School Nutrition Environment and Services

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) lists *Nutrition Environment and Services* as one of the 10 components of the Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child (WSCC) model. Nutrition environment and services refers to:

- The foods and beverages that are available to students throughout the school day.
- Information and messages about food, beverages, and nutrition that students encounter on school grounds.

A healthy school nutrition environment makes it easier for students to make healthy choices by giving them access to nutritious and appealing foods and beverages, consistent and accurate messages about good nutrition, and ways to learn about and practice healthy eating. All individuals in the school community support a healthy school nutrition environment by marketing and promoting healthier foods and beverages, encouraging participation in the school meal programs, role-modeling healthy eating behaviors, and ensuring that students have access to free drinking water throughout the school day. Within a healthy school nutrition environment, school nutrition services provide meals that meet federal nutrition standards for the National School Lunch and School Breakfast programs, accommodate the health and nutrition needs of all students, and help ensure that foods and beverages sold outside of the school meal programs (i.e., competitive foods) meet Smart Snacks in School nutrition standards (CDC, 2019).

Access to nutritious and affordable meals throughout the school day is essential for students to gain full benefit from the education provided. School meals are the lunches and breakfasts served through the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program. These meals must meet federal nutrition standards set by the US Department of Agriculture (USDA). The standards require a variety of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains; set limits on saturated fat, added sugars, and sodium; and set both minimum and maximum calorie levels. All students can participate in school meal programs, and some students are eligible to receive free or reduced-price meals.

School Meal Programs are administered at the federal level by the USDA. At the state level, the NC Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI), Office of School Nutrition administers the programs and local school food authorities (SFAs) operate these programs within their schools. Using USDA federal nutrition standards, local School Nutrition Administrators (SNAs) determine which foods to serve and how they are to be prepared.

Sometimes, children require meal modifications that diverge from the School Meal Programs meal patterns. Schools must make substitutions in meals and afterschool snacks for students who are considered to have a disability under 7 CFR 15b.3 and whose disability restricts their diet. In order to receive federal reimbursement for modified meals that do not meet the program meal pattern requirements, school food authorities must require a written medical statement signed by a state recognized medical authority (licensed physician, physician assistant or nurse practitioner) and the parent/guardian. The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction School Nutrition Services provides this form, ***Medical Statement for Students with Unique Mealtime Needs for School Meals***, for local personnel to use**.** The medical statement must include information about the

student's physical or mental impairment, how it restricts the student's diet, an explanation of what must be done to accommodate the student's needs, and the food or foods to be omitted with recommended substitutions. In other cases, more information may be required. For example, if the child requires caloric modifications or the substitution of a liquid nutritive formula to accommodate a disability, this information must be included in the statement.

A child's modification request extends to any food items and ingredients offered to the child. When accommodating a student's food allergy, no food item offered to the student may contain traces of substances that may trigger an allergic reaction. For example, if a student has a peanut allergy, no foods served to the student may contain peanuts or include peanuts as an ingredient. This means food labels or specifications on food items must be checked for allergens before they can be served to a student with a known allergy. School food authorities must also provide the student with a safe environment in which to consume the meal. This includes ensuring proper storage, preparation, and cleaning techniques are used to prevent exposure to allergens through cross contamination and may involve preparing a separate meal "from scratch" using ingredients allowed on the modified diet rather than serving a meal using processed foods. Common food allergies include milk, eggs, fish, crustacean shellfish, tree nuts, peanuts, wheat and soy products.

School nurses can play critical roles in the WSCC Component of *Nutrition Environment and Services*. They may:

- raise awareness among parents and students of the benefit of school meals and help to promote uptake of the services,
- alert parents and students (especially teens) to the criteria for school meals and support eligible families in their applications,
- ensure a whole school approach is being used,
- work within school-based teams in creating safe and supportive school environments for addressing nutrition and physical activity and decreasing weight stigma,
- provide essential coordination and referrals for students with special health care needs (including unique mealtime needs and food insecurity needs),
- provide case management services (in coordination with other professionals, the student and families) for children with nutrition-related conditions (e.g. diabetes, food allergies, disordered eating, underweight, obesity, etc.),
- serve as members of the multidisciplinary team serving students with 504 accommodation plans and Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) to ensure that nutrition is being addressed. For example, in this role school nurses collaborate with school nutrition staff, other school staff, parents, the recognized medical authorities and other health care professionals to obtain the ***Medical Statement for Students with Unique Mealtime Needs for School Meals***, and
- serve as members of the School Health Advisory Council (SHAC) to promote greater access to healthier foods and beverages by students. This includes the school cafeteria, vending machines, grab & go kiosks, school stores and snack bars, concession stands, classroom rewards, classroom celebrations, and fundraisers.

In the case of students needing assistive technology in order to obtain nutrition, school nurses work to obtain the licensed health care provider orders, and in many cases, train school staff to provide

the feedings through alternative routes. The school nurse troubleshoots issues related to these alternative routes. In complex cases, the student may need the assistance of a one-to-one care giver. Other school personnel with whom the school nurse collaborates for a student to obtain appropriate nutrition includes the speech-language pathologist, occupational therapist, registered dietitian, school nutrition administrators and school cafeteria staff, teachers and teaching assistants. For assistance in assuring a student's nutritional needs are met during the school day, school nurses should first engage their SFA school nutrition administrator. For additional assistance SFA Directories can be found on the NCDPI School Nutrition website under the Contact Information resource tab.

Resources

USDA National School Lunch Program: https://www.fns.usda.gov/nslp

NCDPI Office of School Nutrition: https://childnutrition.ncpublicschools.gov/

Reference

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *Comprehensive Framework for Addressing the School Nutrition Environment and Services.* Atlanta, GA: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; 2025. https://www.cdc.gov/school-nutrition/media/pdfs/2024/09/School_Nutrition_Framework_508tagged.pdf