K12 Food Service:
A Guide to Navigating the New Normal

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Introduction

School closures and social distancing measures have made a dramatic impact on K-12 nutrition departments. Foodservice staff members had to move away from the traditional cafeteria dining model and embrace a different type of service to make sure children had meals.

Some nutrition departments worked with their transportation department to set up a district-wide system of bus stops to deliver meals. Others set up online ordering with Grab-and-Go pick-ups. Still, others employ a drive-thru system.

The metamorphosis of school nutrition departments across the nation was swift and mighty, but there was no other option. Districts had to think fast to get students fed.

Nutrition professionals for schools know better than anyone that the only meals some students receive are the ones they eat at school. More than 11 million children live in food-insecure homes in the US, which could climb higher as people lost their jobs due to the economic impact of the pandemic.

There is a lot of uncertainty about how the upcoming school year will look. However, there is one certainty: students must eat. Learning environments have turned upside down. Yet, our nutrition departments are a steady constant.

How should nutrition directors plan to move forward with their programs when the future is uncertain? In this guide, you'll learn how to keep your nutrition program prosperous while serving delicious and wholesome meals in a new learning landscape.

1 Understanding the New Service Model

If the health and safety of students are always top-of-mind, it must be of the utmost priority in the upcoming school year. Can you imagine your cafeteria filled with students who are sitting shoulder-to-shoulder? In the current climate, it's unfathomable.

Even though schools will open again, what will persist is the sensitivity over proximity and cleanliness. Here are a few things to consider when planning your food service in the fall.

Matching Food Service to the Educational Model

Our students' education has changed in the blink of and eye.

Learning that used to occur at school now happens from a laptop at home. School food service also had to pivot to ensure children were getting the meals they needed by creating grab-and-go meal pick-ups or delivery.

For the 2020-2021 school year, many schools plan to combine distance and in-class learning to limit the total body count in school buildings. School nutrition departments will have to understand what the alternative model for education will be and diversify to feed their students.

Non-Congregate Feeding

There is a high possibility that learning will happen both on and off campus. Instead of driving all students through the cafeteria, meals will have to be served where your students are located. Here are some serving options to consider:

Classroom Service

Delivering meals right to your students' classrooms is an easy way to help students stay safe and fed. Use packaged items that are suitable for delivery to make it crazy easy on everyone.

Hot Spot Delivery

Work with your district's transportation department to set up delivery hot-spot locations at bus stops throughout the community. Alternatively, turn a school bus into a food truck and serve meals to students from various locations throughout your district.

Staggered Lunches

It's likely that your nutrition program already staggers its service, perhaps feeding individual grades in 30-minute intervals. Lunch intervals could be staggered further to keep a cap on the number of people in the cafeteria.

Scattered Points of Service

If you rely heavily on the sales of a la carte items, you may be nervous about the hit those numbers have taken. Consider setting up vending machines, kiosks, or food carts at various locations around the school. Students can grab quick, pre-packaged items without setting foot in the lunchroom, and your sales numbers will stay steady.

Collecting Payment Remotely

When planning for alternative food service, don't forget to consider how you'll track purchased meals. A remote POS system makes it easy to serve at various locations on or off-campus. The LINQ Nutrition POS is entirely mobile, integrates with vending machines, and works even when offline.

The Silver Lining

Your food service will look vastly different than it did in the years prior, but that can be a good thing! With the feeding options we mentioned, you're meeting your students where they are. Ultimately, this will increase program participation in the coming year.
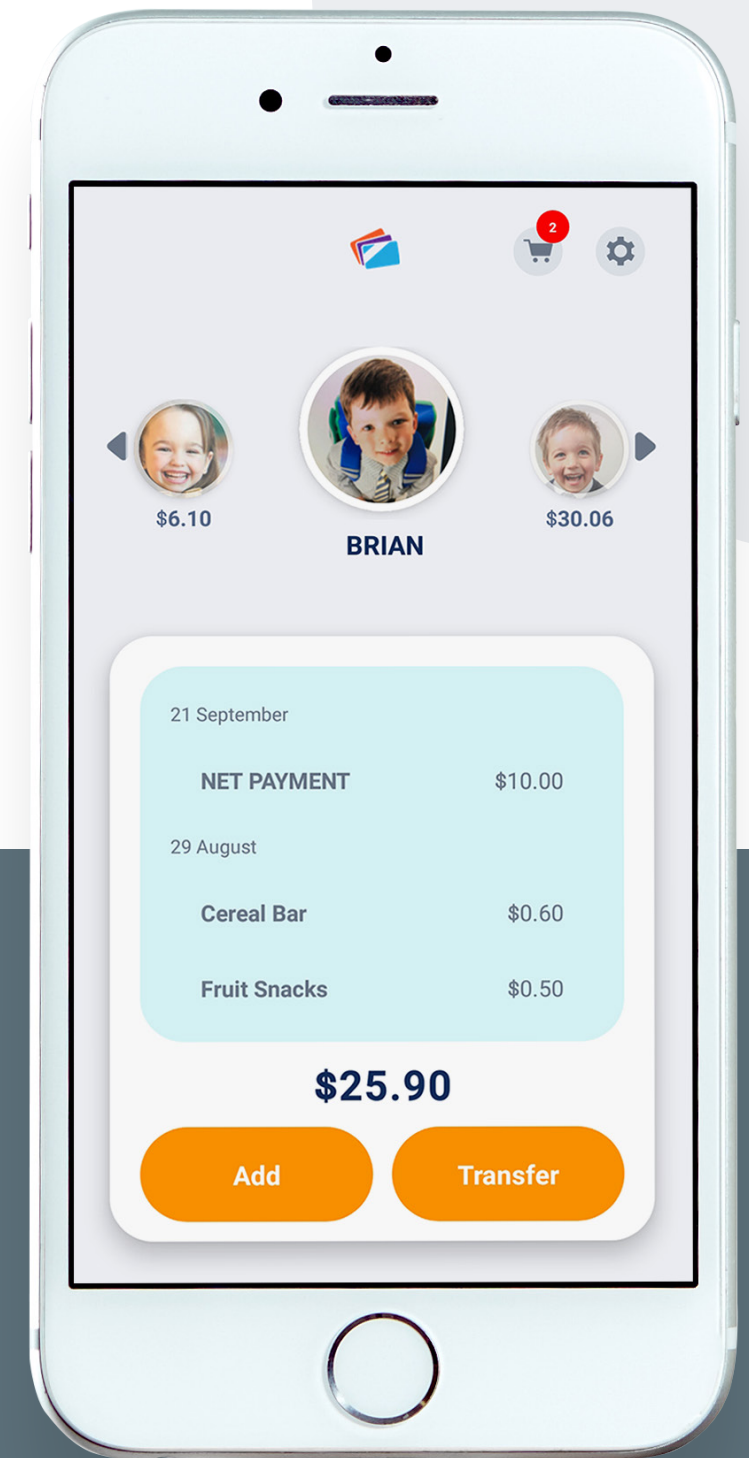
2 Make Your Marketing Efficient

Marketing can be a monumental challenge for nutrition programs, but it's a necessary evil if you want to boost participation. But it's important to communicate where students (or their parents) can get meals.

The problem is that you don't have time to create or manage massive marketing campaigns; your focus is on feeding your students. We get it. Here are a few ideas to make marketing your program a cinch.

Make Your Marketing Efficient

Communication Apps

If you need a fast and effective way to communicate when and where students can pick up meals, a communication app is the way to go.

The eSVShare app was built to help schools communicate messages on multiple channels with the push of a button. Users can send a single message as a text message, a push notification, to a website, as an email and on social media all at once.

Our Mobile Menu App also offers an easy way for students and parents to view your menus and nutrient information for products right from their smartphone.

Nutrition Program Website

Parents depend on the district website for up-to-date program information. Your nutrition site should do the same. Program information like where they can pick up meals, meal prices, menus, and free and reduced meal guidelines are essential. Also, consider adding nutritional components dealing with special diets, carbohydrate counts, food allergens, and others.
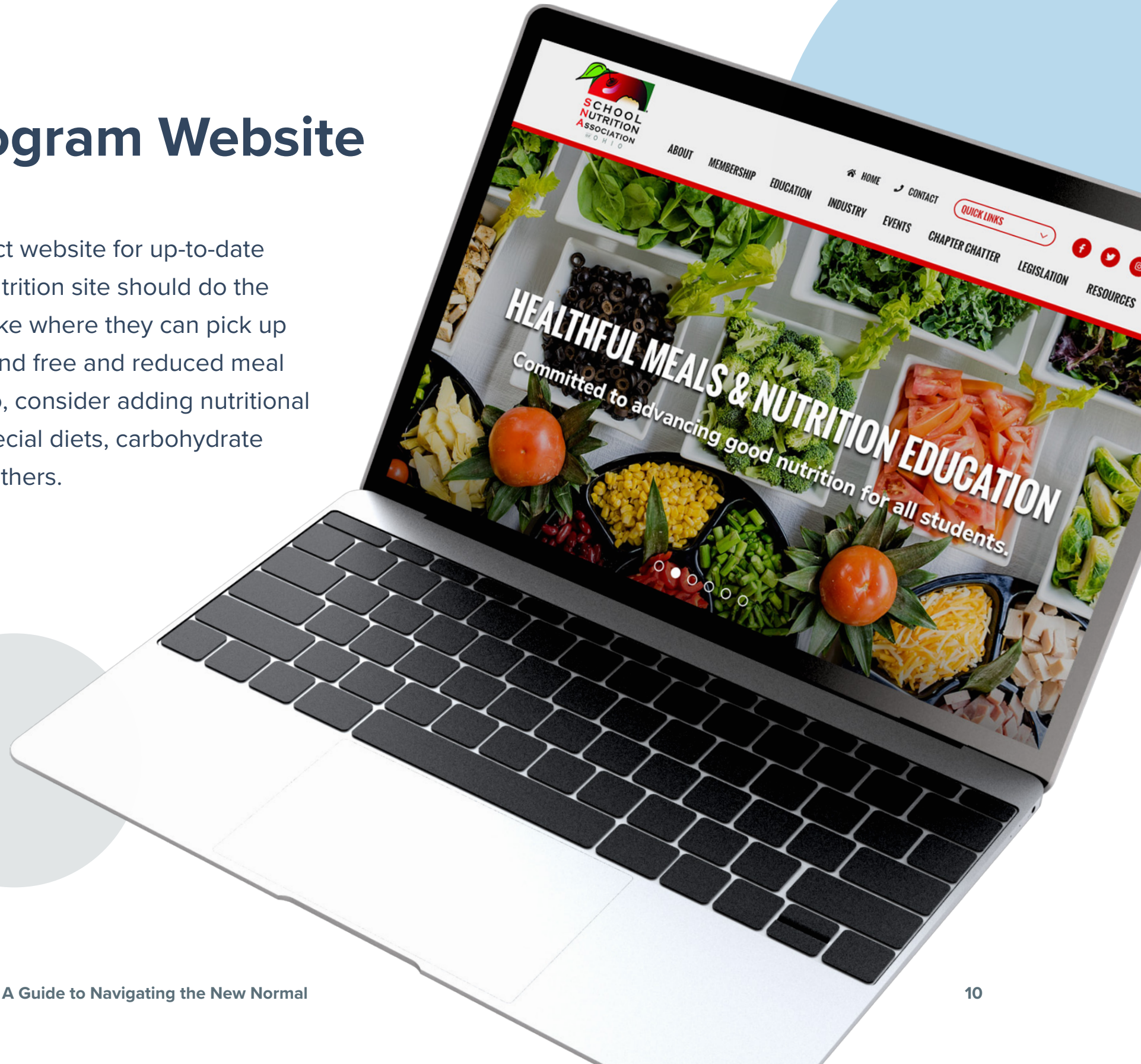
Engage with Students in a New Way

With remote learning, teachers hold Zoom meetings with students to keep in touch. Often, teachers invite ancillary staff (librarians, counselors, art teachers) to join so that their students have some variety.

Consider reaching out to teachers and ask to join a remote meeting with their class. You can use the opportunity to discuss nutrition and let them know where they can find meals.
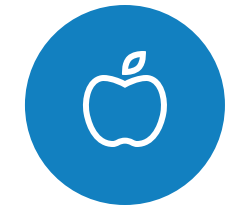
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Mobile Ordering: The Future of School Food Service

Though popular before social distancing, the use of online ordering apps for food delivery has exploded in recent months. It's also a trend that is gaining steam in nutrition departments across the US.

Offering an option to pre-order cafeteria meals comes with significant perks for everyone involved. Here are some things to consider.

For **Students**

Online ordering provides a more inclusive and interactive school meal experience:

Early menu access so families can plan accordingly

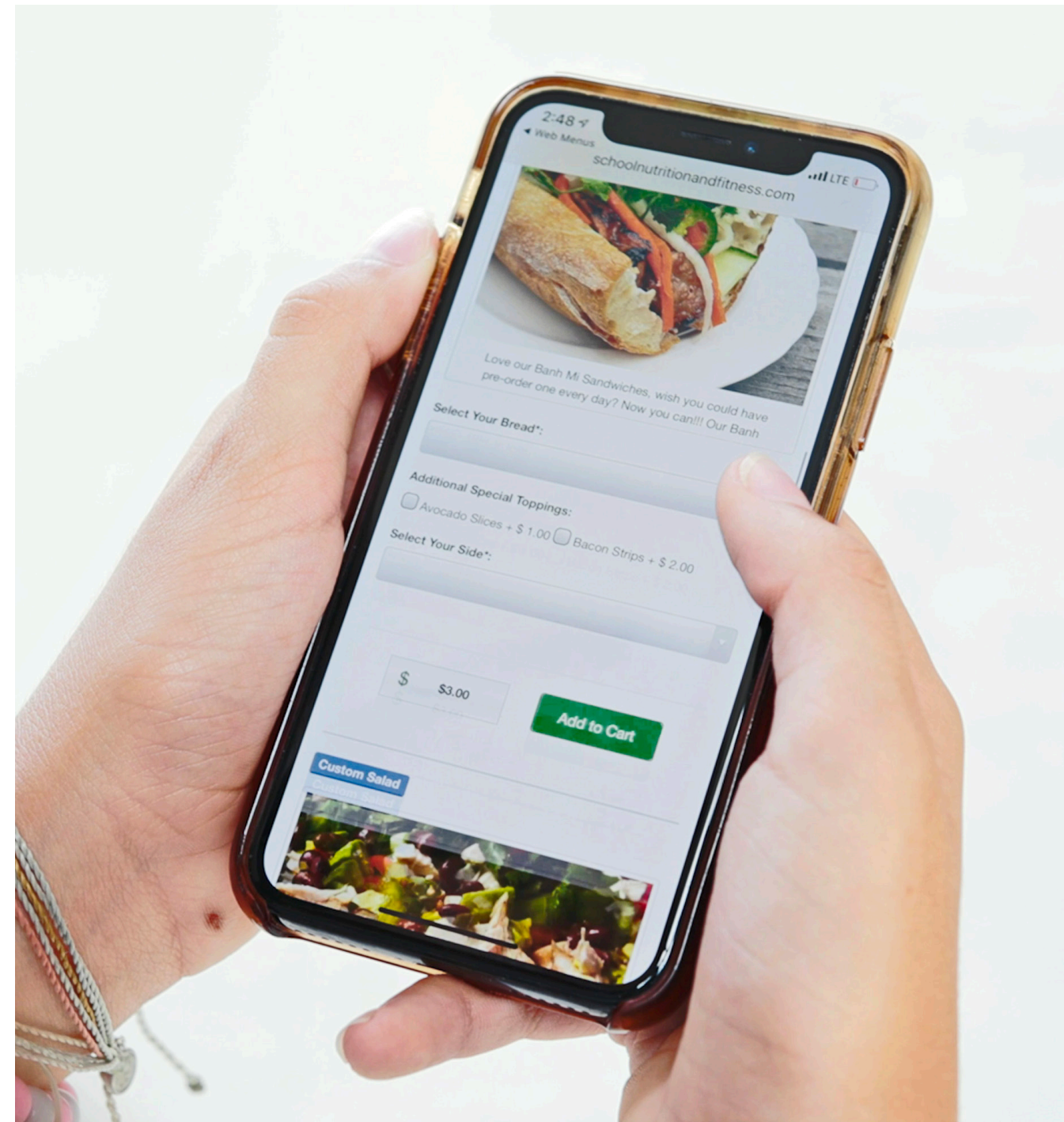**Transparency so that parents know what their children are eating**

Secure online payment options with automatic reminders

Customizable meals for dietary purposes or personal preferences

Less time or no time waiting reduces congregating lines

For **Nutrition Departments**

With online ordering, you too reap the benefits:

Increased student participation

Accurate meal counts

Easy inventory management

Reduced meal debt from online payments

Pre-ordered meals for advanced prep

Shorter lunch lines and faster service both help facilitate distanced service.

4 Eliminate Paper for Good

You are already in the process of evolving your nutrition program. You've learned how to continue food service during an unprecedented world event. Perhaps now is the time to make your program greener by eliminating paper.

Paper is a costly staple in most schools, both in terms of dollars and its environmental impact. The average school spends roughly **$25,000** per year on paper, and nutrition programs utilize around **9.5%** of their annual budget for outsourced services like printing. That's a considerable chunk of change. But what about the environmental impact of paper usage in schools?

At least **40%** of the waste generated by a typical school is composed of paper. Paper is the most significant component of all school waste. Also, **900 million** trees are cut down each year for paper and pulp mills in the US alone.

With numbers like that, it's easy to see why eliminating its usage as much as possible has enormous benefits. From cash to Free and Reduced applications, eliminating paper will save you money and make you more efficient while decreasing your environmental impact.

Production Records

You already know the importance of accurate FPRs; the information included helps you get reimbursed for meals, build menus, maximize your food costs, and stay compliant.

> *If you're still using paper forms and filling by hand, you don't have to.*

Tools like LINQ Nutrition make it possible to move your FPRs to the cloud, and provide easy access before and after service. We save you time by automatically generating and publishing to each site upon menu assignment. You can view production records in real time and check the status of your site's production calendars.

Cash Handling

Yes - accepting cash payments is convenient. The issues arise when you have to count the money, make a deposit, and send it to the bank. Also, cash isn't exactly sanitary.

> *If you want to focus on cleanliness and make payments even more manageable, start accepting online payments.*

Online payments make it easy for parents to pay for meals ahead of time. They can get reminders (no more paper reminders!) through push notifications and emails that help parents know when it's time to add money or their account is negative. These reminders help to drive down school meal debt, too.
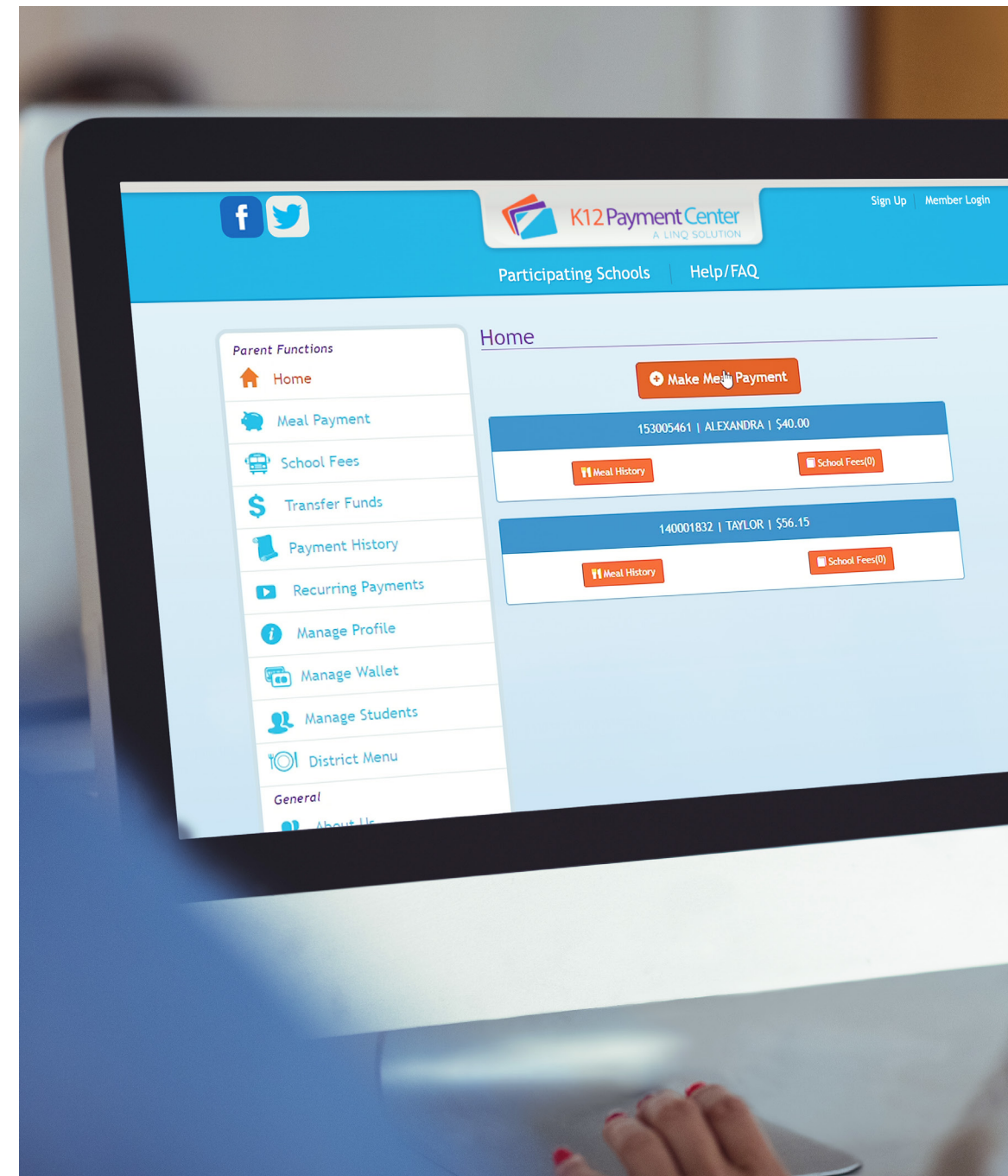
Free and Reduced Applications

Did you know digital forms are **40%** faster to fill out than paper forms? They are quick to fill out, but also families are more likely to submit digital forms earlier since they are accessible from any device with wi-fi. On top of that, online forms are more accurate than paper forms.

LINQ Nutrition allows you to offer online forms for Free and Reduced and helps you to deliver notification letters faster with email notifications.

Want to save more time on Free and Reduced? Consider adding rolling verifications to your process. LINQ Nutrition makes it possible to set your sampling dates and automatically replace families in the sample who have withdrawn enrollment from the district. Rolling verifications decrease the administrative workload for school districts while increasing the response rate.
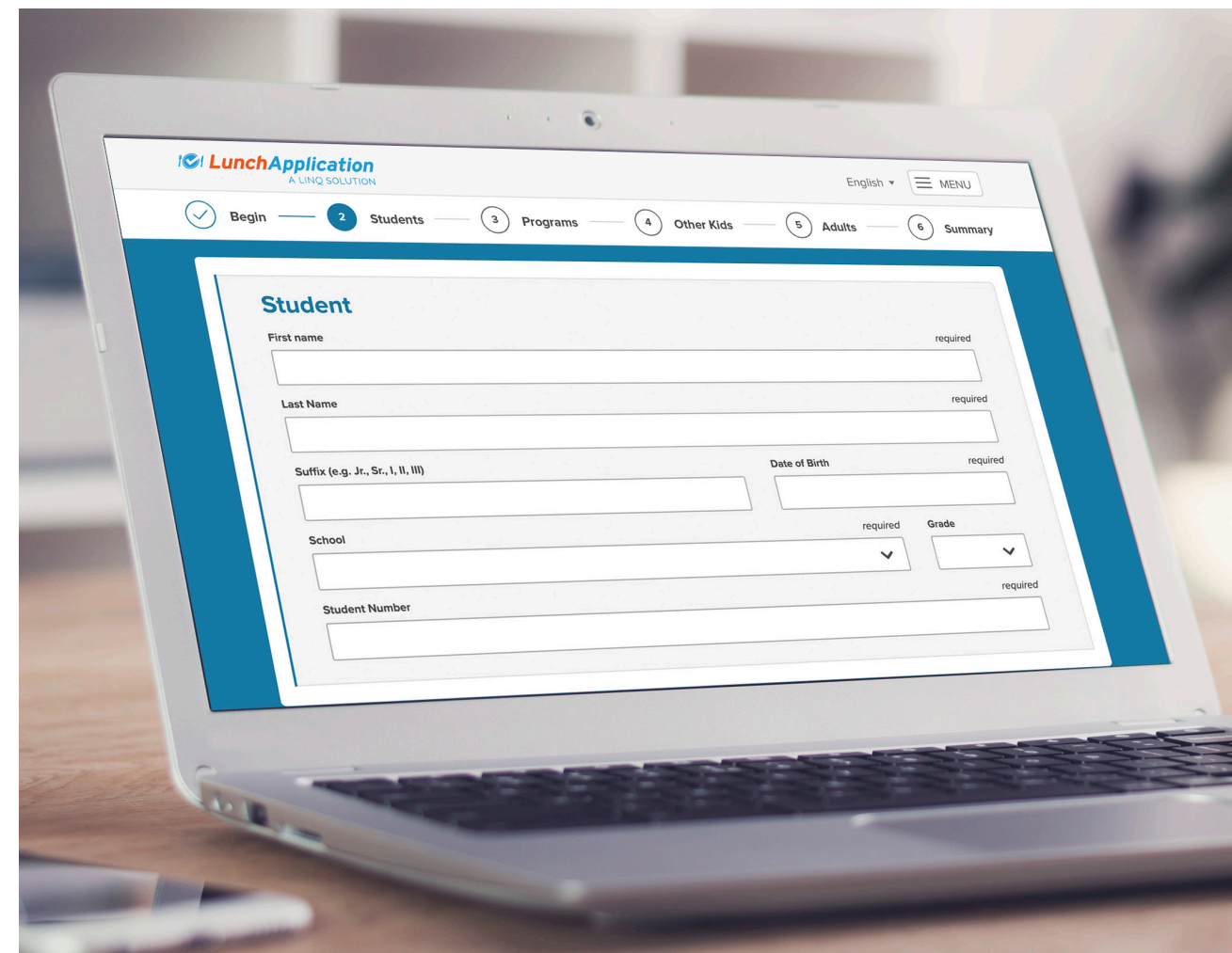
5 Evolving Your Nutrition Program

The new ways of feeding students are laying the groundwork for the months to come. Summer feeding programs will also be a testing ground for innovative ways to serve your students. By the time the 2020-2021 school year begins, you're sure to be well versed in unique and fresh ways of school food service.

Beyond service, there are other matters to consider in the realm of school nutrition. Here are some other items to consider as you begin to plan for fall.

The New Labor Model

If you've been concerned about what will happen should one of your staff members become sick, you are far from alone. The threat of becoming infected looms over us all. Perhaps even more so in school nutrition because of the mass, daily exposure. On top of that, self-serve options will likely disappear from most cafeterias in the US.

All of this adds up to one thing: more people on the payroll. Staff redundancy will become more necessary if members of your team become ill. And when self-service options vanish, there need to be more helping hands around to assist students.

Working with Vendors and Using What You Have

There are significant operational and financial changes underway for schools in every district, and your vendors are working to meet those changes.

Depending on your budget, you have a few options.

You could work with your distributors to purchase more pre-packaged items that are easier to serve, especially for deliveries.

You could get creative! Some districts have flipped the script and are using their commodities to create inventive meals from scratch like bean salads, parfaits, hummus, corn salsa, omelets, casseroles, and more.

Other districts may find they have to rework their menus, especially if they are experiencing ongoing spot shortages in key categories. With a tool like LINQ Nutrition, you can easily manage such spot shortages in a snap.

Start Connecting

The school nutrition community has a wealth of knowledge and experience to share. It's worth your time to connect with them whenever you can. No, that won't be at a face-to-face meet-up where you share swap dishes. But you can find like-minded communities with a quick internet search on your phone.

Here are some things we recommend:

Remote Meetings

Use a tool like Zoom to set up a remote meeting with other school administrators or your staff. Video meetings keep everyone on the same page when they aren't in the same location.

Virtual Events

Even though parents and students aren't allowed in the school doesn't mean you can't connect! Host online webinars where you can discuss your program and gather feedback.

Online Communities

Don't know your next steps? Look to school nutrition social media groups for advice and ideas.

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We Will Get Through This Together

There is one positive thing to be said for being placed in harrowing circumstances: we are allowed to be inventive. And that is what school food service departments have to do to feed students and thrive.

There is a setback, though. Being inventive can be intimidating at best, but you don't have to do it alone. Look for ways to connect with nutrition directors online to learn new ways of managing a nutrition program.

When the most important thing on your to-do list is to feed children, everything else comes second. Find the resources that will help eliminate as much busy work as possible so that you and your team can get back to what's most important.

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