

Well-nourished students are higher achievers: How administrators can help support quality meals for students

School food in San Francisco is much better than it used to be, thanks to the district Wellness Policy and strong new leadership in Student Nutrition Services (SNS).

But SNS has other problems. It hasn't been able to balance its budget. That's largely due to factors beyond the district's control – primarily the impossibly low reimbursement rate for low-income students' meals, which are subsidized by the federal and state government, and a threshold for qualifying that's cruelly unrealistic in high-cost San Francisco.

When the SNS budget doesn't balance, the deficit comes out of schools', classrooms' and students' resources. So everyone has an interest in helping ensure that Student Nutrition is as fiscally strong as possible.

School and district administrators should be aware that there are many things they can do to ensure SNS' improved financial health. In fact, most are things they are already supposed to be doing, and could be done at no cost to the district.

Administrators need to understand that competitive food sales drain money away from Student Nutrition. That means the quality of the food suffers and fewer students are likely to eat it, creating a downward spiral – poorer-quality food and less money available for classroom needs.

Here are 15 specific ways administrators can make a difference:

HELP SUPPORT THE CAFETERIA

1. Administrators should encourage students to eat the school meals and generally support the cafeteria operations. The more students who eat the meals, the stronger revenues become.
2. School staffs need to remember that all adults must pay the adult price if they eat in the cafeteria; this includes teachers and families of students.
3. Many students have indicated that they choose not to eat in the cafeteria because the lines are too long, and some students push and shove, or cut the line. When SNS is able to implement a Point of Sale swipe card system at every school, the lines will move much faster, but meanwhile it is the schools' responsibility to provide staff to monitor the line and deal with unruly students. SNS does not have the manpower to provide this service.
4. High schools with closed campuses should adhere to this policy and keep their students on campus at lunchtime.
5. Teachers need to let the cafeteria know when students on field trips will miss lunch – giving at least two weeks' notice. Teachers should also be aware that with two weeks' notice, they can request free bag lunches for those days for students who qualify for free/reduced-price

meals, and that higher-income students can order paid bag lunches for just \$2 each. Principals must make sure their teachers are aware of this.

ENFORCE THE WELLNESS POLICY (COMPETITIVE SALES)

6. Principals must enforce the longstanding Wellness Policy prohibition on competitive food sales at lunchtime, whether it's teachers selling Cup o Noodles out of their classrooms, Brown Bag Theater lunchtime events selling hot dogs, or classrooms, clubs and JROTC running fundraising food sales. And they need to halt all sales of non-compliant foods at any time of day. Food sold for fundraising competes with school meals and is often unhealthy.
7. A city ordinance now prohibits catering trucks from vending near schools. Principals need to support that by reporting violators to the School Operations and Instructional Support Office, which then needs to contact the police (both actions required under the Wellness Policy). Vending trucks sell unhealthy items and compete with the school meals.

ENFORCE THE WELLNESS POLICY (VENDING)

8. Administrators need to enforce the Wellness Policy at all school sites, from Pre-K to 12th grade, including ensuring that all products in school vending machines meet the Wellness Policy's nutrition standards. For a list of approved items, a survey assessing schools' compliance, a sample letter which can be sent to vendors if machines are out of compliance, and more information, go to www.sfusdfood.org. Parents and educators can report non-compliance, with confidentiality guaranteed, through the website.
9. Principals would be relieved of the responsibility for ensuring that items stocked in machines comply with the Wellness Policy if district administrators would follow up on the Policy's longstanding recommendation that all school vending machines be put under one districtwide contract, rather than the wild patchwork of unaccountable arrangements that currently exists. This would almost certainly guarantee a better financial arrangement for schools and would allow accounting for revenues, which are currently entirely unmonitored.

ENFORCE THE WELLNESS POLICY (PARTIES AND CELEBRATIONS)

10. The newest section of the SFUSD Wellness Policy calls for foods handed out to students, including at class and schoolwide parties, and parent-donated snacks, to meet the SFUSD healthy food standards. Administrators need to enforce this section, which applies to all district sites Pre-K-12th grade. Food provided at parties competes with the school meals and is often unhealthy. A suggested list of healthy school snacks and party food is available at www.sfusdfood.org.

FOLLOW THE USDA REGULATIONS

11. Principals must understand that SNS employees report to SNS and are following a stringent set of federal laws. SNS income and federal reimbursements can be jeopardized if Principals

try to make their own rules for the meal program. Likewise, although many of the regulations may seem arbitrary (such as requiring each student to hold his own meal card in his hand in the lunch line), SNS does not make these rules (the USDA does) and SNS cannot change them.

12. It's essential that all students who qualify for subsidized meals fill out the meal application forms so Student Nutrition can be reimbursed. Achieving this requires every student to turn in a form (non-low-income families may write "not interested.") This task is the job of Principals, and it should be made mandatory. Currently, Principals vary widely in their effectiveness in – and concern about – collecting the meal applications.
13. Under the current system, SNS relies on meal cards for students' proof of eligibility for reimbursable meals. In some cases, schools delay distributing the cards, which means SNS loses money. Principals should be required not just to distribute the cards (some never do) but to do it within 48 hours after the cards are received at the school. And principals must not forbid cafeteria workers to check students' eligibility. That can mean SNS doesn't get the reimbursements to which it is entitled. That money is the sole source of revenue to pay for the costs of food and labor to run the meal program.
14. Principals at schools with snack programs need to make sure that their after school program coordinator is complying with record-keeping requirements, including daily snack counts, and submitting monthly counts in a timely manner. A delay at even one school holds up reimbursement for all meals – breakfast, lunch, and snack – for the entire district, and each day of delay costs SNS money (about \$109,000 in 06-07.)
15. If a Principal has knowledge that a specific student's family would qualify for free meals, USDA regulations allow the Principal to fill out and sign a free meal application for that student if the family does not do so. So long as the Principal is not filling out forms to cover large groups of students, this is a perfectly acceptable procedure. A student who qualifies for free meals, and who eats breakfast and lunch at school every day, brings in about \$815 a year in revenue; the same student with no meal application on file brings in only \$98 a year to cover the cost of the meals he eats.

WORK COOPERATIVELY WITH SNS

16. Principals need to help school communities understand the realities about school meals. Occasionally, Principals encourage parents to demand the impossible – such as scratch cooking at school sites that would require millions of dollars to install kitchens, or meal programs that would violate federal law. Parent involvement and activism is vital in our schools – but crusades demanding changes that are far outside the realm of reality can be counterproductive.
17. The Human Resources Department needs to make every effort to fill job vacancies within SNS in a timely manner. When temporary clerks are needed to process meal application forms at the start of school, and those positions are not filled despite a timely request by SNS, then regular workers must be paid expensive overtime to get the job done by the

deadline set by the government. In addition, reimbursement for students who are qualifying for the first time for free meals cannot be collected until after the students' meal applications are processed and meal cards printed and distributed to the students. Every day of delay due to understaffing of SNS costs the department money.

When the school district is finally able to implement a Point of Sale swipe-card system for school meals, that will be a big step toward minimizing the SNS deficit. Because SFUSD doesn't have the money for this system even though it will rapidly pay for itself, SNS, parent volunteers and SFUSD staff are seeking other funding sources.

Administrators also need to be aware of the many factors that are beyond the district's control but that impact SNS financially. A partial list:

1. As previously mentioned, an unrealistically low reimbursement rate from the state and federal government.
2. As previously mentioned, a cruelly low income ceiling on eligibility for free/reduced meals.
3. Poor-quality commodities provided by the government as meal ingredients.
4. The highest labor costs in the country, due to the highest cost of living.
5. The "no child left hungry" policy. SFUSD provides a meal to any child who goes through the lunch line with no money. Other districts provide a bare-bones "meal of shame" or let such children go hungry.
6. No government money available to repair or replace equipment. The government used to provide these funds, but they were discontinued in the 1980s. SFUSD has no money to repair or replace aging or broken equipment.