

ENGAGEMENT BUILDS COMMUNITY-WIDE PARTICIPATION

By **Angela Olige**
Assistant Commissioner, Food and Nutrition
Texas Department of Agriculture



Texas school cafeterias are not only a hub of student nutrition they also are a place to demonstrate leadership, engagement and influence. Inside those walls, your community looks to you to stand as an example of

leadership in the service of young Texans. Each day, you endeavor to build an environment where students receive healthy and appealing meals and have an opportunity to engage with their peers and be influenced by the child nutrition staff's compassion, care and dedication. Every school year is another opportunity to reach higher levels of success through new student and community engagement strategies.

FIND A CHAMPION

The next level of success may lie with someone you do not know... yet. Find that person! Communicate with parents, teachers and other stakeholders and tell them about opportunities to join you in championing good nutrition inside the cafeteria and outside in the community. If you are uncertain about where to start, look no further than the Texas Department of Agriculture (TDA) and your local Education Service Center (ESC). TDA is committed to developing new ways to increase participation and make each community a source of enthusiastic support. We have created resources such as downloadable posters that appeal to students and social media toolkits that simplify the process of engaging stakeholders in the goal of promoting nutritious meals in the cafeteria.

ENCOURAGE PARENT PARTICIPATION

Parents represent a key gateway to increasing engagement. Ask parents to visit FarmFreshFriday.org

where they will find resources for the family. Although these resources are focused toward gardens and local agriculture, they also contain helpful hints for family involvement in their child's healthy diet.

Use TDA menu calendars available on SquareMeals.org to keep parents informed about the tasty menu items and the cafeteria activities you have planned. Schools using TDA's MENU software can also use the School Café online page and mobile app to interact with parents.

Additionally, parents can support healthy eating by joining their child for a nutritious school lunch.

National School Lunch Week's Take Your Parent to Lunch Day is a great time to invite visitors to the cafeteria. TDA developed and provides, at no cost to you, invitation cards to share this event with parents at SquareMeals.org/ NSLWtoolkit. You can also create and promote other special meals for parents to share with their children.



TDA menu calendars available on SquareMeals.org

By reaching out to families you may discover parents who want to share their passion for good nutrition much like parents engage with other school groups such as the band or sports teams.

Teach Your Teachers

You can find great motivators in teachers. Help them incorporate cafeteria items into their curriculum. Agriculture and healthy foods can be included in

almost any subject. Physical education teachers have made “try it in the cafeteria” part of their physical fitness programs. The more efforts to present and include the subject of school meals outside the cafeteria, the broader the reach and appeal of school meals will be.

The statewide You Art What You Eat student art contest has unlimited potential for engaging with faculty, especially the art teachers. Entries for the next contest will be accepted beginning in February 2019.

Ask teachers to visit SquareMeals.org/ArtContest for details about participating. Winning entries earn recognition for the students and the schools they attend.

Encourage Elected Officials to Vote for a Healthy Lunch

Local elected officials are powerful influencers. Having this kind of celebrity guest server or visitor creates a special occasion to highlight all the great things you are doing for your students and community. Invite your local, state and federal elected official to also connect by participating in the Healthy Community Network at SquareMeals.org/HCN.

Engage Existing School Organizations

Each school district has a School Health Advisory Council (SHAC) or community engagement team that works with the public to obtain input on student wellness issues. SHAC participants are already committed to incorporating their personal insight into their school nutrition program planning. Likewise, staff members contributing to the Local Wellness Policy have the expertise and energy that are perfect for enhancing school meal programs.

Contact your school’s Parent Teacher Association (PTA). Members of the PTA board are typically well connected with school staff, and can help you identify individuals who share your passion for farm-to-school programming. Additionally, the PTA itself may agree to champion your nutrition efforts.

Engage Students

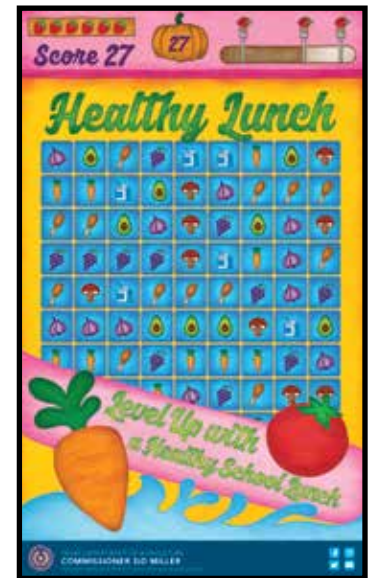
Social media offers limitless possibilities for reaching students directly. During events like National School Lunch Week and School Breakfast Week, you can utilize hashtags to promote school meals. TDA provides nutrition-themed selfie stations for use in the cafeteria free of charge to get kids excited during



National School Lunch Week and School Breakfast Week. Encourage kids to use selfie stations and to share their excitement on social media.

Many of you already build special events around celebrations like Thanksgiving and Valentine’s Day. Make the most of these events with coloring sheets or stickers for the kids and decorations for the cafeteria walls. Initiating seasonal activities will help you capitalize on the social element inherent in every cafeteria.

Engage students in the lunch line by hosting a tasting event. Taste testing of menu items or local products motivates students to interact and have their voices heard. Student feedback on menu items helps to identify cafeteria selections that appeal to your student body. Be on the lookout for TDA’s taste test toolkit on Squaremeals.org to support your implementation of these events.



You are the Key

Your leadership role extends out into the community and across the Lone Star State. Your experience gives you a unique perspective and your dedication provides the energy to make great things happen for the people you serve. The influence and leadership you exhibit daily will reap rewards that are as varied as the students you serve. The specific actions you take to engage students with innovative activities and healthy meals will reverberate for years to come as young Texans use the nutrition lessons to embrace life-long healthy eating habits. So I encourage you, keep the big picture in mind while focusing on the details of serving school meals and managing the food service operation. Never forget you are also building future Texas leaders and influencers while helping to ensure our great state remains a leader in school nutrition. Thank you for everything you do. I am excited about the year ahead and look forward to continuing our partnership to meet the needs of all those we serve.