

The Empty Cafeteria Effect: How Low Meal Participation Signals Broader Campus Vulnerabilities

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Reading the Empty Room

Walk into a high school cafeteria at noon and count the empty seats. That number tells you more than you might think.

I've spent years working alongside foodservice directors across the country, and as a former director myself, I've come to believe something that many administrators overlook: low meal participation is rarely just a food problem. It's a signal. When a large share of students leave campus every day at lunch, or skip the cafeteria entirely, that pattern points to deeper cracks in how a school operates, how safe it is, and how connected students feel to it.

To pressure-test this idea, I spoke with some of the sharpest minds in school nutrition: Kim Minestra, Director of Nutrition Services at Evanston Township High School in Illinois; Sal Valenza, Foodservice Director for West New York Schools in New Jersey, who has managed programs across 18 districts; Karen Kempf, Foodservice Director for Fairview School District 72 in Skokie, Illinois; Jordan Ryan, Director of Nutrition Services for Brownsburg Community Schools in Indiana; Anji Branch, Child Nutrition Director in Gooding, Idaho; and Joe Urban and Lauren Couchois of School Food Rocks.

What follows is their collective wisdom, filtered through five topics that reflect key issues school leaders care about. My goal is simple: to help fellow foodservice directors see that the cafeteria is not a side department. It is a cultural anchor, a safety net, and a key part of how schools create safe, well-run, student-centered campuses.

When Students Leave, What Ripples Out?

Open campus policies feel like a small convenience. In practice, they send waves through the whole community.

Kim has watched this play out for nearly two decades. "I've been at my school district for almost 20 years, and we've had open campus the whole time," she told me. "Kids get into what they get into. Accidents, drugs, fights." When I pressed her on the community angle, she pointed to the businesses first. "The McDonald's, Wendy's, Subway's all have no problem with open campus. But what about the businesses where kids are just loitering? And then there's the fights."

Sal took the conversation somewhere that should stop every administrator cold: security.

"We're trying to make sure our schools are safe. We're having active shooter drills. When we allow all the children to leave for lunch, they have to get back in. They do not all come in the front door. They're coming in any door they can. Their friends are opening the doors and inviting them in. They're diminishing our ability to control security in and out of the school."

Karen put it perfectly. "It's almost like lunch is a security reset. You have to start from the beginning, because every student comes back as if they've been gone for 12 hours."

Then there's the parent perspective. Sal, who recently sent two kids through high school, framed it as a matter of trust. "When my kids were in ninth and tenth grade, I didn't want to not know where they were for 45 minutes. I give them to you as a school district, and there's a standard of care that I expect. If you have no idea where they are, I take issue with that."

And here's the part that struck me most. Sal noted that these open campus decisions rarely include the people most affected. "I've never seen the administrators talk to parents when they were considering opening or closing a campus. It's always an inside decision. If parents knew that decision was happening, they'd have a lot to say about it."

The ripple effects are real, and they land far beyond the lunch line. Neighborhood loitering. Traffic risk. Diminished building security. Eroded parent trust. One district I used to work at closed its campus after two students were killed in a car accident pulling out of the high school. That is a tragically high price for a policy that started as a convenience.

The Hidden Cost to Attendance and Classroom Order

The lunch exodus doesn't end when the bell rings. It follows students back into the building or keeps them from returning at all.

Kim named the most immediate consequence. "They don't make it back to campus. So they're missing class or they're late to their class." Multiply that across hundreds of students and you get a daily attendance headache that lands squarely on administrators and teachers.

One director in our group described a principal whose biggest discipline spike came right after lunch. That principal would love to close campus. The obstacle? Parent pushback in an affluent community that frames off-campus lunch as a way for students to "let off a little steam" and build independence.

Sal, ever direct, put the accountability question where it belongs. "There's no liability that rests on our shoulders. The liability rests on the administration's shoulders. They make decisions that most of us at this table are sometimes confused by."

This is where I want to add something I've been thinking about for a long time. School nutrition programs follow an enormous number of regulations. Directors work incredibly hard to build compliant, nutritious menus that keep students on campus. Meanwhile, students walk out to fast food restaurants that follow zero nutrition standards. If we truly care about student health, that has to be part of the equation. Students are often paying similar prices for far lower quality. The value gap between a reimbursable meal and a fast-food combo is real, and it deserves to be seen.

Joe Urban tied the classroom and the budget together. The shared responsibility of everyone at that table, he explained, is to run a program that is self-sufficient and does not cost the district money. Open campus policies work directly against that goal.

The Operational Drain Nobody Budgets For

An emptying campus forces schools to spend resources in ways that never appear on a menu spreadsheet.

The labor math alone is punishing. As one director explained, staffing depends on how many students you expect to feed. With open campus, that number is impossible to predict. Sal described the seasonal swing candidly. "As we come into spring and warmer months, I'm actually lowering my labor in my high school because I know fewer kids will be there. They're going to go out."

He's honest about why. "The lure of being able to go out and hang out with your girlfriend for 45 minutes unsupervised is not going to be defeated by the best slice of pizza in town."

But here's the strategic pivot. Sal and Joe both traced open campus back to a root cause: many schools simply don't have the physical space to feed everyone. Sal's high school holds 2,000 students across three lunch periods. On a rainy day, there's nowhere to sit. So the question becomes less about willpower and more about facilities.

And facilities can change. That's where Anji Branch's story becomes a blueprint.

Anji's Bistro: A Case Study in Creative Space

Gooding's high school has just 400 students, and its foodservice setup was rough. "We had a multi-purpose room cafeteria and a kitchen with an accordion door that opened into a hallway. That's what we were serving out of. We were only feeding about 26% of our high school students."

Then Anji got creative. "Last year, we remodeled a dry storage room and turned it into a market and bistro. It's set up like a convenience store. We serve reimbursable breakfast and lunch every day, and we're also open from 7:30 in the morning to 3:30 in the afternoon selling à la carte."

The results speak for themselves:

- **Participation jumped from 26% to 58%** of high school students
- **\$35,000 in à la carte sales** in the first year
- **200 kids served in six minutes** in a modest space
- **19 breakfast entrées, 21 lunch entrées**, and a customizable choice bar daily
- Everything fresh, nothing reheated, no canned fruit

Anji went further by meeting students where they already were. "We added a pre-order option. We put a link out every day using Google Classroom, because kids can get it on their Chromebooks. They pre-order, we bag it in nice kraft handle bags, everything's branded, and they pick up their Senator Street Express and off they go."

Getting there took nerve. "My superintendent was not a super fan of the bistro idea. I said, it'll work, just like an airport kiosk. Then a couple weeks before it opened, I was thinking, oh my gosh, I hope this works out. But it worked." Now she's the genius who ripped out the old line.

Jordan Ryan added the "cool factor" angle after visiting a school that let students eat in redesigned spaces like stairways. "If I don't have to eat at an eight-person table, if you can find spaces that feel cooler and install outlets so kids can charge their phones, that's a different experience." Sal agreed that renovating tables and making spaces more inviting genuinely helps.

The catch, as Sal reminds us, is that most of these decisions sit with administration. Which is exactly why foodservice directors need a seat at the table before the decision is made, not after.

The Equity Problem Hiding in Plain Sight

Here's where the empty cafeteria stops being an operational issue and becomes a moral one.

When most students leave campus, who stays behind? Kim described a building with four cafeterias, one of which had become deeply isolated. "It's all the special ed kids, and no one else wants to go where they are. Or there are free and reduced students who don't have the means to leave campus. So now it's an equity issue. Glaring. Very glaring."

That word, glaring, stuck with me. When the ability to leave for lunch depends on money and transportation, the cafeteria quietly sorts students by income. The students who remain can feel marked.

This is not a hypothetical. The Wall Street Journal recently reported on lunch shaming so severe that some students are too afraid to eat at school at all, because classmates snap photos of them eating and share the images to embarrass them. You can read it [HERE](#). When eating in the cafeteria carries social risk, participation drops for reasons that have nothing to do with the food.

Sal sees a clear answer. "You've got a case for universal meals there. That's a strong one." His district runs CEP, and he's worked hard on the culture around it. "Our program isn't looked upon as, oh, that's the weirdo kids who eat lunch. Our kids are involved in getting other kids to participate. We do a lot of peer-to-peer marketing."

I lived the most powerful version of this during COVID, when every student ate free regardless of eligibility. It was the greatest equalizer I've ever seen. Everybody was eating because they could, and there was no stigma. No student had to worry that eating in the cafeteria signaled anything about their family's income. It was, quite honestly, the best marketing campaign we could have run: try it for free.

If we can secure universal free meals, we remove one of the biggest blocks to participation. Everybody eats, everybody's equal, and one more reason to leave campus disappears.

Sal keeps us grounded on the rest. "If I'm a high school kid and you let me leave, I'm going. Just because I can. They're teenagers." He's right. We won't win every student. But we can make sure the cafeteria is a place where no student feels ashamed to be.

Rebuilding Connection and Keeping Students Engaged

If low participation is a warning sign, then rebuilding connection is the cure. The directors and leaders I spoke with offered strategies that any district can adopt tomorrow.

Be present and listen. Anji leads with relationships. "I'm out in my buildings a few times a week just talking to kids. I have student influencers and a student advisory team. I tell them, if the food sucks, tell me. It's not my program, it's their program. It doesn't matter if I like the food. What matters is if they like it." She wins over the reluctant ones too. "There's always the kid that thinks it's not cool to talk to me, so I work on them a little more, and then they become my BFFs."

Karen framed the mindset it takes. "You have to have thick skin. Go find out if the kids like it, and if they don't, ask why. It's not about you." Anji put a fine point on the business case: "I'd rather they tell me than me waste money bringing something in."

Let students run the show. Sal stopped trusting his own taste buds long ago. "If a vendor comes in with a product, I grab 10 kids and make them eat it. I ask, do you like this? They'll tell me right away. Then I ask, would you buy it? Big difference." He leans on peer influence because he knows his limits. "I'm a 61-year-old man. They don't always want to talk to me. They'd rather talk to other kids." And he shared the golden rule of working with students: "If you tell them you're going to do something and you don't do it, you'll never work with kids again. We need to do what we say we're going to do."

Meet students on their platforms. Directors found that Google Classroom outperformed social media for reaching students directly, because kids were already opening those links to place orders. Lauren offered a complementary path. "We did a lot of social media to represent our district. We reached the parents, and parent engagement led to student engagement. We had staff who knew every single kid's name in a building of 800. Our staff led to a lot of that engagement."

Start young and recruit teacher advocates. This is my personal conviction. Get students hooked in elementary school and you keep them for years. And teacher advocates are gold, because they see students every single day. Every time I've gone into a classroom to talk about the program, teachers say, "Oh, I had no idea." That gap in understanding is one of our biggest missed opportunities.

Model the behavior. Sal shared a favorite tactic for elementary buildings. "I get the principals and assistant principals in there. I have one principal who sits with the kids and eats lunch every day. It's that modeling. The kids see her eating and think, well, this must be good."

Treat staff as customers, not a separate class. Some directors offer branded "staff selections." Sal takes the opposite view and refuses to run separate teacher meals. "All the

food should be awesome. Teachers should want to eat the exact same thing as the kids." He charges \$5 for a teacher lunch, and the response is telling. "They come to me and say, we can't believe this is only \$5. And I say, neither can I. Go have fun." Best of all, teachers who eat the food bring the kids with them.

The Cafeteria Is a Campus Strategy

Let me bring this back to where we started. An empty cafeteria is not a menu failure. It's a message.

It tells you that students are leaving campus and creating security gaps that reset every single day. It tells you that attendance and afternoon discipline are being strained by a policy few parents were ever consulted on. It tells you that labor and supervision dollars are being spent to manage an exodus rather than to nourish students. And most urgently, it tells you that the students who remain may be the ones with the fewest options, sitting in a space that quietly signals who has means and who doesn't.

The good news is that everything I've shared points toward a solution. Anji proved that a creative facility can nearly double participation. Sal proved that peer-to-peer culture can strip away stigma. The COVID era proved that universal meals can erase the equity divide overnight. And every director I spoke with proved that relationships, presence, and genuine listening bring students back to the table.

For those of us working alongside superintendents and principals every day, the takeaway is this: don't wait to be invited into the conversation. Position yourself at the table before the next open campus decision, the next facilities plan, the next safety review. When we frame our work in terms administrators care about, student safety, equity, and operational efficiency, we stop being the lunch department and start being a strategic partner. We are not just feeding students. We are anchoring campus culture, protecting the building, and keeping the most vulnerable students seen and safe.

Fill the cafeteria, and you strengthen the whole school. I'd welcome the chance to help you get started.

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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 Lakeside/Multiteria, that experience fuels a deep passion for solving real-world challenges with practical, customer-focused solutions.