

STRATEGIES FOR CREATING A POSITIVE CAFETERIA ENVIRONMENT

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The cafeteria is the school’s largest classroom! Just as there are “things to say and not to say” to students that encourage them to eat a little more or try something new, it is important to recognize the tone that school staff set in order to create a calm and positive cafeteria environment where students feel welcome, build healthy relationships, and nourish their bodies.

1. A Team Approach Brings Success

Building a team of staff to establish values, develop goals and provide consistent messages will set everyone up for success by creating a positive cafeteria environment. A complete team could include the school principal, teachers, paraprofessionals, custodians, and food service staff. Including parents and students is helpful as well.

CAFETERIA STRATEGY

- *Talk to the people you think should be included in a team to address the cafeteria environment and suggest a meeting.*

2. School Values are Reinforced in the Cafeteria

Most schools have a set of values that they expect of the students across different settings in the school. Bringing those values to the cafeteria and providing examples of what is expected will help set clear expectations for behavior and bring calm to the eating environment. Ask students to get involved in applying the school values to the cafeteria, identifying examples, and making posters to decorate the cafeteria. School assemblies are a good time to educate students and reinforce messages about behavior expectations for the cafeteria.

CAFETERIA STRATEGIES

- *Identify the school values and give examples of how they apply in the cafeteria.*
- *Involve students in this process so they feel more connected and engaged.*

3. Students Feel Valued and Respected

Having adults in the cafeteria who positively interact with students promotes social-emotional growth and contributes to a positive eating environment. Adults can build relationships with students and model appropriate social interactions and mealtime conversation.

CAFETERIA STRATEGY

- *Show a personal interest and build relationships with students (call students by name, smile, etc.).*

CAFETERIA EXPECTATIONS		
BE SAFE	BE RESPECTFUL	BE RESPONSIBLE
 Be patient and wait your turn	Use kind words, like “please” and “thank you”	Clean up your area 
Stay seated during the meal	Listen to adults and respond quickly	Use a “Level 2” voice (quiet conversation)
Eat only your own food	 Be inclusive of others	 Take time to recycle/compost



4. Behavior Expectations are Established

School cafeterias are classrooms where students have an opportunity to develop their social skills, learn about and practice making healthy food choices, and practice good table manners. Establishing cafeteria expectations early in the school year will set everyone up for success. Assemblies, classroom discussions, and in-house cafeteria “field trips” are an effective way to teach and practice.

CAFETERIA STRATEGY

- Establish behavior expectations early in the school year so students understand what is expected of them.

5. Transitions to and from the Cafeteria are Clear

Establishing an efficient flow of student traffic in and around the cafeteria is important. Students should understand the process for entering and exiting the cafeteria and getting school meals. Teaching and practicing transitions helps set the tone for behavior expectations in and around the cafeteria.

CAFETERIA STRATEGIES

- Adjust the cafeteria layout as needed to create clear and efficient pathways to move into, around, and out of the cafeteria.
- Make time for teachers and staff to practice with students, especially early in the year (e.g., an in-house cafeteria field trip during which students learn where to go and what to do).
See handout “How to Host an In-House Cafeteria Field Trip.”



6. Students are Seated and Comfortably Eating

Setting limits on the reasons for students to get up from the table reduces the number of individuals wandering around and makes the cafeteria feel calm, increases food consumption, and reduces noise levels.

CAFETERIA STRATEGIES

- Give permission for short trips to get utensils, water, use the restroom, or dispose of waste.
- Limit individual trips by carrying utensils/napkins to have on hand when students ask (using an apron with pockets works well).

Cues to Calm the Cafeteria

- Adult cue: 1, 2, 3 eyes on me
Student response: 1, 2 eyes on you
- Adult cue: Hands on top (put hands on head)
Student response: That means stop
- Adult cue: “Give me a thumbs up if you can hear me” (2 fingers up, etc.)
- Adult cue: If you can hear my voice touch your (head, nose, chin, etc.)
- Adult cue: Use a clapping sequence
Student response: Students mimic the claps
- Adult cue: “Give me five” then countdown 5,4,3,2,1
Student response: Countdown with you

7. Cafeteria Noise is at a Reasonable Level

Students are socializing with others at their table and no one needs to shout to be heard. Adults in the cafeteria are able to quiet the cafeteria using techniques that don’t contribute to cafeteria noise. Using hand signals, clapping techniques, and other strategies to get students’ attention helps to create a calm environment for eating. When behavior expectations are established, and students are clear on those expectations, adults seldom need to intervene.

CAFETERIA STRATEGY

- Use visual strategies to get students’ attention. Only use a microphone to give direction after students are reasonably quiet.

8. Students are Leaders

All students deserve a clean space to eat. They take ownership and pride in their school and feel responsible for doing their part. Leaving the cafeteria ready for the next lunch will help cultivate good citizenship and mutual respect.

CAFETERIA STRATEGIES

- Give students responsibilities for cleaning up after themselves (e.g., wiping tables, sweeping underneath, helping sort waste).
- Arrange jobs for older students to work with food service and cafeteria staff (e.g., serving in the kitchen, assisting younger students, cleaning, helping at the waste station).