

Revamping School Meal Programs: How Technology and Advocacy are Transforming Participation

Insights from Tracie Samp, Regional Sales Manager, Multiteria® USA, LLC

With over 25 years in the foodservice industry—including roles as a K-12 foodservice director, manufacturer's representative, and now as part of the Multiteria team—I've truly seen every angle of school foodservice. Though I bring my own hands-on, boots-on-the-ground experience to every conversation, what excites me most today is hearing directly from operators facing the real-world challenges of running K-12 programs. This white paper is my way of sharing what I've learned—not just from my own journey, but from the incredible network of foodservice directors and consultants nationwide.

K-12 foodservice isn't just about serving meals—it's about cultivating environments where students want to stay on campus, choose healthy options, and feel seen. Foodservice directors are constantly weighing how to retain students, compete with the rising tide of off-campus chains, and make a genuine impact on each child's daily experience. Pleasing stakeholders such as parents, the school board, and the community is a critical part of a Foodservice Director's role. This is especially true when it comes to meeting the needs of older students, who may have dietary sensitivities or preferences, such as plant-based options or concerns about meat and vegetable quality. Foodservice directors must juggle a variety of dietary requirements, including providing special meals for medically necessary situations, while also addressing the diverse wants and expectations of both parents and students. It's not just about competing with off-campus chains or meeting basic stakeholder demands—it's about creating a dining experience that satisfies everyone involved. By balancing these priorities, foodservice directors can foster trust, engagement, and satisfaction among all stakeholders, ensuring the foodservice program is both impactful and inclusive.

Through hundreds of conversations and site visits, two themes keep rising to the top: leveraging smarter technology, and the power of everyday advocacy—from students, staff, and the community. Participation rates reflect far more than a statistic—they are a window into trust, inclusion, and program innovation.

Why Participation Rates Matter—And Why Students Leave

When participation drops, the impact goes far beyond budgets: offerings shrink, innovation slows, and the program's reputation degrades. Foodservice directors across the country have shared stories of watching high school students leave campus for lunch, often just because they can—to get a break from the building or to enjoy a different environment. It's not always about the food; sometimes, there simply isn't anything on campus that truly draws them in or keeps them there.

But this is where product quality becomes critical. If the food is engaging, if it's something students actively want, schools can build loyalty that keeps kids on site. The department's reputation becomes synonymous with value—if students view meals as a highlight instead of just "school food," participation jumps. At the elementary level, the influence shifts to parents. The feedback I continually hear is that when parents believe in menu quality, variety, and transparency, they encourage their children to eat

school lunches instead of packing one. Building a reputation for excellence early on is crucial; if we foster loyalty in younger years, we're more likely to see those same kids choose on-campus dining even in high school.

This ties back to perception—students and parents alike weigh the actual value of school meals against options like eating out, bringing a packed lunch, or even skipping meals. Factors like housing costs, the rising price of eating out, and the convenience of pre-packed meals all play into their decisions. That's why energizing our cafeteria staff is so important: when a team is happy, values their equipment, and feels valued themselves, they'll advocate for your program to students and families alike.

One story really stands out to me. I learned about a vegan student who felt there truly weren't any compelling menu options for them or their friends. Instead of just hearing the complaint and moving on, the foodservice director invited them to participate in menu planning. Together, they brainstormed and piloted a new vegan entree—an option that did not exist before. The student then shared their excitement and the new menu item on social media. The result? Participation among vegans spiked, and, just as importantly, their enthusiasm drew non-vegan friends to try something new. That's a game changer. Students are powerful advocates—especially when their voices are truly heard.

Advocacy doesn't just come from students. Teachers and staff are enormously influential, too. I've seen firsthand how partnering with teachers—encouraging them to eat alongside students and spread the word about new menu items—can shift the atmosphere in a cafeteria. Some programs even invite teachers to help roll out new offerings or showcase their feedback. When teachers and staff see their workplace improved through thoughtful equipment upgrades or streamlined workflows, they become champions both behind the lines and throughout the community.

"Perception of value" is a theme that comes up again and again. It's not just about pricing, but about how approachable, enjoyable, and worthwhile the cafeteria experience feels. Staff who are energized and equipped to do their jobs make the environment more inviting, and happy staff are the best promoters a program can have. When staff feel valued and take pride in using efficient, modern equipment, that positive energy spreads to students and families.

Technology: The Engine for Engagement, Efficiency, and Empowerment

Over the last decade, technology has utterly transformed school foodservice. It's not just about modern gadgets on the lines; it's about practical tools that make programs more responsive, efficient, and student-focused.

Many foodservice directors now use production record software that goes far beyond counting meals—it combines menu planning, cost analysis, profitability, and participation tracking. Having automated, daily insight into what's working (and what's not) lets you make decisions based on hard data, not just intuition. For example, examining historical records and leftover reports helps directors forecast accurately, reduce waste, and see which menu combinations resonate with students on any given day.

One foodservice director shared how her team stopped defaulting to "Taco Tuesday." Instead, drawing on participation-and-profitability software, they rotated popular items to whichever day had the highest demand shown by the data. This meant fresher food, happier students, and a healthier bottom line.

Another huge piece of the puzzle: inventory management. Automated software now helps teams keep a close eye on ingredient usage and minimize excess production. When you know exactly what's leftover, you can refine future orders, track educational opportunities for staff, and ensure efficient use of limited resources.

On the student side, digital signage and mobile technologies have fundamentally changed how kids engage with their meal options. Digital menu boards don't just inform—they can spotlight special items, highlight student-driven features (like that vegan dish!), and keep the flow moving. These empower students with choice and speed, easing bottlenecks and adding a touch of restaurant-style convenience to the cafeteria.

Experiences from foodservice directors resonate: In one district where serving line speeds were lagging, leadership introduced mirrored lines—offering the same featured options at both ends of the serving area—to meet demand more efficiently. Coupled with these mirrored lines, technology tracked which stations got congested and helped staff adapt. Self-service is another popular strategy, but must be deployed thoughtfully: too many options can actually slow lines, so many schools strike a balance—offering customization where it matters, but ensuring pre-portioned sides or simple choices keep things moving.

My top technology recommendations after hearing from so many creative districts:

- Invest in unified software platforms to streamline menu planning, cost assessment, and participation analytics.
- Use digital tools and interactive displays to showcase student-driven menu innovations and promote healthy choices.
- Pilot meal-preorder systems and feature student-tested items—gather feedback, adjust, and scale what works.
- Deploy equipment and layout solutions designed for your customers: students want both speed and ownership in choosing what they eat.

Advocacy: Student, Staff, and Community Voices Shape Success

Successful programs put advocacy at their center—not just as an afterthought, but as a driving force. Advocacy shows up in outreach, listening, and following through on feedback.

Take that vegan menu story—the foodservice director didn't just respond; she empowered the student to lead real change. I've heard from directors who've created student councils on food, run taste tests for upcoming items, and publicized the stories behind new dishes on social media. This isn't just token engagement; when students see their ideas come to life, they become the program's biggest cheerleaders.

Teacher advocacy is also powerful. Districts that involve teachers directly—inviting them to sample new menus and share honest reactions—benefit from positive word-of-mouth in the classroom and beyond. Some go further, equipping teachers with talking points or inviting them to lead mini-campaigns for new programs. Their trusted voices matter.

We cannot forget parents. Choice starts at home, especially in elementary years. Directors who earn parent trust through quality, transparency, and occasional “backstage” events (like kitchen tours or parent tastings) see it pay off when those children reach middle and high school. Parent endorsement is a recruiting tool for ongoing participation.

And staff matter deeply, too. Directors constantly tell me that updating equipment and supporting staff with training or recognition makes a visible difference. When staff feel empowered—knowing how to operate new equipment or seeing how their service fits into a bigger picture—they’re more likely to promote the program and deliver service with pride.

Best advocacy strategies gathered from the field:

- Host regular student advisory meetings and make visible changes based on feedback.
- Bring staff together for cross-training and menu development—equip them to be proud ambassadors.
- Make social media a two-way street—showcase new ideas, highlight student and staff voices, and celebrate your daily wins.
- Lean on parent networks through tastings, open kitchens, or advisory events to spread good news beyond the cafeteria doors.

From Serving Line to Dining Destination: Layout and Customization

Every operator knows: the cafeteria’s atmosphere, speed, and flexibility set the tone for the entire dining experience. Practical redesigns—guided by student input and data—move programs from “serving lines” to “social destinations.”

Line speed has emerged as one of the biggest determinants for participation, especially in larger schools. Self-service, when implemented smartly, gives students a sense of ownership—but overwhelming them with choices can create bottlenecks. Schools that use open concepts and mirrored lines (where the same meal options are offered at both ends of a line) see lines moving faster, more efficient service, and happier students. Customization is key, but simplicity wins: letting students, for example, choose their main entree while sides are quickly portioned keeps things efficient and exciting.

Versatile design—mirroring what you’d find in a favorite fast-casual chain—adds vibrancy. Modern cafés use digital menu boards, fresh colors, and rotating featured “specials” to create buzz. Students notice, and the direct comparison to off-campus food chains push programs to keep innovating, not just to keep up with the competition, but to stay ahead.

Moving Forward—Together

Having worked on every side of this industry, I know that foodservice directors and consultants do their best work when they draw from each other and keep open communication at the forefront. The insights here aren't mine alone—they belong to dedicated foodservice leaders committed to student well-being and operational success.

A few actions inspired by top professionals:

1. **Leverage your tech tools:** Analyze participation data, respond to student needs, and challenge tradition with evidence-based menu cycles.
2. **Cultivate advocates:** Build coalitions of students, staff, teachers, and parents who know and love your program.
3. **Embrace modern cafeteria design and serving line equipment:** Invest in spaces and tools that make your cafeteria engaging, fast, and fun.
4. **Share your journey:** Use digital platforms to show how technology, advocacy, and staff dedication are reshaping your meal program.

Competing with restaurants isn't about copying; it's about outpacing them through innovation, excitement, and a sense of community—building a campus dining culture students want to return to. As we keep sharing ideas and pushing for more inclusive, responsive programs, I hope these experiences spark new conversations and bold steps forward. Let's keep learning from—and advocating for—each other. Our students deserve nothing less.

Got a challenge? Reach out, and I'll be happy to provide a tailored idea that fits your program perfectly!

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About The Author:

With over 25 years in the foodservice industry, Tracie brings a well-rounded perspective shaped by hands-on experience. As a previous K-12 foodservice director, then moving into the equipment side as a manufacturer's representative, Tracie has seen the industry from every angle. Now at Multiteria, that experience fuels a deep passion for solving real-world challenges with practical, customer-focused solutions.

Whether working directly with school nutrition teams or supporting sales professionals behind the scenes, Tracie is known for building connections, sharing knowledge, and always putting the customer first. Driven by purpose, Tracie brings energy, experience, and a collaborative spirit to every project.