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# SN SCHOOL NUTRITION

The Official Publication of the School Nutrition Association MAR17

## DO YOU DELIVER?

Getting Meals to Kids Who Won't Come to the Cafeteria

GOING BANANAS!

ROAMING RUBY COMES HOME

SCHOOLS AS NUTRITION HUBS

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# Pushing All the Buttons

## Vending machines offer convenient access to reimbursable meals.

BY PATRICK WHITE

Live worms for bait (in fishing hotspots everywhere). Beer and liquor (fairly commonplace in Japan). Gold (maybe not surprisingly, in Abu Dhabi). Medical marijuana (being tried in several states in the U.S. west). A bicycle (in the Netherlands). Lobsters (ironically, selected using a joystick-controlled claw). iPods and tablets (Best Buy gets credit for that). And, as of this past January, McDonald's Big Macs (rolled out in Boston).

If you're looking for a common theme for this peculiar list, it's this: They are all things you can buy from a vending machine. At an increasing number of U.S. school districts, you can add reimbursable meals to that list. It's not a new phenomenon—some schools have done it for the better part of a decade now, and yours truly wrote about the topic in *School Nutrition* back in 2010. But more schools are getting onboard with vending meals, and those with a little more experience in the practice have some data and expertise to share on the matter.

### TAKEN FOR GRANT-ED

**Penny Parham,** administrative director for Food and Nutrition, **Miami-Dade County Public Schools,** has used reimbursable vending for the past six or seven years in an effort to build participation. She was able to purchase the machines thanks to a sizable U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) grant. "We wrote the grant specifically to buy fresh meal vending machines to increase the points of access for students in high school to get a healthy lunch," Parham explains. With some sprawling school campuses in her district, giving students more convenient options to quickly pick up their food without a long trek to a single cafeteria site was essential, she explains, reporting, "That's exactly what we were able to do; it's worked great."

Grants are a common way for schools to cover the costs of reimbursable vending equipment. **Keri Carlson,** school nutrition director with **Manistee Area (Mich.) Public Schools,** gives credit for the district's vending machine to her predecessor, **Kathy Gutowski,** who wrote the grant that allowed for the purchase of a machine that the small district would otherwise not have been able to afford.

**Jessica Shelly, MBA, SNS,** foodservices director at **Cincinnati Public Schools,** purchased reimbursable vending machines via a grant she received back in 2011. "We brought them on as *breakfast* machines—that was our main thrust," she explains. The cost of the machines is undeniably high, which might scare away some, but Shelly advises districts that might have an interest in offering vended reimbursable meals (particularly to build breakfast participation) to be on the lookout for grants: "Go out there and talk to your community partners and advocates about grants." Plus, with so many leading-edge districts using these successfully for several years, there is now a track record to use in making the case with school administrators and grant funders alike. Talking about increasing participation is a great way to get the attention of those administering grants, Shelly points out.

### MAKE A SELECTION

Beyond the elephant-in-the-room question of how to afford the equipment, another initial decision that must be made in regard to reimbursable vending is whether to focus on providing

helloGooc
Fresh. Healthy. Tasty.

breakfast or lunch—or offering both. As usual, the answer tends to differ district by district—and even school by school—depending on circumstances.

**Mark Bordeau, SNS,** director of food services for **Broome-Tioga BOCES,** which encompasses 15 school districts in New York, implemented reimbursable vending in three districts this year. "We had started providing Provision 2 breakfast at those school districts last year; that gave us a baseline for participation. This year, we wanted to expand our breakfast program, so there were more access options for the students," he explains. "That's why we decided to put the vending machines in." Bordeau is planning to do exactly the same thing in another three districts next year.

At one school, Bordeau had the machines placed in a large vestibule area where students congregate in the morning. "Kids want that 10 or 15 minutes of social time, so many of them aren't going down to the cafeteria, because it's time away from their friends. So, we brought the food to them," he explains.

In general, he leaves his breakfast vending machines turned on until half-an-hour before lunch service begins. "A lot of the foods we serve are shelf-stable, so if students don't want to eat the meal right away, they can save it for a mid-morning snack," he explains. He is currently experimenting with vending lunches at one school where all kids eat for free, "but it hasn't been as successful as we hoped it would be," he admits.

Breakfast is also the focus of the vended meal program in Cincinnati, where the goal of installing the machines "was to target students in the high school who weren't coming to the cafeteria, either because it was too far away from the bus drop-off area or the classrooms, or they didn't have enough time in the morning," explains Shelly, echoing Bordeau's observations. "A lot of times students have to decide: socialize or breakfast?"

Shelly pondered using mobile serving stations in various places, but didn't have the labor to staff them. "So we looked for a way to accomplish our goals without increasing our labor costs," she explains. "Reimbursable vending machines helped us do that. They're able to stand alone without anyone having to do anything other than just stock them, which we can do during our down-time."

Shelly initially purchased a total of 19 machines for 14 schools. "Our objective was to put them in social gathering areas that were outside of the cafeteria," she notes. Since that time, her team has expanded the program and is now using 29 machines.

Cincinnati continues to focus its vending program primarily on breakfast. It is vending reimbursable lunches at only one of its high schools, which has 2,400 students and a campus that stretches nearly a mile, end-to-end, reports Shelly. "Those students just don't have time to get to the cafeteria, and the principal asked us to get some vending machines in there for lunches," she explains. "We do a lot of fun salads and wraps, sandwiches, hummus plates and items like that."

Conversely, vending machines are used mostly for reimbursable lunches in Miami-Dade County schools, where sandwiches, vegetarian wraps, lowfat yogurt-and-fruit parfaits and salads are the primary reimbursable meal menu items vended, cites Parham. She reports finding greater success with vended lunches than with breakfasts.

At Manistee Area Public Schools, the vending machine had *just* been

installed at the local high school during Christmas break of this school year, and at press time, students can purchase healthy *snacks*, such as a la carte items that are Smart Snacks-compliant, including apples, oranges, string cheese and yogurt, as well as deli sandwiches. Carlson does intend to use the equipment to vend reimbursable meals, but given the mid-school-year installation, the decision was made to wait on adding that component "until our students truly understand the concept," she explains. "We were worried that they might take a reimbursable meal from the machine and then come through our lunch line." Manistee's machine, from Vend-ucation, is connected to the district's POS system, so such a sale would be blocked, but Carlson still would prefer to avoid frustration and confusion. The goal is to have students get accustomed to using the vending machine first, and then educate them on the concept of purchasing an actual reimbursable meal from it.

### THE LOGISTICS OF LINKING UP

The connection between a vending machine and the POS system is critical, both for student convenience and for program accountability, say directors who offer reimbursable meals in this manner. For Bordeau, the first criteria when looking for vending equipment was to find a brand that was compatible with his Nutrikids POS system. He explains that it's critical that the two systems be able to link together, not only so that the program can be reimbursed for the meals served, but also to prevent the possibility that a student could get a reimbursable breakfast at the vending machine, and then go down and get another meal in the cafeteria. The systems should work the same way as any POS register running at the site. He selected machines from Star Foods, the vendor used by both Shelly and Parham, as well.

How do students interact with the vending machines? Students at Broome-Tioga sites enter a PIN (either four or six digits, depending on the specific district), along with their birthdate. They then select the meal they want, and are provided with a brief window of time to grab that meal before the door closes.

In Miami-Dade County, Parham is pleased that her vending machines are cashless and are connected to her POS system from PCS Revenue. That process "was a lot of work when we installed them," she concedes, adding that while grants covered the cost of the machine, "We incurred the cost of technologically wiring [building areas] and tying them to the POS system. It wasn't just plugging in the machines."

Not only was this POS link worth it to provide seamless accountability, the cashless function was a priority. "We didn't want to have to make change; we didn't want students to have problems like dollar bills getting stuck," she explains, noting that going cashless helps to protect the anonymity of students eligible for free meals. All students simply type in their ID number to access menu items.

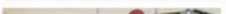
"It was huge for us that the machines connected to our POS," echoes Jessica Shelly in Cincinnati. "It was a way to make sure we were in compliance with the rules and regulations." She also talked to her state agency to be sure the automated approach would meet all the requirements. "They walked through it with us to make sure we would be OK," Shelly recounts. In part, this process was necessary to meet state-specific rules about listing ingredient information. Fortunately, the state agency team was "very helpful in making sure this program was successful. They were much more of a help than a hindrance," Shelly credits.

In Manistee, Michigan, Keri Carlson also reports that connecting the new vending machine to the school's POS system was a seamless process. "It was very simple," she says. "I was worried about it...but it took all of maybe 15 strokes on my keyboard to get them to talk to each other. It's wonderful, because it allows students to use their account balances through our POS system to access those snacks without needing cash." Carlson doesn't expect use of the machine to pose any paperwork problems once she starts serving reimbursable meals; so long as the meals meet the nutritional requirements and she can account for everything in her production records.

Generally speaking, these directors have had no struggle in offering and delivering all of the reimbursable meal components—all cold items—in an automated format, so they see this option as simply another point of access, along with the main cafeteria line and separate kiosk stations or mobile carts. "As long as you are controlling accountability and you make sure the meal is complete, then you're fine," asserts Mark Bordeau.

### TAKING STOCK

In Cincinnati's reimbursable breakfast vending program, each tier of the machine offers a different meal option, featuring variety in specific menu components. These range from cold cereals to yogurt parfaits to a PB&J bar and so on. "It's not the hot breakfast options they get if they come to the cafeteria,"



concedes Shelly, "but it's still an option, and it gives them the empowerment of choice."

Menu items are packaged together in a clear plastic bag, so that students can see what they are getting—and, as a bonus, the bag provides a way to keep trash together for disposal. Shelly recalls that when the idea of vended meals was first discussed, custodians in the schools worried. "But there have not been any problems or increased spills that we've had to deal with," she reports. In fact, the principal at one school has even requested Shelly install *more* vending machines.

Mark Bordeau's program is similar. "We have a pretty good selection of meals to choose from," he says. "All of the meals are completely packaged together, so when they select a menu item, they get the milk, the juice, the fruit, yogurt—whatever they pick—all packaged in one meal together."

The Manistee Public Schools nutrition staff has already experimented with a wide array of different items in their new vending machine, including breakfast bars, muffins, carrot sticks and the like. And Keri Carlson and her team have begun working on what the reimbursable meals will look like once they are added to the unit. "We will create a breakfast bar combo with apple slices and a juice and/or yogurt," she explains. "And we've been successful already in vending Smuckers' Uncrustable Sandwiches through the machine, so I'd like to see a combo with that at lunch. Eventually, we'd like to put items like salads in there, as well." She and her team are taking time to do more testing to determine exactly what types of items the vending machine dispenses well from each section. "That has been a learning curve for us...we do get interrupted occasionally if there are jam-ups," she concedes.

## WHERE IT WORKS

"We are doing this only in middle schools and high schools," explains Bordeau of his reimbursable breakfast vending program. "We haven't done it at the elementary level; we do breakfast in the classroom there. I think it would be more difficult to do vending in elementary schools." He points to the short window of time between when buses arrive and elementary students need to get to their classrooms, and he fears that younger students would have some trouble remembering multi-digit access codes.

Brea
art keep

> *"I think that the machines are wonderful. If you can increase access, why not do it?*

But at the upper grade levels, Bordeau has seen success across the board, and it doesn't matter the enrollment size. "A lot of schools think that vending machines are something just for big districts to use," he says, noting that some of his peers see this option only through the lens of addressing over-crowded cafeterias, long service lines and limited time to eat. These *are* good reasons to consider reimbursable vending, but Bordeau warns against thinking of this option *only* from that perspective. It's really about offering students another way to get their meal, he says.

"I put them in a small district that has only 500 or 600 kids at the high school level, and in a big district that has 1,600 high school students. It works for us at both," Bordeau reports, explaining that the decision comes down to the fundamentals: "If you want to increase participation, it's a viable way to do so, whether you're large or small."

Penny Parham's experience has been a bit different. She has seen varying results based on enrollment size—and the bigger schools *have* been a better fit with vended meals. She has roughly 50 high schools in her district, including 30 considered *very* large. "We put the machines in almost every high school initially. But we found that some of the smaller high schools weren't really using them." She didn't let them go to waste, of course. "We moved the machines and now in some of our really large high schools, we have two or three machines," she reports.

Parham also tried out reimbursable vending machines at some of her district's middle schools, but found less success there. "We really didn't get the sales at the middle school," she says, theorizing that middle-schoolers have a scheduled lunch period in the cafeteria, while the high schools offer less-regimented lunch schedules. "They just have a time when they can eat, so students are all over the place," she explains. There is another possible reason, Parham suspects: "Frankly, students prefer the hot meals [they can get in the cafeteria]. But cold meals are wonderful as a choice for older students who have a larger campus and more complicated schedules."

## THE RESULTS ARE IN

Bordeau reports that the introduction of the vending equipment has been a relatively smooth transition with his staff. They worked collaboratively to develop menus, but one hiccup was finding the right packaging process. At first, they used an automated prepackaging system, but eventually found it was simpler to package the items manually, using a small tray and plastic bags. "It wasn't difficult at all," he recounts. "We just had to add some extra

hours to compensate for the time it takes the staff to package all the meals."

Penny Parham agrees that the vending machines haven't added a significant amount of work for her site teams: "They were already making the wraps and the salads. It was just a matter of adding the milk and sides—such as fruit or carrot sticks—into a bag with the meal."

In both districts, the extra labor time has been worth it. "In almost all of the schools that we've done it, it's increased participation," reports Bordeau. "In the biggest district I have, we installed three machines. Each machine holds 96 meals and we sell out *every day*. Plus, we still offer meals on the serving line, and the meal counts there haven't gone down. We've increased participation by about 300 breakfasts a day since adding the vending machines."

In Miami, vended meals brought a participation increase of roughly 25% right after installation. Parham cautions that some of this increase can be attributed to a broader effort to improve the reach of reimbursable meals throughout the district. "We had a policy at the time that any point of service *had* to offer reimbursable meal combinations; we weren't just selling a la carte."

Jessica Shelly also reports encouraging results. The year before the reimbursable vending machines were installed, breakfast participation was 18%; the year after installation, participation had jumped to 30%. Now, about six years into the effort, it's almost doubled at 34%. Vending has attracted new customers to the school meals program. In part, she says, it's because the breakfasts are available throughout the morning, so it gives students who missed it in the morning a second chance after classes have begun.

## MAKE THE CASE

Inspired to investigate reimbursable vending in your own district? Bordeau says it's important to do your research and get buy-in from district administrators up-front. It might be a hurdle to get some stakeholders past the assumption that vending machines must mean

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candy and soda. Be very upfront about the menu items you will include, he advises. It's also helpful to go into discussions armed with data, solutions to potential problems (like trash) and concrete benefits. For example, since Bordeau was intending to use reimbursable vending to increase breakfast participation, he focused his case on the many benefits of the morning meal to students—and on providing an option that was easy and didn't delay the school day.

When it comes to getting buy-in from your own team, Shelly cautions that the introduction of reimbursable vending involves an inevitable learning curve. "I think you have to give yourself and your staff some grace time to learn as you go. Things are going to go wrong; you're going to run out of certain items; you're going to figure out what works," she notes.

Don't hesitate to use the testimonials of Bordeau, Colson, Parham and Shelly as further evidence in making the case for change. Parham doesn't mince words: "I think that the machines are wonderful. If you can increase access, why not do it?" **SN**

*Patrick White is a freelance writer based in Middlesex, Vt., and a former assistant editor of this publication. Photos are courtesy of the four districts featured in this article.*

**BONUS** WEB CONTENT

**Pushing All the Buttons**

In this month's exclusive online extras, district directors reflect on the attraction of "cool" technology with students and cite the factors they applied in equipment purchase decisions.

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