



Nourish to Flourish: A Progress Report

July 2019



Every school day, nearly **30 MILLION STUDENTS** in almost **100,000 SCHOOLS** across the U.S. eat a nutritious school lunch.

About **15 MILLION** eat school breakfast.

For some students, the nutritious meals provided through school meals programs make the difference between being nourished and being food insecure. School meals can promote school community, help to enhance academic performance and contribute to building lifelong healthy eating habits.

National Dairy Council and the Urban School Food Alliance have reaffirmed a dedication to enhancing the school meal experience by convening the **Nourish to Flourish School Meals Summit** in 2017 with the purpose of bringing together representatives of the entire K-12 school ecosystem. Nourish to Flourish work is active today. The 240 people representing 170 organizations at the inaugural summit ranged from school nutrition professionals to food companies, from technology providers to farmers. But it was the summit's emphasis on the student voice that made it unique. The conveners wanted to hear directly from the ultimate consumers of food through school feeding programs, and students were active participants throughout the summit. As one student said: "I'm grateful that you've treated us as equals. You've told us our voice is important and powerful." Students continue to be involved in post-summit activities.

Summit participants dedicated themselves to scaling up excellence in school meals through multisector collaboration. The participants recognized that



improving students' experience of school meals can lead to better nutrition, lower rates of food insecurity and help improve academic performance.

The summit identified 16 different areas of opportunity to scale up excellence in the school meal experience. Each of these opportunities reflects one or more of the nine principles that guide the Nourish to Flourish (N2F) movement:



- **Nutrient-rich foods:** School meals should be nutritious, taste great and be visually appealing.
- **Eating experience:** Students should have enough time to eat, and the experience should be comfortable and welcoming.
- **Empowered students:** Students should be involved in decision-making for school meals.
- **Environmental responsibility:** Every school district should consider how its foods are sourced, that they are responsibly produced and nutritious. Sustainability should be addressed by all stakeholders.
- **Technology and innovation:** Schools should strive to evolve and be continual, fluid, adaptable and engaging for students.
- **Resource support:** Public and private partnerships are crucial. Parents and the entire community should be N2F's partners and champions.
- **Education on food and nutrition:** Nutrition should be integrated into the school curriculum and connect students to real-life experiences to teach life skills.
- **Decision-maker education:** Guidance should be adaptable, flexible and implementable at the local level. Nutrition standards should be realistic and based on the totality of the science.
- **Self-organization:** Anyone should be able to implement transformations that support and align with these guiding principles.



One N2F summit participant remarked: “It’s so very complex what we do — serving millions of meals and balancing budgets and so many changing views on nutritional excellence, and then making those foods attractive, tasty and appealing.” Indeed, it is complex. It’s also critical to the nation’s future, because what nourishes today’s students will help them flourish throughout their lives. One vision the summit identified for a 10-year milestone was that school meals are seen as a national treasure. Enhancing the real value of that treasure is what N2F is all about.

“ We’ve spent our careers educating about good nutrition. From the largest school systems in the United States to the smallest, students have a common need for healthy, nourishing food that tastes great and is served in a comfortable, welcoming environment that builds community. Our organizations are dedicated to advancing the work of N2F in many ways and across many platforms. Our nation’s students deserve nothing less. ”

Jean Ragalie-Carr, RDN, LDN, FAND,
President,
National Dairy Council

Katie Wilson, Ph.D., SNS,
Executive Director,
Urban School Food Alliance

N2F continues to work and evolve. After a second convening by over 100 participants in July 2018 the scope of work was narrowed.

This report focuses on six **volunteer work groups**, each pursuing unique but complementary paths toward enhancing the school meal environment. The groups’ work is ongoing; this is a progress report to show what is already happening and what still lies ahead.





Before



After

Improving the Dining Experience

- This group wanted to give students a more **welcoming, rejuvenating, enjoyable setting for meals**. Sensibly, they began by listening to students, who in a survey said they want an extra 10 minutes to eat, reductions in food waste, changes to seating (including outdoor seating) and student input on meal offerings.
- Modest and affordable changes recommended by the work group could meet many of students' requests. For example, installing queue lines and menu boards will better manage foot traffic, getting students where they need to be more quickly and giving them cues so they know what they want by the time they reach the food. That means students will have more time to actually eat, even if lunch periods stay the same length.
- A more welcoming place to eat may increase average daily participation in school meals, increasing consumption of healthy foods like fruits, vegetables and dairy. In turn, higher ADP benefits schools through additional federal resources, potentially paying for some or all of the cafeteria improvements.
- The work group produced "**A Guide to Redesigning Your Cafeteria**" and will **present the work during School Nutrition Association's 2019 Annual National Conference**, the nation's largest gathering of school nutrition professionals, and will continue making the resource available.

“ The heart of the school should be the dining area. ”

Stanya LeMay,
Interior Systems (Elkay)



Leveraging Partnerships and Coalitions



- Led by the Food Research and Action Center, this group seeks to **bring a range of groups, individuals and companies together** on nutrition projects.
- The work group decided to focus on **after-school meals**, which are offered in settings where students are able to participate in educational and enrichment programs. The meals are available through USDA's Child and Adult Care Food Program in areas where half or more of students qualify for free and reduced-price meals.
- After-school meals provide nutritious food to students who, in many schools, may have eaten lunch as early as 10:30 in the morning. The meals can help play an important role in reducing food insecurity, which affects 17 percent of children in the United States.
- Schools also benefit in several ways. They receive additional federal funds and can often achieve operating efficiencies.
- The work group sees a need for **a “best practices” guide** to help schools establish and maintain after-school meals, since the



program is relatively new and not yet widely adopted. The plan is to make **a video that will include on-site taping** at several school districts, with student assistance and input. The group wants to make the video widely available to schools, empowering them to begin offering suppers during the school year.

“ After-school meals are a win-win for students and schools alike, and our group wants to make more schools aware of this opportunity to nourish children who are often food-insecure. ”

Alison Maurice,
Food Research and Action Center

Providing the Best Food for School Meals

- People are the key to any process. That’s true for school meals too. The best food will be prepared by dedicated people who have received top-notch training in the skills they need.
- This N2F work group is dedicated to **creating an accreditation program for school nutrition professionals that is consistent throughout the country and that ensures key competencies and skills are standardized.** The group knew they needed a partner and were delighted to learn that the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the **Institute for Child Nutrition (ICN)** at the University of Mississippi had many of the same ideas.
- USDA provided funds to ICN to develop a national culinary training program for child nutrition professionals, and the N2F work group joined that effort. The Culinary Institute of Child Nutrition (CICN) is in the planning/developmental phases and will be launched soon.



- ICN has hired a chef, who is also a former school nutrition director, to lead the development of the culinary training program and culinary training standards that are being established. ICN plans to pilot a weeklong hands-on culinary training program. The program also plans to expand its collaborative partnerships with allied organizations and other stakeholders to aid in marketing and communicating the program's efforts. Additionally, ICN plans to launch a series of shorter hands-on culinary trainings to expand its outreach and provide culinary training nationally.
- The goal of the group is not just to accredit professionals but to see culinary excellence lead to real improvements by enhancing school food quality and popularity. This should improve students' nutrient intake as well as benefit schools through higher meal participation.
- The work group has evolved into a collaboration, led by ICN and includes USDA, National Dairy Council, Healthy Kids Collaborative and major school districts.



“ We want to move the needle forward with this new culinary training program. One of the program's goals is to enhance the culinary skillsets of child nutrition professionals. By completing this culinary training program, we ultimately want to continue to professionalize the field, improve the child nutrition workforce by providing job skills training, and generate child nutrition culinarians. ”

Aleshia Hall-Campbell, Ph.D., M.P.H.,
Institute for Child Nutrition



Elevating the School Milk Experience

- Although milk is offered with every school meal, concern about declining school milk consumption — confirmed in a recent USDA study — motivated this work group. They challenged themselves to think about innovations that could lead more students to choose milk and benefit from its nine essential nutrients.
- Taking their cue from student leaders, the group focused on other appealing ways to deliver milk besides the traditional gable-top cartons.



- The group discovered innovation was already happening. For instance, the school system in Harrisonburg, Virginia, **installed milk dispensers** with reusable cups — primarily as a means of reducing milk packaging waste, **which fell 91 percent**. At the same time, the amount of milk taken increased 41 percent, and the amount actually consumed rose 52 percent.
- The group is working rapidly toward an innovative pilot project in Orange County, Florida, that should begin in fall 2019.

“ Student leaders told us that improving the milk experience can make milk more popular with their peers — which means better nutrition. ”

Mark Blake,
National Dairy Council



Streamlining Procurement: The Promise of E-Procurement

- Schools purchase large quantities of food and the procurement process can be cumbersome. A work group that includes food vendors, individual school districts and the Urban School Food Alliance is taking on this issue from a pre-competitive standpoint.
- Improving and streamlining procurement, in the work group's view, **can give students access to better food, reduce costs and generate more competition** as the school market becomes attractive to more vendors.
- Today, many of the nation's nearly 14,000 school districts use procurement forms that are unique to them. Food companies selling to schools can face a multitude of inconsistent paperwork across a large number of customer schools.
- The work group has begun by compiling **a collection of common documents for bidding** incorporating all federal certifications required of school food vendors. Nineteen different forms or exhibits are included.

“ If we can make the procurement process more efficient, that will mean more competition for schools' food budgets, lower costs for schools, a more attractive market for industry and ultimately better meal programs for students. ”

Jennifer Armstrong,
Butterball, LLC

Peter Fleischer
Urban School Food Alliance





Technology Work Group

- School nutrition departments collect plenty of data, often to meet USDA requirements. Meanwhile, the food service industry has widely used the common language of the **Global Data Synchronization Network (GDSN)**, with products bearing Global Trade Item Numbers (GTIN) that provide information on the attributes of a food, its manufacturer and other information.
- In 2018, new attributes were added to GDSN standards and protocols that addressed the special data needs of school nutrition. The N2F technology work group sees this as **a powerful opportunity for schools**.
- **Four school-based pilot projects** in two states have already launched, with more ahead. **Taking advantage of GTINs**, schools will have access to product-by-product information on how a food credits toward USDA meal requirements, its nutritional content, portion sizes, allergens and other data.
- Incorporating GTINs will make **menu planning** more efficient and accurate for schools, ease regulatory compliance, give suppliers insight into schools' needs and the popularity of individual foods and ultimately enhance the resources available for schools and vendors alike to improve students' meal experience.



- The technology group also sees applications **to other N2F projects**. As schools try to improve the dining experience, mobile apps can enable “grab and go” advance ordering and other innovations. The single unified supplier database can be leveraged to change the paradigm for online validation of approved products and e-procurement.

“ We’ve reached critical mass with suppliers that represent 80 percent of the products in school food. Each supplier is publishing mission-critical data in real time to a single Nourish to Flourish data warehouse. Technology is going to empower schools to markedly improve their students’ meal experiences.”

Chip Goodman,
inTEAM Associates, LLC

Students are the Future

Former Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack addressed the first N2F summit, and what he said then still rings true. “School meals connect to our youngsters’ ability to achieve and learn. If they are the best learners, they will be better prepared for global economic competition. The economic security of our country — the very future of our country — is at the heart of what this summit aims to achieve.”



To learn more about the work of Nourish to Flourish, visit www.n2fdata.org or contact Scott Dissinger with National Dairy Council at scott.dissinger@dairy.org