

Activities to Engage Students in the Cafeteria

Overview

FoodCorps seeks to build a movement that helps inspire schools across the country to reimagine 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, and 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.

Regular Service Member Cafeteria/Mealtime Presence

We know that a student's cafeteria or mealtime 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 in making healthy food choices. These activities include salad bar and lunch line design, taste tests, cafeteria role modeling, local sourcing and recipe development, and schoolwide healthy food promotion. These activities not only help encourage students to choose and eat healthy foods but also have the power to make cafeteria and mealtime environments welcoming, inclusive, and joyful spaces for students.

Although all school cafeterias and mealtime environments have the potential to be spaces that positively influence health, education, and inclusion, that is not the current reality for far too many schools. Every school experience is different, and although some schools have wonderful, joyful mealtimes, many schools across the United States experience lunch as a time of stress. Cafeterias can be extremely noisy and chaotic for students and adults alike, short lunch periods can mean students don't have nearly enough time to finish their meals while also socializing with friends, limited staff capacity can result in schools implementing restrictive policies to manage behavior (e.g., not allowing students freedom of movement or enforcing silent eating time), and the physical environment may feel unfriendly and unwelcoming. Some students may not eat and remain hungry due to limited time to eat, the social stigma of school lunch, or a general dislike of school lunches. Schools often see an increase in bullying, social isolation, and disciplinary action during mealtime as well.

That's why FoodCorps service members play an important role in this area by having a regular presence in the cafeteria or mealtime environment and engaging students through these activities. This section of the guide is intended to support service members in identifying simple activities they can start doing this year.

Additionally, it is important to connect what happens in the cafeteria with what happens in the classroom. In the FoodCorps Lessons Book, you will find lessons that provide opportunities to connect cafeteria and classroom learning. Additionally, the Lessons Book includes several charts that specify lessons that

highlight cooking and tasting activities. Although we have developed many of these lessons for a classroom setting, consider how these activities connect to cafeteria efforts or could even be modified to lead in the cafeteria setting.

Finally, at the end of this section you will find selected resources for procuring local foods that can be served to students in the cafeteria. This includes FoodCorps-developed webinars and important USDA resources. Remember that you can find all this (and more!) on the FoodCorps Toolshed.

Activity Ideas

We adapted these ideas 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?

- **Cafeteria greeting:** 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: Welcome to lunch; Awesome seeing you; etc.
- **Post positive messages:** Post visuals with cafeteria rules and expectations as well as other positive and encouraging messages.

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?

- **Menu emcee:** Get on a microphone, or use your outdoor voice to show excitement about today's

meal by giving students an overview of the menu and highlighting any local produce/farms where the food might come from.

- **Student voting:** 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.
- **Meal samples:** In partnership with cafeteria staff, bring samples from the meal line out to students to highlight and build excitement for that day's meal.
- **Mystery fruit or veggie or grain:** As a way to get to know students, circulate through the meal 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 discover what it is. Consider an herb like lemon balm that has a strong scent. Or a “guess the grain,” 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 a hands-on learning opportunity.

Selecting and Choosing a Meal

What do students see and experience while they are getting their meal? Is the food promoted, displayed, and plated in a way that is fun and compelling to students? Are local ingredients celebrated through signage that helps 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 students 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 young students make choices.
- **Remind students about the salad bar:** If your school has a salad bar, stand at the end of the

meal 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. Young 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 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).
- **Prepackaged salad support:** Instead of a salad bar, some schools have prepackaged 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 prepackaged salads or veggies. Students who 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?

- **Daily table topics:** 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 facilitate a conversation based on the table topics. Here are some suggestions: *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?

- **Plate waste captain:** Select a weekly captain who is responsible for helping his or her table reduce plate waste. The captain could be a part of the “green team” (see details below), armed with knowledge about how much waste the school is creating and how to prevent this through student serving choices.
- **Food trivia:** Develop a trivia game that asks students to identify fruits and vegetables. Ensure that you lead this game only if students have previously been introduced to the fruits and vegetables highlighted in the game so they are set up for success. 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 the ingredients in the meal from cafeteria staff, and ask older students to identify specific ingredients in their meal (corn, wheat, ketchup in the tomato sauce, etc.). Offer prizes for trivia winners!
- **“Caught Eating Well Today” certificates:** If you find a student making healthy choices during their meal, honor them with a certificate to take home to their family.
- **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 walk around to see if students have servings similar to MyPlate. Consider setting grade-level appropriate expectations: grades K–1 need a fruit and veggie, older grades need a balance of grains, 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 respect to students 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 to 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:** Walk 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 students 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 fruits and vegetables to color (for young 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 do the following:
 - Eat school lunch and sit with students. Use your Food & Seed Fund to purchase school meals once a week. Include all the fruit or vegetables that are being offered in 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 students to eat their fruits and vegetables.
 - Make things fun, and promote a positive environment where conversation is encouraged. Connect with students individually 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 eating 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 students who sit alone during lunch.
- Reward students who are eating healthy cafeteria foods with opportunities to get involved with special FoodCorps activities, (e.g., 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. (e.g., you can have students give an appreciation “clap” to cafeteria staff).
- **Waste station and goal setting:** Have students weigh total waste from their lunch, track it on a graph (an 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?

- **Healthy Buddies Club:** 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 meal 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.

- **Green Team, Clean Plate Club, and Food Waste**

Audit: One easy idea is to start or join a school “green team.” The team could start by 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 led with coordination of school and cafeteria staff. See the resource below for more information! (Recommended Resource: USDA Guide To Conducting Student Food Waste Audits)

- **Taste Buds:** 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. (Recommended Resources: VT FEED *Guide to Taste Testing Local Food In Schools* and *Action For Healthy Kids Taste Test Guide*) Taste Buds is a team of students that co-lead taste tests.
 - Use the taste test as an opportunity to have students serve their peers. Promote positive social norms around “trying something new.”
 - 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!
 - Remember to take pictures of the taste test, and share the activity broadly with the school to increase interest and promote excitement!

Cafeteria Look and Feel

- **Healthy food posters:** Create colorful, 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.

- **Celebrate cafeteria staff:** Honor cafeteria staff by writing their bios and sharing those on posters, through creating School Food Rockstar Playing Cards, and on cafeteria flyers. Remember to celebrate Lunch Hero Day each May!
- **Food trivia:** Generate excitement about daily cafeteria menu items through schoolwide or cafeteria announcements that can be written and posted in the cafeteria—and shared in morning announcements!