusual, like quinoa. Use this interaction to get to know students and provide an hands-on learning opportunity.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
SELECTING & CHOOSING A MEAL

What do students see and experience while they are getting their meal? Is the food advertised in a way that is fun and compelling to kids? Are local ingredients celebrated through signage that help students see the connection between local farms and what’s on their plate?

Positive food advertising

Create signage that celebrates local food/farms on the menu for the meal line to help kids understand the connection between growers/producers and their meal.
Serve lunch and celebrate offerings

Help cafeteria staff serve lunch or assist at the salad bar to help younger students make choices.

Remind students about the salad bar

If your school has a salad bar, stand at the end of the lunch line and ask students if they think they might enjoy a salad with their meal (students often turn around and head to the salad bar!).

Salad bar support

If your school does have a salad bar, use this as an opportunity to engage students. Younger students may need support learning about ratios (refer to MyPlate and “eat a rainbow” concepts) when they are building their own salad. You can develop a “model plate” to help them understand the right balance of foods. This can be a real plate of food (if available) or you can print color images of salad bar items and move them around on a real plate. Help them use the tongs and understand all of the options being offered as well as “salad bar etiquette.” Offer assistance for putting dressing on their salad. Consider adapting the FoodCorps Lesson “Salad Dressing Challenge” with students using the salad bar. You can also develop a “Salad Bar Wall of Fame” by giving students who use the salad bar a sticker to add to a “Wall Of Fame” poster, with their names. (Recommended resource: The Lunch Box Salad Bar Tools and Resources).

Pre-packaged salad support

Instead of a salad bar, some schools have pre-packaged salad as an alternative. You can engage students about this healthy choice by drawing attention to the salad with a “Lucky Salad Tray Day.” On this day you can add a sticker to random pre-packaged salads or veggies. Students that pick up a salad with a sticker win a prize!
**EATING AT TABLES**

*Do students have assigned tables? Do all students feel safe and included in the cafeteria? Are students expected to eat silently, or are there opportunities for socializing and learning?*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Daily table topics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identify several age appropriate table topic conversation starters for each table. Share with students the cultural importance of conversation during a meal. It helps people learn about each other, connect, make friends and build positive relationships. Help to facilitate a conversation based on the table topics. Some suggestions include: What is your favorite fruit and vegetable? Why? What makes a fruit a fruit and a vegetable a vegetable? Is there a fruit or vegetable that you’ve never tried but would like to? Have you ever grown a fruit or vegetable? If so, what did you learn? What is your favorite food that you eat with your family?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Plate waste captain</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Select a weekly captain who is responsible for helping their table reduce plate waste. The captain could be a part of the “green team” (see more below), armed with knowledge about how much waste the school is creating, and how to prevent this through student serving choices.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Food trivia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Develop a trivia game that asks students to identify fruits and vegetables. You can put trivia questions on cards placed at tables or on a poster at a taste test station. Another approach would be to get all of the ingredients in the meal from cafeteria staff and ask older students to identify specific ingredients in their meal (corn, wheat, catsup in the tomato sauce, etc.). Offer prizes for trivia winners!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>“Caught eating well today” certificates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>If you find a student making healthy choices during their meal, honor them with a certificate to take home to their family.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
MyPlate challenge

Lead this activity after students are familiar with MyPlate (for example once they’ve learned about it during classroom lessons). Plan random days to show up in the cafeteria and travel around to see if students have servings similar to MyPlate. Consider setting grade-level appropriate expectations: K/1 need a fruit and veggie, older grades need a balance of grains, too, etc. If they meet the requirements you’ve discussed in class (and set by grade level) they get a sticker to put on a MyPlate poster in their classroom!

Encourage positive behavior

Give props to kids eating healthy meals and trying new things, while supporting cafeteria staff in positive behavior management. One approach could be to create a “superfood wall of fame.” Pick the superfood that day (a fruit or veggie being served) and students who choose it eat that superfood get to write their name on a laminated cutout “certificate” of the fruit or veggie. Tape the certificate to the “superfood wall of fame” and reuse the certificates in the future.

Lunch detective

Travel around the cafeteria as a “Lunch Detective” and when you find someone eating a healthy option, offer a “Caught Fresh Handed” certificate or an “I tried it!” sticker. Then take a photo of that person as a “Healthy Hero” and add it to the “Healthy Challenge” bulletin board. Consider offering a reward to people who receive the most stickers. Or start a raffle and honor the winner at a school assembly. Include school staff in the challenge, too! Use this club to engage other adults to become “Lunch Detectives.” Engage parents and teachers as detectives!

Creative worksheets

Have worksheets with fruit and vegetables to color (for younger students) and food facts at the table. Allow students to get creative coloring the worksheets or discussing the information on the worksheet.
**Eat and talk with students**

Eating lunch with students shows them that you’re interested in who they are as people and models positive eating habits. You can:

---

**Eat school lunch and sit with students.** Use your Food & Seed Fund to purchase school meals once a week. Include all of the fruit or vegetables that are being offered on the meal line. Share with students and staff how much you appreciate the cafeteria staff offering these choices.

---

**If you bring your own lunch, highlight what you’re eating that is healthy and delicious.** You can also point out what might not be familiar to students.

---

**Create positive social norms that make fruits and vegetables “cool.”** Encourage them to eat their fruits and vegetables.

---

**Make things fun and promote a positive environment where conversation is encouraged.** Connect with kids one-on-one in a way you can’t in a classroom setting.

---

**Dress up like a fruit or vegetable and make people laugh.**
Learn about student motivations, culture, and family. Ask students what they enjoy to eat and why. Learn about what motivates them to make specific food choices. Encourage them to share how their families cook specific fruits and vegetables. Pay attention to special cultural food recipes and customs. Share this information with the school chefs to inform food preparation and presentation.

Remember to connect with kids that sit alone during lunch.

Reward students who are eating healthy cafeteria foods with opportunities to get involved with special FoodCorps activities. For instance, helping out in the garden or working alongside you to run a future taste test.
EXITING THE CAFETERIA

How do students exit the cafeteria? Is there a ritual to ending meal time, such as daily announcements? Is there a way to make the end of the meal celebratory and provide appreciation for the cafeteria staff?

Closing cheer and appreciations

Lead a closing cheer celebrating a great meal and appreciations. For example, you can have students give an appreciation “whoosh clap” to cafeteria staff.

Waste station & goal setting

Have students weigh total waste from their lunch and track on a graph (opportunity for student engagement and math connections) and set a goal to reduce waste as a community. And even simpler, stand next to the waste station to discuss plate waste as students clean up their places.
CAFETERIA TEAM/CLUB IDEAS

Are there student clubs or teams that can broadly support the cafeteria experience of peers?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Healthy Buddies Club</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Promote student mentorship by starting a “Healthy Buddies” club for older students to act as role models and support younger students to make healthier choices. Train older students to offer support at the lunch line, salad bar, and waste station. Healthy Buddies wear buttons and have other “cool” incentives that make students want to join the club. Healthy Buddies sit with students who are sitting alone and get to know the entire student body. They become health ambassadors for the school.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Green Team, Clean Plate Club, and Food Waste Audit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One easy idea is to start or join a school “green team.” The team could start by simply standing by the trash, recycling and compost options and helping students sort as they finish their meal. Promote conversation about food waste and ask students questions about where they think the waste ends up. If they put away empty plates, start a “clean plate club.” If you would like to take this theme further, consider leading a “Food Waste Audit.” This activity should be lead with coordination of school and cafeteria staff. See the resource below for more information! <em>(Recommended resource: USDA Guide To Conducting Student Food Waste Audits)</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Taste Buds</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Taste tests are a great way to engage students to try new foods and use their feedback to encourage cafeteria staff to integrate new local foods into meals. <em>(Recommended resources: VT FEED Guide to Taste Testing Local Food In Schools and Action For Healthy Kids Taste Test Guide)</em> Taste Buds is a team of students that co-lead taste tests.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Use the taste test as an opportunity to have students serve their peers. Promote positive social norms around “trying something new.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Consider “short and sweet” taste tests. For instance, hold a “Blind Veggie Taste Test Competition.” Blindfold two students sitting across from each other. Have them taste a fruit or vegetable. The first person to correctly identify it wins!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Remember to take pictures of the taste test and share the activity broadly with the school to increase interest and promote excitement!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Is there a welcoming cafeteria look and feel that reinforces healthy eating and positive social norms?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Healthy food posters</th>
<th>Create colorful and engaging posters that promote items on the cafeteria line and, if possible, foods that students have also learned about in the classroom. Even better is to have your students create those posters as a club or classroom activity. You can also highlight healthy menu items on whiteboards and bulletin boards both inside the cafeteria and other places in the school.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
FOODCORPS LESSONS
WITH COOKING &
TASTING OPPORTUNITIES

These FoodCorps Lessons provide an opportunity to engage with students in the cafeteria through cooking and tasting activities. Remember to connect to cafeteria staff for approval and logistics related to leading these in the cafeteria or during meal times!

- **Mindful Tasting** (click here) Students will learn the practice of slowing down and focusing on their senses while they’re eating. They’ll review the five senses, take an imaginary trip to an apple orchard, and end by mindfully eating two different apple slices from two different varieties of apples.

- **What’s in My Salsa?** (click here) Students will compare and contrast homemade and store-bought salsas, by reading nutrition labels and making their own salsa.

- **Rolling into Spring** (click here) Students will practice knife skills and balancing flavors to make veggie spring rolls and a dipping sauce.

- **Tortilla Time** (click here) Students will explore the difference between whole versus processed foods by making tortillas from corn.

- **Plant Part Wraps** (click here) Students will create plant part wraps to reinforce their knowledge of the six plant parts and discover a healthy snack option.

- **Fun With Fruit Salad** (click here) Students will use simple multiplication to assemble and enjoy a fruit salad.

- **Quick! Pickle That!** (click here) Students will understand the role of preservation in preparing food and make their own customized quick pickles in teams.

- **Choose Your Own Flavor Popcorn** (click here) Students will explore the five flavor profiles, identifying and sorting ingredients in teams, and making their own personalized popcorn seasoning.

- **Salad Dressing Challenge** (click here) After learning the basic formula for a dressing, students will negotiate in groups to come up with a custom salad dressing and then vote on a class favorite. Students will collaborate to create a balanced salad dressing by tasting and adjusting.

- **Rainbow Grain Salad** (click here) Students will learn knife safety and techniques, observe a demonstration, and practice chopping vegetables in groups for a rainbow grain salad.
• **From Beautiful Beans To Delicious Dip!** *(click here)* Students will learn to process fresh foods by hand as they prepare herbs, vegetables, and a bean dip.

• **Perfect Parfaits** *(click here)* Students will identify the source of different ingredients in a yogurt parfait, which they will then assemble and eat.

• **Stone Soup** *(click here)* Students will practice knife skills as they prepare and then enjoy a vegetable soup. NOTE: This activity is ideally intended for a celebration where parents or other adult community volunteers are present to assist. Students will each be given a role to prepare and contribute something to a classroom stone soup.
Procuring Local Foods: USDA’s One-Stop Resource Shop (click here)
This website includes the USDA Guide for Procuring Local Foods for Child Nutrition Programs, Finding, Buying and Serving Local Foods webinar series, Fact Sheets, Policy Memos and Regulations.

FoodCorps Webinar: Cafeteria Communications (click here)
Learn how to navigate your school cafeteria environment by fostering relationships and by setting achievable priorities for your service year. This webinar introduces great communication strategies for relationship building within the school food setting, tips for getting kitchen ready, a review of creative cafeteria connections, and a demonstration of communications scenarios.
Presenters: FoodCorps Regional Program Manager, Daniel Marbury and FoodCorps Alum, Caroline Stover

FoodCorps Webinar: What You Need To Know About School Food (click here)
Hold onto your lunch trays, folks! We are going to step into the exciting and complex world of school food. As FoodCorps service members, you are going to be spending a lot of time in school kitchens and lunchrooms across the country, and we want to prepare you with the context you’ll need when you don your first hair (or beard) net and start working with Food Service Directors and staff. In this webinar, FoodCorps members will gain foundational knowledge and resources from the USDA Farm to School program that are essential for achieving success in supporting healthy school meals and improving school food environments.
Presenter: FoodCorps Alum, Kirsten Gerbatsch
FoodCorps Webinar: Supporting Local Procurement: Taste Testing in the cafeteria and recipe development for school food service (click here)

Are you looking to help the schools you serve in take their local procurement efforts to the next level? Join FoodCorps Maine service members as they delve into developing recipes for school food service using locally sourced produce and promoting them through cafeteria taste tests. Joining them will be Stephanie Stambach from the Maine Department of Education, who will introduce projects she’s orchestrating through the Maine DOE’s Local Foods to Local Schools program – often in partnership with FoodCorps Maine – that bolster local choices in school cafeterias across the state.

New School Cuisine Cookbook (click here)

Nutritious and Seasonal Recipes for School Cooks by School Cooks

New School Cuisine is the first-ever effort by public school cooks who wrote a hands-on cookbook for their peers. It is the only cookbook that:

• is for school cooks, by school cooks
• includes only kid-tested recipes
• features local, seasonal ingredients and farm to school resources

The book includes more than 75 recipes for school kitchens to prepare healthy, locally-sourced meals for their students. It’s a practical resource for child nutrition programs: each recipe is in USDA format, yields school-sized quantities, includes a nutritional analysis and contains information on the specific food components that credit towards meeting the USDA meal pattern.