

CICN: Menu Trends for School Nutrition Programs

While listening to this webinar, they are trying to focus on identifying, adapting, and implementing food trends/ menus in kindergarten through the 12th grade within the school nutrition programs. I must add before I deep dive into this programs that I have learned some what about this topic in the past and the pros and cons of past programs to enhance the United States school nutrition programs. Throughout the webinar they discuss the importance of understanding your target audience, the implementation process of adopting to a new menu, understanding the current food trends, and the overall challenges and solutions. As I move forward through my schooling and life, I learned a fascinating idea of presenting and just conversations in general. While a lot of the times, it is very easy to illustrate the problems but its extremely complex to find out the resolutions and many fail to do so. I am grateful that throughout this webinar, they dive into many complex ideas but also balance what is happening with what could be done.

Moving forward, they mention the target audience and how each generation may vary on the approach needed to work with them to construct a “healthy” yet accepted menu. With technology and social media on the rise with both generations, they are more likely to have access to different cuisines and while they may not have tried these menus, they have an idea of what it is. They mention how food trends evolve over four stages i.e., inception, adoption, proliferation, and ubiquity. They mention siracha as something that has rose from these cycles and I understand this fully. When I left America and more exactly the Midwest, my food pallet range was very sparce but when I left the area and the country, I left no plate unturned and adopted a Anthony Bourdain type approach and never said no the meals of that country or city. I

think, while I had a hands-on approach, the internet can offer this to these children and give them an idea of what is out there to try, and I think that is amazing to have the worlds cuisine right in front of you.

To summarize what one of the speakers mention was that taking a pilot study approach an understanding what students are eating outside of school and why they are more attuned to quick serve food, to find out what other school districts are doing, attend conferences or follow social media accounts to get a better understanding as well and finally explore meal prep services to gather their data and make it into a children friendly one. But most importantly, find out what the children actually want and think by having this approach we could contrast “healthy” alternatives that are just as satisfying. The next subject they mention is to adapt the school nutrition and this is a multistep approach. They would have to develop a generalizable menu that also meets the USDA guidelines, conduct a taste test, market the menu and train staff to ensure its meets their standards. While USDA guidelines are very important, having the children eat the food is almost as important because without one, you cant serve the food but without the other you have no one to serve it too. In lieu of this, having a meal that students like is great but if we can’t prepare it properly it’s the same dead end, so having a chef or alike train staff would be an excellent idea, to ensure that the food is following the guidelines but also pleasant to eat. In a perfect world a chef would be present in all schools, but this is not the case, so we have some considerations to make. They are to find what ingredients are going to be and ensure they are meet the budget, along with the equipment and training. Also, as I said before we must evaluate the staff’s skill level and what and how much training should be and finally to ensure that while we want to students to eat their food, we also have to ensure that the trends align with the program goals.

The current food trends will differ by area and population, and I think having staff trained by local experts could help them adapt certain menus. I think having alternative menu items that still abide by the USDA guidelines and can be enjoyed by most students is the goal. While I think changing the entire menu for one direct population may not be the entire fix but having inspiration from these cultures is a perfect idea. By introducing foods periodically could help bring different cuisines into the school that many students may not have ever tried but through these programs it gives them the ability to travel the world in their school. All these ideas, that I have mentioned from the webinar and my own thoughts come with challenges, but I think there are some solutions. For one, the main failure in the past was the labor concerns and how we can work with the budget while logistically and creatively delivering food to the students. They mention while following the guidelines while also balancing the labor-intensive menu with simpler menus and making sure the logistics works as well. Finally, they try to convey the idea that conducting small market test and also using a pilot to find how to market it to their clients and in the end the budget matters but the client's needs are more important and if the menu isn't accepted there is no point of a budget.