

# K-12: Preparing for the Next School Year

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**Foodservice in K-12 public schools changed dramatically** when COVID-19 hit U.S towns and cities in mid-March of 2020. Almost overnight, children were told to finish the school year from home, using online resources. Suddenly, school cafeterias were empty, but school pantries were still full. According to estimates from the Coronavirus Foodservice Impact Model published by IFMA and Datassential, the K-12 segment experienced maximum average daily declines of 71% as a result of COVID-19. K-12 foodservice directors knew they could not shut down; under the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), they still had to feed a percentage of their population that depend on free or reduced cost meals.

As a result, they pivoted and came up with grass roots ways to feed the disadvantaged families that need food. Remote locations were set up where families could come by and pick up meals in their cars. This required the foodservice directors to prepare food in facilities that were partially shut down, transport the prepared food to the locations, bring in staff to hand out meals, and coordinate with local officials to communicate with families. Despite all these challenges, the families in need were supplied with food that still met the nutritional guidelines of the NSLP.

While most school districts have shifted to their Summer schedule, they are already preparing for the uncertainty of the 2020/21 school year. This whitepaper looks to summarize the challenges that K-12 foodservice directors face as they prepare for the next school year. Note that this discussion puts a blanket over the United States, knowing full well that not every K-12 school district is the same. Protocols vary widely by state, by urban/suburban/rural, and by size of school district.

The content of this whitepaper is the output of weekly discussions over the last three months among K-12 foodservice directors that make up IFMA's K-12 Operator Council. The fifteen members of the Council are listed at the end of this whitepaper. To fully understand the challenges facing K-12 foodservice operators, it's critical to understand how they are funded through the NSLP. To read more on this federal program, it is suggested that you refer to <https://www.fns.usda.gov/nslp>.

Below are the top challenges facing K-12 foodservice directors that have been discussed on the weekly council calls.

- **Budgeting and funding** – A sharp decrease in the number of meals served at the end of the 2020 school year means that NSLP funding could be cut significantly if the letter of the program is followed. Combine that with uncertainty about how meals will be served when school starts again and the directors are struggling to budget for the 2020/21 school year. Temporary funding waivers issued by state governments and/or the USDA have alleviated some of the immediate budget shortfalls, but how long these waivers will last is uncertain.
- **Planning for return of children** – There are myriad scenarios on how the next school year will operate, and this differs by region and school district. Consistent across the Council, however, is that no one knows how they will operate; decisions are not being made as state education agencies look at how COVID-19 impacts their states through the summer. Some of the scenarios being discussed to reduce infection risk include children eating in the classrooms, children attending school in staggered cohorts, and the school year starting earlier than normal. A return to previous operations is also a consideration as is continuing remote learning. Each scenario presents its own challenges for the K-12 Directors. Not having time to prepare for the final decision is weighing heavily on Council members' minds.

Regardless of what operations look like in the next school year, there is consensus among Council members that service and meal options will be different. The expected changes are detailed below. These changes are a reflection of how kids will be served if they are eating in the school. In the case of schools that continue with remote learning, feeding of families would follow many of the same protocols used during the end of the most recent school year.

- **Pre-packaged foods and beverages will be the norm** – Grab and go items will be more widely available than in previous school years. Choices will be reduced as operations are streamlined to serve foods that are easier to pre-package. Salad bars and other self-serve areas will be replaced with grab and go kiosks. Foodservice directors will be looking for more individually wrapped items that meet Child Nutrition (CN) guidelines.
- **The cafeteria will change** – The school cafeteria, normally a place for kids to socialize and share, will be used less frequently. If the cafeteria is open, its capacity will be constrained to allow for physical distancing. A la carte buffet lines will be reduced or eliminated entirely. Sanitation and hand washing

stations will be prominent. Mobile carts with boxed meals could replace the cafeteria entirely. Packaging manufacturers will be counted on to provide cost-conscious solutions for these boxed meals.

- **Touchless technology capital investments will be requested** – For school districts that do reopen schools and have families paying for daily meals, the use of touchless ordering and payment technology will be requested. Naturally, this is incumbent on getting the necessary capital funding to purchase and implement the necessary software. With COVID-19 having dented tax revenues for states, these asks could fall on deaf ears.

Over the last three months, K-12 foodservice directors have been challenged like never before. Their world has been turned upside down and they have had to adjust on an almost daily basis. Consequently, they are open to ideas on how to recoup their lost revenue while still adhering to the new safety protocols that are now in place. Foodservice manufacturers, their trading partners, and broadline distributors need to create partnerships that focus on driving new value into the K-12 foodservice segment.

IFMA will continue to host and listen to the K-12 Operator Council and provide its members with the insights and best practices to help build these partnerships and support operators in the segment. In addition to the K-12 Council, IFMA is also hosting Councils in the Healthcare, College & University, Business & Industry, and Small & Mid-sized Chains segments. Report outs, like this one, from the other Councils will be published in the coming weeks.

### IFMA K-12 Operator Council Members

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Name & School District
<b>Chair</b> , Bertrand Weber, Minneapolis Public Schools
<b>First Vice Chair</b> , Spencer Taylor, Metro Nashville Public Schools
<b>Second Vice Chair</b> , Anneliese Tanner Austin ISD
<b>Past Chair</b> , Adam Russo, Prince William Public Schools
Daniel Ellnor, Jefferson County
Joanne Kinsey, Chesapeake Public
Betti Wiggins, Houston ISD
Miguel Villarreal, San Ramon Valley USD
Dr. Robert Lewis, Santa Clarita Valley School Food Service Agency
Dan Gorman, Montague/Whitehall PS
Tamara Yarmon, Omaha Public Schools
Jessica Shelly, Cincinnati Public Schools
Whitney Ellersick, Portland Public Schools
Patrick Durgan, Bellingham Public Schools
Doug Davis, Burlington School Food Project

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*The International Foodservice Manufacturers Association (IFMA) is an established trade association serving foodservice manufacturers for over 65 years to improve industry practices and relationships while equipping every foodservice manufacturer with the tools to navigate their future with confidence. By providing insights, developing best practices and fostering connectivity through events, we enlighten members and motivate change that leads to betterment for the individual member organization and the industry at large. For more information, visit [IFMAworld.com](http://IFMAworld.com).*