

Serving Supper after School

This district serves its students supper with a side of afterschool activities.

By Ali Mehanti and Elvira Michalek



Students in J. Sterling Morton High School District 201 in Cicero, Illinois, are less likely to go hungry now that the district serves supper at school.

The district, which operates three large high schools in the Chicago metropolitan area with a large free and reduced-price population, is taking advantage of the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 program to serve its students supper and provide a safe place for afterschool activities. The act, a provision of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), gave schools that are located in low-income areas and that participate in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) an opportunity to provide meals as part of afterschool programs in “high-risk” areas.

The USDA administers and provides funding for food and nutrition services in general, including the NSLP and the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP). Although both are federally funded entitlement programs, they are separate nutritional programs for children that carry their own sets of regulations. Each state is assigned the task of administering those programs through a designated state agency. In Illinois, both programs are part of the Nutrition Services Division of the Illinois State Board of Education.

Qualifying Requirements

Schools that want to participate in the afterschool meal program must meet specific guidelines:

1. They must have on file at least 50% approved household applications for free or reduced-price meals. All the schools in J. Sterling Morton District 201 are located in high-risk communities; districtwide, 92% of enrolled students are eligible for subsidized meals through the NSLP.

2. Schools must have afterschool programs that provide educational or enrichment activities to youth in an organized, structured, and supervised environment. An afterschool program that includes supervised athletic activity as one of its educational or enrichment activities could be eligible to participate. Organized athletic programs that participate only in interscholastic or community-level competitive sports may participate only if the at-risk supper program approval is already based on a qualifying enrichment program.

Students would not normally have the opportunity for a supper break until after they leave school after 7:00 p.m.

J. Sterling Morton District 201 runs a night school program at one of its school buildings. Students attend regular day classes and are enrolled in the night school program for academic credit recovery and academic enrichment. Those students would not normally have the opportunity for a supper break until after they leave school after 7:00 p.m.

3. After an initial site assessment by the school food service department, financial estimates set a break-even point for participation at 110 students. Night school enrollment at the Morton West High School campus was 158 students; other afterschool programs, including athletics, increased potential participation to 400 students. Based on those considerations, the school district chose the Morton West campus as the site to launch an 11-week pilot for its at-risk supper program.

Application and Approval

The USDA recently made efforts to streamline the requirements for schools in low-income areas that have an existing NSLP program in place. But school meal programs are funded and administered through the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) at the state level, and states have their own systems for processing CACFP applications and interpreting the requirements. An addendum to an existing NSLP agreement may be considerably more complicated than a simple agreement.

The USDA requires state agencies to review applications and notify school food authorities (SFAs) within 30 days of the completed application. A preliminary agency review of the application is conducted, and state

agencies may take additional steps to ensure that the new sponsors are fully compliant and functional.

The Illinois State Board of Education's regulations required a new-site preapproval visit, which is not a USDA requirement. The Morton West campus is in compliance with USDA's NSLP guidelines and serves an average of 3,000 lunches daily. In addition, 58% of the students are eligible for free or reduced-price meals. During the preapproval visit, the state inspectors found the site fully compliant and capable of running an at-risk supper program.

Budget and Administration

Schools participating in the NSLP are not required to have a budget and a management plan. However, a budget pro forma is a useful planning tool to determine financial viability. In Illinois, a budget model worksheet is available through the Nutrition Division of the Illinois State Board of Education.

Funding is based on participation, and supper is free to all students up to age 18. Sponsors receive a per-meal reimbursement based on USDA annual fixed rates for school-based nutrition programs (fiscal year 2013–2014 reimbursement is \$2.93 per meal). The higher rates for school-based child nutrition programs for severe need and the six-cent certification do not apply to afterschool meal programs.

Individual state agencies also manage commodity food programs for child nutrition programs and must determine if an SFA prefers commodity food entitlements or cash in lieu of commodities. Illinois, for example, has received USDA approval to provide an additional commodity reimbursement of 23.25 cents per meal (planned assistance level for FY 2013–2014). Those combined rates are meant to cover food costs for each meal served and to meet the NLSLP meal pattern guidelines.

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At-risk supper is a separate federally funded nutritional assistance entitlement program. As such, the program is not permitted to run a profit. In the best-case scenario, it will break even, but most likely the program will actually operate at a loss. Meal reimbursements may not cover all associated costs, including those for supplies, labor, and administration. Additionally, administrative costs may not exceed 15% of monthly revenue from meal reimbursements.

Administrative capability and program accountability go hand in hand. The SFA must maintain separate program records for CACFP to document compliance with all program requirements. All funds and expenses associated with an at-risk supper program are kept separately from other programs.

To maintain integrity and accountability, J. Sterling Morton District 201 uses a separate chart of accounts and food orders for the supper program. That procedure ensures that all expenses incurred are assigned to the correct program account, and it helps maintain proper financial accountability. Record-keeping forms are available through the Illinois State Board of Education's website for the CAFCP program for labor, cash disbursements, and a monthly profit-and-loss statement. Although the SFA is not required to use those forms, the SFA must have a system in place to track those costs monthly.

Menu and Operations

Meals prepared at Morton West High School follow the same age-appropriate meal-pattern requirements used for the lunch program. Menu planning is based on a 10-day cycle, and foods are selected for quick and easy batch cooking to allow for unexpected participation fluctuations. The menu includes daily side salad offerings and allows for the selection of a variety of foods. Unlike the lunch program, choices are limited to one entrée for the supper program.

Written menus are posted with all food offerings and are kept on file, along with standardized recipes, child nutrition labels, and product labels for purchased processed foods. Although CAFCP does not require daily production records, maintaining such records is an excellent way to track food from production to participation.

The meal-count procedure for an at-risk supper is similar to that of the USDA's Summer Food Service Program. Daily tally sheets track meals served; meals must be counted at the point of service. Students are not identified by eligibility status because all meals are free. However, an edit check for daily attendance must be conducted to compare with actual meals served.

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Morton West High School was challenged in trying to track and consolidate attendance for the many after-school programs. To solve that problem, cafeteria staff asked students to sign a daily attendance roster in the cafeteria when they came to supper. To make the process easier, the school recently added supper to its meal-tracking software program. Students sign in by scanning

their IDs; now, meal counts and attendance can be taken in one step.

A participation report from the meal service software program is generated at the end of the meal service, and the information is entered into a financial spreadsheet that tracks participation, calculates reimbursements, records expenses, and creates the monthly profit-and-loss report. That participation report helps the school district manage the monthly record-keeping procedures required by CAFCP.

Factors for Success

Three key factors create a successful at-risk supper program: (1) know where a need exists, (2) have the vision to create a successful meal program that students enjoy, and (3) understand the importance of accountability and compliance with federal funding guidelines.

As a new sponsor for an at-risk supper program, officials at J. Sterling Morton District 201 worked closely with the state agency to ensure they understood all the rules and regulations for the Child and Adult Care Food Program. It helped that the district was already participating in the National School Lunch Program.

It is important for school food agencies that are interested in participating in CAFCP to understand all the USDA requirements and how individual governing state agencies apply the following rules:

- Eligibility documentation
- Meal-count procedures
- Claims for reimbursements
- Menus and meal service
- Revenue and expense record keeping
- Training and civil rights requirements
- Sanitation and food safety

At the end of the school day when lunch is long over, students who participate in after-school activities now have a healthier option than empty-calorie snacks from vending machines. Based on feedback, we believe our students are very happy with the supper program. It helps the school district strengthen the value of after-school programs and provides a nourishing academic advantage for students.

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