

GAINING SUPPORT FOR A NEW FOODSERVICE SYSTEM

Centralizing food production often requires support and acceptance from a number of different constituencies, particularly if a new central kitchen must be built. Sometimes that support and acceptance comes readily, and other times the school foodservice director must take planned steps to ensure that support and acceptance occur in order for the project to be undertaken and successful. This chapter will provide information on:

- School District Support
- Student/Community Support

School District Support

There are two main groups within the school district who must support a centralized foodservice system in order for it to be constructed: administrators and school board members. The school district superintendent and the school business official need to believe in the project and support the project before it can move forward. The school foodservice director needs to work closely with these administrators and communicate how the centralized foodservice system would benefit the district. This process may include multiple steps such as the following:

1. Introduce the idea of a central kitchen during a routine meeting with the superintendent or school business official. This “test balloon” will help determine the propensity of these administrators to support the idea.
2. If these administrators seem supportive, the school foodservice director needs to prepare some preliminary information to present to the administrators. This may include information on advantages and disadvantages of the centralized foodservice system, case studies of how centralized foodservice systems have been successful, preliminary information about how the system might be implemented in your school district, and rough estimates of costs and cost/benefits. This information needs to be presented in a succinct, easy-to-understand format, such as an executive summary with visuals and tabular presentations of information.

3. If administrators react favorably to the information presented, the next step may be to visit some centralized foodservice systems in other school districts. School foodservice directors want to select districts that have the same basic system as the one they are proposing (i.e. cook/chill, bulk or pre-plate, etc.). Case studies included in this manual may be useful, and there is a list of school districts with centralized foodservice systems in the appendix. You may want to consider inviting the superintendent or school business official to accompany you on one or more of the site visits so they can get a good feel for how the system operates. School district foodservice directors who operate centralized foodservice systems usually are very willing to provide tours of their facility (including both the central kitchen and satellite schools) and discuss how the system works. They usually are willing to share budget and other information with their peers. This process may build enthusiasm of administrators for the project.
4. If the site visits confirm your belief that a centralized foodservice system is in the best interest of your school district, the administrator may want you to present the idea to the school board. If the school board reacts favorably, it is time to begin the process of doing a feasibility study (for more details, see Chapter 4).
5. The feasibility study is presented to administrators and school board members. Based on this information, a final decision is made on whether or not to proceed with the project.
6. Decisions about funding the project will be made, including whether or not a bond issue will be required to generate the funding.

Throughout the process of planning and building a central kitchen, communication with administrators and board members is critical to the success of the project.

Student/Community Support

It is important to recognize perceptions of students, parents, and other people in the community about food produced in central kitchens. If you are fortunate, there will be no negative perceptions; however, many school foodservice directors report that there are perceptions that the food is “plastic” and that pre-plated foods are of poor quality because they are mass produced. In some areas, there may be negative reactions if disposable ware is used because of the perception that it is bad for the environment.

School foodservice directors will need to listen to concerns of students, parents, and others and respond to their concerns. Directors also may want to be proactive in dealing with issues such as food quality and environmental impact. For example, if there are concerns about the environmental impact of the use of disposables and all of the styrofoam plates are recycled, let the public know.

The school foodservice director may want to develop a marketing plan for the new facility. The basic purpose is to create a feeling of prestige and pride about the district's central kitchen. Factors such as the following could be emphasized:

- The facility is unique to the area.
- The facility is very high technology.
- The variety of menu items served can be improved.
- Quality of food will be consistent.
- Food safety can be assured through the system.

When the facility is completed, several marketing strategies could be undertaken. Examples include:

- Host a grand opening event. Conduct tours for various groups such as teachers, parents, students, etc. Be sure to have some cinnamon rolls (or other product with a good aroma) baking so that the tantalizing aroma permeates the kitchen! Food produced in the facility could be served to showcase the quality of products that will be produced.
- Invite media representatives to attend the opening event.
- Develop a brochure explaining the new facility.
- Write news releases for the local newspapers.

Case in Point

Jefferson County Public Schools Nutrition Service Center developed a brochure to publicize their new central kitchen. The 11 x 17" tri-fold brochure is printed in color on glossy paper. The cover includes a picture of the facility. A couple of color pictures are used on the back page to illustrate the large equipment in the facility. They included a facility layout and a description of the facility. They also included descriptions of the various storage and production areas, including square footage and production capacity. For example, for the bakery area they say "in this area, staff can prepare and bake 18,000 yeast rolls; 6,000 cookies; and 10,000 servings of brownies and cakes per hour. Products can be fully baked or partially baked for finishing in the schools." They also included three frequently asked questions/answers about the facility: How does the Nutrition Service Center benefit the students of Jefferson County Public Schools? In what method and how often are the meals that are prepared at the Nutrition Service Center delivered to the schools? Will the students and staff notice a change in the food or method of service at the schools?

Marketing the centralized foodservice system should be an on-going process. The facility can be used as a learning laboratory through visits and activities of school children.

Case in Point

Portland, Oregon Public Schools Nutrition Services employs a full-time nutrition education specialist. She works with teachers throughout the district to set up weekly field trips to the central kitchen. Students spend time in the facility's classroom learning about nutrition. The educator works with teachers to integrate her lesson with what the students currently are studying. The department uses the opportunity to have students taste-test new products that are being considered for the menu and provide feedback about the acceptability of these items. Students take a tour of the central kitchen and see production in action.