

How Meal Pre-Ordering Improves Cost Control in K-12 Schools

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Drawing on over 20 years of experience supporting K-12 school nutrition programs, Nutri-Link Technologies combines operational insight with innovative technology solutions that help districts improve efficiency, compliance, and family engagement. This long-standing partnership with school administrators and nutrition professionals gives the company a unique perspective and positions it as a trusted voice on the future of school nutrition management.

Introduction

Today, school nutrition departments are balancing more responsibilities than before. Labor shortages, rising food costs, supply chain disruptions, and changes in student preferences have made it difficult to manage cost-efficient meal production. According to the USDA, food costs are one of the largest and most unpredictable expenses when it comes to school meal programs, often making up a significant portion of their total budgets.

In addition to feeding students while maintaining their budgets, school nutrition programs must meet federal nutrition standards and provide students with high-quality meals. Further, the School Nutrition Association (SNA) reports that labor shortages and rising costs of ingredients are top concerns for many school meal programs across the country.

One tool helping schools stay on top of this problem is meal pre-ordering. With students or parents selecting meals in advance, districts can have a better understanding of the daily demand for meals before food preparation begins. This helps improve planning for purchases, production, staffing, and inventory, further helping schools reduce food waste and costs.

Better Forecasting Through Real Demand

Predicting meal participation accurately has been a big challenge for many school nutrition departments. Many districts depend on historical participation trends, staff experiences, and seasonal preferences to estimate how many meals to make each day. While these methods provide a good foundation, they fail to account for fluctuations caused by attendance, weather, field trips, testing, or changes in student preferences.

The USDA Food and Nutrition Administration (FNA) lists variations in participation as one of the greatest operational challenges faced by school meal programs, especially when real-time data are lacking.

Pre-ordering allows for more reliable meal preparation with actual selections replacing estimates. Nutrition staff can make decisions about how much to prepare based on confirmed orders, rather than guessing how many students will choose a given entrée.

With more visibility around student demand, schools can better prepare accurate meal quantities, improve planning, and reduce uncertainty.

Reducing Food Waste and Overproduction

Overproduction is a common source of unnecessary spending in school cafeterias. The USDA estimates that, on average, about 21% of the calories in NSLP meals are wasted. Much of this waste is tied to overproduction and uneaten prepared meals.

Preparing too many meals often leads to a surplus of food that cannot always be stored or reused, particularly fresh produce. Even when food can be stored safely, more handling and storage costs can be incurred, increasing operational costs.

By pre-ordering meals, production can be better aligned with expected student participation, allowing cafeterias to prepare meal quantities better aligned with actual demand. Less excess means less food waste, lower waste disposal costs, and better food budget usage. Reducing waste also supports other sustainability initiatives while allowing for more resources to be allocated toward serving students rather than replacing wasted food.

Improving Purchasing and Inventory Management

Increased accuracy with meal forecasting also improves purchasing decisions. When cafeteria staff know what students are likely to order, they make smarter ingredient purchases and avoid storing surplus inventory. According to the SNA, better forecasting and menu planning are key to managing rising food costs and an ever-changing supply chain.

Ordering ingredients closer to what actual demand requires reduces spoilage, improves inventory turnover, and increases the efficiency of storage space usage. It can also reduce the need for last-minute purchases that cost more and put additional strain on staff.

Better demand visibility allows districts to strategically plan menus, ensuring ingredients are used efficiently across meal cycles. With fluctuating food prices, this level of accuracy can have a meaningful impact on budget management.

Meal Pre-Ordering is Part of the Future of School Nutrition

As technology continues to evolve, meal pre-ordering is becoming increasingly important in school nutrition departments. When integrated with online payments and POS systems, it provides districts with a better picture of how to carry out daily operations. These benefits also extend beyond traditional public school districts. Charter and independent schools can also utilize technology to streamline their meal operations and improve cost control.

This connected approach allows staff to make informed decisions using real-time data rather than solely relying on historical trends, leading to better forecasting, more efficient resource allocation, and stronger financial oversight across the entire program. By helping schools plan with more confidence in their predictions, meal pre-ordering helps both short- and long-term cost control while strengthening the financial stability of school nutrition programs. Technology

solutions can automate processes, provide real-time data, and help identify opportunities for waste reduction and resource management.

References

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