

5 — SLMP

This section summarizes guidance from the SLMP cadre team and SLMP schools to help other schools be successful with implementing Smarter Lunchrooms. It includes lessons the learned from the experiences of the six SLMP schools.

From January 2014 through June 2015, the CSDE conducted the SLMP in six Connecticut schools, as part of a 2013 Team Nutrition grant from the USDA. The purpose of the SLMP was to identify effective strategies for changing the cafeteria environment to positively influence students' daily food choices, and make them more consistent with the 2010 *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*.

SLMP Schools

- **Bennie Dover Middle School**, New London (Grades 6-8)
- **CREC International Magnet School**, South Windsor (Grades K-5)
- **Cutler Middle School**, Groton (Grades 6-8)
- **East Hampton Middle School**, East Hampton (Grades 6-8)
- **Illing Middle School**, Manchester (Grades 7-8)
- **New London High School**, New London (Grades 9-12)

The CSDE implemented the SLMP in collaboration with the University of Connecticut's Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity, and Cornell's B.E.N. Center. The Rudd Center conducted plate waste collections and SLMP data analysis. The B.E.N. Center provided training and technical support on Smarter Lunchrooms implementation.

The CSDE selected the pilot schools through a competitive application process. Each school received a \$5,000 stipend to support implementation of the SLMP, and complete all required activities. A team of two Smarter Lunchrooms cadre members helped each pilot school assess the cafeteria operations, and develop and implement local Smarter Lunchrooms strategies.

The CSDE and Rudd Center collected data at baseline (spring 2014) and during the intervention year (school year 2014-15). For information on the SLMP results, see the CSDE's [*Report on Connecticut's Smarter Lunchrooms Makeover Pilot*](#).



ADVICE FROM THE SLMP CADRE TEAM

While all pilot schools made positive changes to improve the cafeteria and promote healthy choices for students, the Smarter Lunchrooms strategies and extent of implementation varied across schools. During their work with the pilot schools, the SLMP cadre team observed several key elements that contributed to success with implementing and sustaining Smarter Lunchrooms. These elements are summarized below.

- **The food service director and cafeteria manager are fully committed to Smarter Lunchrooms implementation.** Pilot schools were most successful when the food service director and cafeteria manager:
 - provided strong leadership, specific guidance and ongoing support;
 - involved food service staff in all phases of the Smarter Lunchroom makeover;
 - provided ongoing education and training for all food service staff;
 - promoted positive attitudes, suggestive selling and strong customer service;
 - facilitated ongoing communication about Smarter Lunchrooms between all food service staff, including site production and office staff; and
 - regularly assessed how well the cafeteria was implementing Smarter Lunchrooms strategies, and if they were working.

The leadership of the food service director and cafeteria manager determined how food service staff responded to the changes, and in turn, the staff's success at implementing and maintaining them.



- **The food service staff believes in and supports the Smarter Lunchrooms principles.** When staff understands the importance of Smarter Lunchrooms, they are more committed to making and sustaining the changes. For information on building staff support, see [“Step 5 — Educate and Train School Staff”](#) in section 2.

- **Building administrators believe in and support the Smarter Lunchrooms principles.** Administrative support emphasizes the importance of school meals, and promotes a positive message to the entire school community. For information on building administrative support, see “[Step 5 — Educate and Train School Staff](#)” in section 2.
- **The food service staff consistently implements Smarter Lunchrooms strategies over time.** Paying attention to details helps sustain the positive changes throughout the school year. Some examples from the pilot schools include:
 - providing attractively prepared foods that are always highly visible and convenient, such as using clear containers for grab-and-go meals, yogurt parfaits and entree salads, and tiered display stands for fruits and vegetables;
 - continually restocking foods throughout the meal service so the serving lines look as good for the last child as they did for the first;
 - replacing signage and posters as soon as they are torn or worn out;
 - regularly rotating cafeteria signage, posters and nutrition education messages on bulletin boards; and
 - training food service substitutes on how to implement Smarter Lunchrooms strategies when regular staff members are absent.



Tiered POS fruit and vegetable display at Bennie Dover Jackson Middle School

This attention to detail and consistency of implementation is critical to developing and maintaining a positive and pleasant cafeteria environment that meets students’ expectations every day. For information on the principles for improving eating behaviors, see [section 3](#). For information on strategies for success, see [section 4](#).

- **The cafeteria regularly collaborates with school groups, community programs and nutrition organizations.** School collaborations that support, enhance and promote Smarter Lunchrooms encourage success. Some examples from the pilot schools include classroom-cafeteria nutrition education, PTO partnerships, Farm to School, FoodCorps, Fuel Up to Play 60 and Cooking Matters. For information on developing collaborations, see [section 2](#).

ADVICE FROM THE PILOT SCHOOLS

At the end of the project, the pilot schools completed a survey about their perceptions of the successes, benefits and challenges of implementing Smarter Lunchrooms, including reactions of students, school staff and parents. They also provided guidance to help other schools be successful with implementing Smarter Lunchrooms strategies. Their responses are summarized below.

Successes

What successes did you have with implementing Smarter Lunchrooms in the pilot school?

- Overall, the process went smoothly. The most noticeable success was the increased consumption of fresh fruits.
- Site food service staff was positive and cooperative throughout the grant, and has a good working knowledge of the Smarter Lunchrooms principles. They saw student behaviors change as we implemented the strategies, and appreciated that they were part of an important program improvement project.
- Our success was that participation for breakfast and lunch jumped up. The other success we had was replicating the SLMP at three other schools, and seeing the same increases in participation. Smarter Lunchrooms does work!
- The students seemed to be taking more fruits and vegetables, and they liked the new baskets and bowls for display.
- We feel that students were taking more fruits and vegetables. They commented that the serving line looked very nice. The students also responded very well to the grab-and-go station.
- Students are eating more fruits and vegetables.



Fruit and vegetable selections on the serving line at Bennie Dover Jackson Middle School

Benefits

What benefits do you see in the pilot school's cafeteria as a result of implementing Smarter Lunchrooms?

- Strategically offering healthy options can influence students' food selections.
- The food service staff is informed about Smarter Lunchrooms strategies, and is able to consider additional changes in the future. The rest of the school community is more willing to collaborate with the food service program on activities and events. Throughout the pilot, we collaborated with the PTO to conduct monthly taste tests for new healthy vegetable side dishes. One class made a tasting suggestion based on a book they were reading in their world culture lesson. All teachers assisted in sending monthly tasting recipes and activity sheets home with students. Students are much more likely to arrive at the POS with a reimbursable meal on the tray, and to consume the foods they have selected.
- Students are getting a greater variety of more appealing fruits and vegetables in a healthier environment!
- Students are participating in the lunch program, and taking the hot lunch. Students appreciated the a la carte station being moved away from the lunch line, so it does not crowd the end of the service area.
- We see more students taking hot lunch and participating in the lunch program. Students appreciate the convenience of the grab-and-go meals.
- Students are open to trying the fruits and vegetables. The new posters and display items spruce up the kitchen and cafeteria.



Healthy meals grab-and-go cart at East Hampton Middle School

Challenges

What challenges did you have with implementing Smarter Lunchrooms in the pilot school, and how did you overcome them?

- Our initial challenge was getting the cafeteria staff to buy in and use suggestive selling to encourage students to take more healthy choices. This was resolved after the cafeteria staff saw the students' reactions, and realized that suggestive selling and the other Smarter Lunchrooms strategies worked.
- One of our key leadership team members became ill and was absent for most of the grant. We restructured responsibilities, and adjusted some activities and timelines to accommodate this challenge.
- The cafeteria manager was not completely sold on the Smarter Lunchrooms concepts, and was not particularly supportive of site staff as they moved through the implementation changes. As a result, we did not have a great deal of follow-up action on our activity successes, such as actually putting tasting foods on the regular menu rotation, or adding a more diverse variety of bundled meals. We worked directly with site staff whenever possible to encourage them, and provide assistance and support with the SLMP action plan.
- Our only challenge was trying to get the right trays and equipment, and making sure it met the grant requirements. * The SLMP cadre team was very helpful in terms of support and suggestions. Challenges were minimal.
- Food service staff buy-in was difficult when it came to implementation. Working on making small changes and providing ample staff training helped.
- The challenge we faced was getting all food service staff to buy in to the Smarter Lunchrooms principles. We wanted all staff to be on board, so we held multiple trainings and led by example for some of the strategies.
- We were unsuccessful trying to get a mural on the cafeteria wall. It was very difficult to find someone to paint the mural at a fair price, and it was too big of an undertaking for the art classes.
- We did not experience any challenges.



Grab-and-go salad meals at Illing Middle School in Manchester

* USDA Team Nutrition requirements prohibited grant funds from being spent on food service equipment, such as refrigerators, food processors, pots and utensils. Only certain small display and merchandising equipment were allowable, such as menu boards, signage, bowls and baskets.

Student Reactions

Describe the reactions of students to the Smarter Lunchrooms changes in the cafeteria.

- Our changes were not drastic, so the students were not extremely surprised. Students responded the most to our new serving line of grab-and-go healthy meal choices.
- Students loved the posters placed in the serving lines and outside in the cafeteria. Students in the aftercare program created nutrition-based artwork that was displayed in the dining area. This created a great deal of excitement and conversation.
- The new bundled cold entree meals are very popular, and account for almost 30 percent of total daily reimbursable meals.
- The new colorful menu board was a conversation piece with students, in addition to the main goal of advertising daily meal choices.
- Students were thrilled, and commented on the variety and appearance of food choices.
- Students liked the additions of the grab-and-go cart, and all the new signage.



Parent Reactions

Describe the reactions of parents/families to the Smarter Lunchrooms changes in the cafeteria.

- We did not notice many reactions from parents.
- The PTO volunteers were very supportive of the program changes, and pleased with the selection of monthly tasting items. They appreciated the efforts of the food service program to provide healthier foods and positive ways to engage with students.
- We had pictures at our open houses to show parents how much more nutritious the meals have become, and what we are doing for their students' health. The SLMP showed them that as a district we care, and go the extra mile!
- Parents did not have much of a reaction.
- There was not much of a reaction from parents and families. While we did notify parents that the changes were happening, they did not really respond.
- They were impressed.

Staff Reactions

Describe the reactions of school staff to the Smarter Lunchrooms changes in the cafeteria.

- School staff members were impressed with the grab-and-go line.
- The building staff was very supportive of the changes made during the pilot. They gained a great deal more respect for the challenges of food service staff, and their commitment to food service program improvement. Teachers were receptive to our request to hand out monthly nutrition education activity sheets and recipes for students to take home. Teachers and dining room monitors were good role models for tasting new foods, and being positive about trying new foods.
- Staff participation has increased by 20 percent, and their comments have been very favorable.
- School staff members were receptive to the changes, and appreciated some of the display bowls and baskets used.
- The school staff appreciates some of the changes but others went unnoticed. Our staff responded to the grab-and-go line, and some of the nicer serving and display containers.
- Same comments as the students.



Advice for Other Schools

What advice would you give to other schools to help them be successful with implementing Smarter Lunchrooms strategies?

- Approach Smarter Lunchrooms with an open mind. Listen to suggestions and be willing to make adjustments as you go.
- It is very important to have everyone truly on board with the goals of Smarter Lunchrooms, from top administrators to daily production staff. Our cafeteria manager did not really support the Smarter Lunchrooms concepts or the proposed changes for the SLMP. This attitude was felt by site staff, and although they were committed themselves, we felt we had to work around instead of with the manager.
- Encourage food service staff not to get discouraged during the early days of implementation. Daily work routines are different, and staff needs some time to rework their production routines and timing. Let them know they can look forward to positive reactions from students and staff, which helps get past the adjustment period.
- It is important to continue the implementation changes and be attentive to details such as rotating signage. This is critical in sustaining the positive changes that initially resulted from the Smarter Lunchrooms action plan.
- Before beginning the SLMP, we thought the work would be more challenging than it actually was. The changes are worth the kitchen staff's effort.
- Make improvements slowly, and provide a lot of training to all staff members who are responsible for implementing the strategies. Be consistent with the changes so that students know what to expect.
- Be patient with the food service staff, and make small changes along the way instead of doing too much at once.
- Be flexible.



Fruit choices at Illing Middle School in Manchester

