

If a triathlon is a 3-part test of endurance, then this school year certainly qualifies as one for the Nutrition Services program.

The first leg started with getting the word out that yes, **Meals are Free** again this year, but for registered RSD students only. At the same time, we made renewed attempts to encourage folks to apply for Free & Reduced Eligibility, based on other benefits to their household and the district beyond free meals. Both of these efforts are ongoing, as we still find folks who seem surprised that meals are free, or that we can't provide a letter of eligibility since they never reapplied for benefits this year. We continue to promote both free meals and Free & Reduced applications on every menu that is published, in every communication sent out from our office and with the support of the schools and SAU doing the same.

Our Free and Reduced list has settled at 14% district wide, with 17 % at both LRES & IHGMS, and only 9% at RHS. There are occasional additions through the state's monthly Direct Certification list, but these typically balance out the eligible students leaving the district each month.

Our average meal participation is up around 65% at LRES & IHGMS with Average daily attendance factored in. Breakfast in particular is up in both schools. This year, instead of a standard percentage being used, attendance must be tracked manually from each school's daily emails. This is due to great fluctuations in student absences throughout the month.

At RHS, lunch participation is also up between 45% & 50% from month to month. This includes a good number of students turning their usual A la Carte favorites into free meals. Breakfast meals are close to double previous years as well. Despite the corresponding drop in A la Carte sales, this trend is helping both the program and our students. At a time when it appears that they have less "pocket money" to spend in the New Wave Deli or in vending machines, the healthy option combos add meals to our program while meeting the energy needs for the kids.

The second leg of our triathlon is more challenging- shortages and the supply chain. More than at any previous point since the pandemic began we are having continual

difficulties getting foods and supplies. Food items as basic as Cereal cups, Breads, Potatoes and Meat items as well as simple condiments, juices and snack items are on back order, not received by our distributors or completely discontinued by the manufacturer. It takes considerable amounts of time to repeatedly re-order trying to get things in. Processing and accepting deliveries of unknown sizes due to substitutions and/or outages twice a week instead of once every other week can create a disruption in itself. The same has been true of supplies such as trays, soup bowls, plastic utensils, straws and other serving containers.

On several occasions, severe shortage has led us to ordering through Amazon, Walmart and Target on line. All substitutions, even ones from our Bid holding vendors come at a higher cost. But they are necessary to us being able to serve as complete meals as possible in compliance with our USDA waivers. These are part of the Seamless Summer Option under which we operate with Free Meals.

We have never relied more on the phrase printed each month on our menus-
“Menu subject to occasional change.”

The final and possibly most difficult challenge we are facing this year is staffing. Having unfilled vacancies due to lack of available candidates and no subs to cover illnesses (especially COVID 10 day absences) has been the regular state of operation since school began. Since the department has only 14 members when fully staffed, even 2 out on top of a vacancy puts us into contingency operation. Particularly since returning from the Holiday break, we have had 4 cases of COVID, 2 other week long absences and 2 vacancies leaving coverage so meager as to just barely get by. We get the meals out, but are at risk in these situations of actually needing to close down a serving line. And in covering all of the production so short staffed, other tasks fall behind. Our staff is working well beyond capacity far too often, increasing risks for illness or injury.

Raymond School Nutrition Services

Winter Update

January 27, 2022

The difference between a triathlon and this school year for Nutrition Services is that all 3 of these areas of tremendous challenge are happening at once, without an end in sight. But we do feed the children.