School Meals: Questions For School Boards to Ask

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Why School Meals Matter

For students

- Hungry students can't engage in learning
- Studies link school meals to better health outcomes, higher test scores, and improved behavior
- AOE Strategic Plan, Safe and Healthy Schools: *"Students are better able to engage in learning when their basic needs are met and the schools they attend are safe, healthy, welcoming, and inclusive places*."

For schools

- Every student's success adds up to your school's attendance and achievement
- Studies link universal meals and breakfast after the bell to lower chronic absenteeism
- Serving more meals lowers your cost per meal by spreading fixed costs
- More scale gives you more flexibility in what you can offer

What Is a School Food Authority (SFA)?

Your SFA is your supervisory union (SD) or supervisory district (SD)

- It's the fiscal agent for your meal programs and the entity that reports to AOE
- USDA requires a single person designated as the food service director at the SFA level

Do you sit on a member district board within an SU?

- Your district is not its own SFA; the SU is the SFA
- For the purposes of the school meals program, the entire SU is one SFA
  - Decisions need to be made together with other districts in your SU
- Running separate programs district by district almost always creates inefficiencies

Room to scale up: Talk to us to learn more about how the SFA can become larger

  - Cooperative Education Service Agency (CESA) could become the SFA
  - SU/SDs could partner under § 267 shared services agreements (share staff or become one SFA)
  - SFAs can add non-profit UPK childcare programs or independent schools as sites

Four Questions to Take Back to Your District

1. What programs are we using to feed students, and are we missing any opportunities?
2. Is our school nutrition program spending intentional?
3. What is the staffing structure of our meal program?
4. Are we proud of the meals we serve?

Programs Available to Feed Vermont Students

During the school day

- School Breakfast Program
- National School Lunch Program
- Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program
- Options for UPK Childcare Centers

Beyond the school day

- Afterschool snacks
- At-Risk Afterschool Meals (CACFP)
- Summer meals: Summer Food Service Program or Seamless Summer Option
  - Congregate vs Non-congregate

Participation: Statewide averages for attending students: ~40% for breakfast and ~67% for lunch

1 What programs does our district operate? What is our student and adult participation?

Finances: Is Your Investment Intentional?

2 QUESTIONS TO ASK

- Is the meal program breaking even?
- If not, how much are we subsidizing it?
- Was that planned?
- Do we have a local purchasing goal?
- Do we have any food quality goals?
- Are we maximizing USDA Foods?
- Have we incurred unallowable costs or missed claim deadlines?

Signs of a structure problem

- Duplicative roles
- Nobody is in charge or too many people are in charge
- Contracts that aren't well managed
- Contracts that charge more per meal than the reimbursement
- No budget set with the food service director
- No clear goals for the program

Staffing: Who Runs Your Meal Program?

3 QUESTIONS TO ASK

What is our food service staffing structure? | Are we seeing a lot of turnover?

Did AOE recommend structural changes in our last Administrative Review?

Recommended model for self-operated programs

- One centralized food service director
  - Required by USDA, with minimum hiring standards
- Well compensated, and expected to manage the program and keep to a budget
- Site staff at every building report to the director
- Staff shared across sites, with floaters and subs so the director isn't washing dishes
- Specialized roles where it makes sense (e.g., baking at one site for the whole SFA)

Are you proud of the meals you serve?

Start Here: Have Lunch at Your School

The best first step when the board hears that the meals are poor quality

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4 WHILE YOU'RE THERE, ASK

Is the meal appealing and high quality?

Are local foods highlighted on the menu?

Is the cafeteria a welcoming place to eat?

Do students have enough time to get their food and eat?

Are there other foods for sale during lunch (i.e., a la carte)?

The dining environment matters as much as the food.

Practical reminders:

- Know what the adult meal price is (~$6 or $7)
- Bring cash, programs prefer it!

Not Happy with Your Meals? You Have Levers

- Federal rules don't stop you from serving great meals
- Decide what you want from the program and set goals and a budget to match
- Great meals may take some additional local funds
- Self-operated or run by a food service management company, either can serve great meals when it's well managed
  - Self-op programs allow for more flexibility to try small changes, evaluate the impacts, and adjust
  - With a management company, you can write meal quality requirements into your next contract
- School Wellness Policy can be updated to incorporate restrictions on foods sold/provided to students outside of the meals program (vending machines, celebrations, school stores, a la carte)

Options for Local Foods

- Learn from Vermont districts already doing amazing work (up to 31% local foods)
- Local Foods Incentive grant to help buy local
- Flexible procurement rules: you can include local in your specifications, and the micro-purchase threshold is $40,000

Local Foods Incentive Report

LFI Awardees from last year:

Mt. Abraham Unified School District: 15%

Central Vermont Supervisory Union: 15%

Montpelier Roxbury Supervisory Union: 15%

Essex Westford ECUUSD: 17%

Addison Northwest School District: 17%

Mountain Views Supervisory Union: 18%

Lamoille South Supervisory Union: 19%

White River Valley Supervisory Union: 19%

Orleans Southwest SU: 20%

Caledonia Central SU: 21%

Windsor Southeast SU: 25%

Harwood Unified Union School District: 25%

South Burlington Town School District: 26%

Windham Northeast SU: 31%







Real Vermont Meals: Harwood UUSD

Verified Local Foods Percentage: 25%

General Fund Subsidy: $160/student annually

Self-operated program

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Real Vermont Meals: Winooski SD

Self-Estimated Local Foods Percentage: 10%

Program does not require a general fund subsidy.

Utilizes a Food Service Management Company.

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Real Vermont Meals: Lamoille South SU

Self-Estimated Local Foods Percentage: 8%

General fund subsidy: $55/student annually

Self-operated program

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Real Vermont Meals: Essex Westford ECUUSD

Verified Local Foods Percentage: 17%

Program does not require a general fund subsidy (Uses significant non-congregate summer meals operation to subsidize school year meals)

Self-operated program

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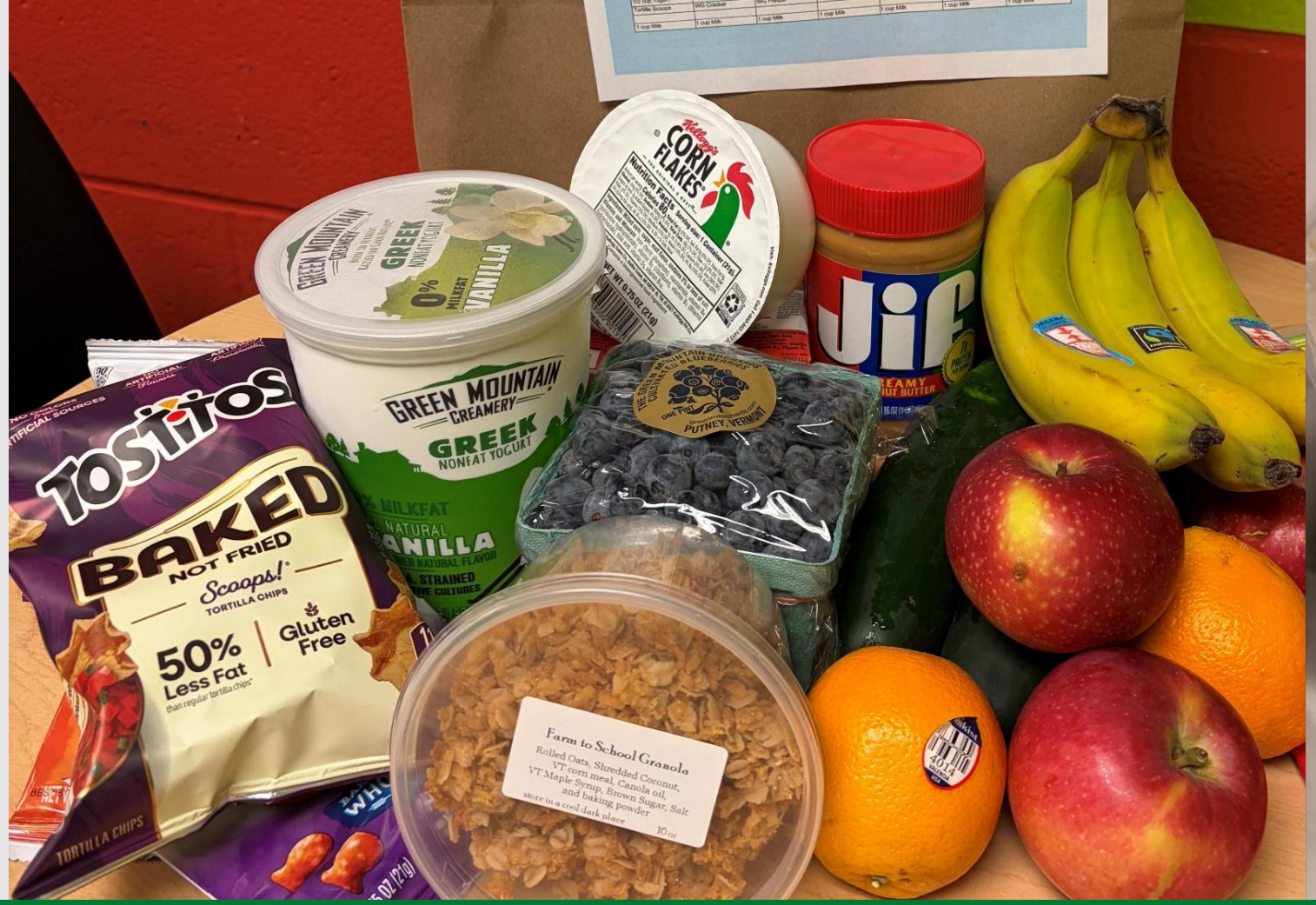
Real Vermont Meals: Windham Northeast SU

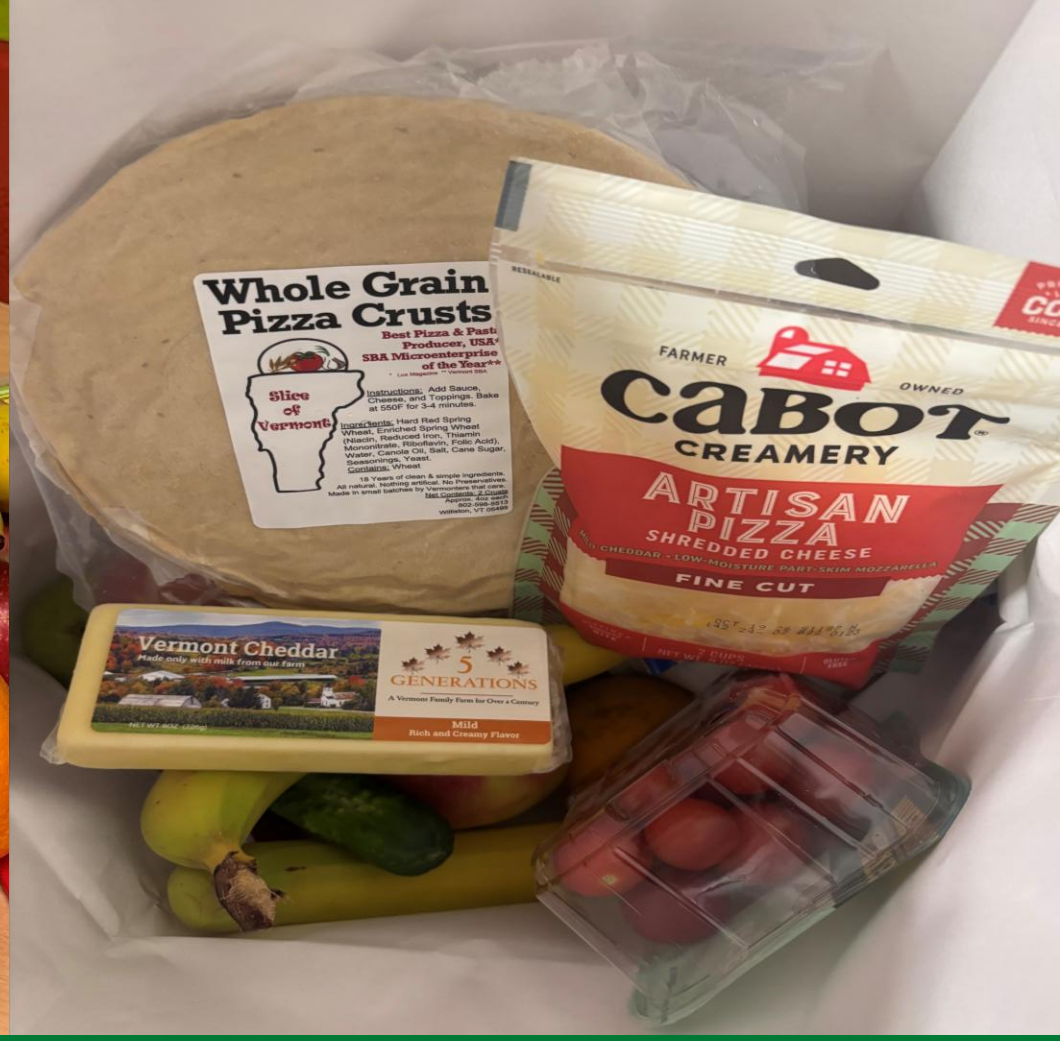
Verified Local Foods Percentage: 31% (highest in the state!), plus local organic milk

General fund subsidy: $199.80/student annually

Self-operated program

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Real Vermont Meals: Windham Northeast & Southeast SUs

Bulk Summer Meals Meal Kits (non-congregate) featuring local foods

These SUs subsidize their school meals program by efficiently operating large non-congregate summer meals programs

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Want Meals Like These? We Can Help

Value of USDA Foods Received Report

Vermont Farm to School & Early Childhood Network

AOE School Meals webpage

Your last School Meals Administrative Review Report

Questions?

- Come find us, we're here for the rest of the day
- Invite us to a board meeting

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