



Memorandum

To: Somerville School Committee
From: Director Lauren Mancini, SPS Food and Nutrition Services Department
Date: October 7, 2024
Re: Food and Nutrition Services Department Production

Overview of Food and Nutrition Services Department

Food and Nutrition Services Department (FNSD) Quick Facts

- The Food and Nutrition Services Department provides healthy, nutritious, and culturally responsive meals for students to enjoy during their school day at breakfast and lunch, while complying with state and federal regulations.
- During the 2023–2024 school year, FNSD served 879,342 meals in 11 district cafeterias.
 - 243,433 breakfasts
 - 635,909 lunches
- **All student meals are free of charge.**
- The Food and Nutrition Services Department is fully self-operated and self-funded.

USDA Federal Regulations and Innovation in School Meals

FNSD is self-funding and operates like a business within the Somerville Public School district. Federal reimbursement funds pay for all labor and expenses.

In order to receive reimbursement funds, Somerville FNSD must serve “complete meals,” as defined by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) National School Breakfast and Lunch Program. The SPS FNSD serves complete meals filled with healthy ingredients for a diverse community.

- A breakfast is “complete” and reimbursable when it includes three of five offered components: grains, meat / meat alternative, dairy, fruits, vegetables. One component must be fruit.
- A lunch is “complete” and reimbursable when it includes at least three of five offered components: grains, meat / meat alternative, dairy, fruits, vegetables. One component must be a fruit or vegetable.

Starting in the early 2000s, SPS participated in the nationally-recognized Shape Up Somerville initiative. Among the changes made, SPS introduced more fresh fruits and vegetables into the cafeteria, and now sources local produce and uses whole grains in recipes, when possible. FNSD continues to approach USDA-compliant meal preparation with this tradition of innovation.

USDA website: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/school-meals/nutrition-standards>
SPS FNSD website: <https://somerville.k12.ma.us/completemeals>

Feeding SPS Students

FNSD consists of a team of 4 administrators and 56 kitchen staff serving, on average, 5,000 meals per day at 10 kitchens. Each meal is carefully planned to provide a nutritious, healthy meal that students will enjoy. **Over 70% of our students take meals each day.**

Our team develops and tests recipes, preparing all meals with a mix of purchased products, made-from-scratch items, and fresh produce. On a given day, kitchen staff prepare components of meals for service happening later in the week as a way to provide the highest possible quality and the most from-scratch meals within the schedule. During service, staff serve meals, continue to prepare meals as needed, take down data about which meals are eaten, as well as cleaning and preparing for the next meal. Within this schedule, staff also work with administrators to develop and test new recipes to increase student interest in the program.

Allergy Management and Meal Modifications

The Food and Nutrition Services Department strives to provide a range of healthy, scratch-made meals for our students to enjoy. Our practices are in line with many other surrounding districts of similar size and demographics. Our department works regularly with other school departments to share best practices and ideas, and to learn from each other.

Approximately four percent of our students have been diagnosed with an allergy to one or more foods. Keeping these students safe requires a coordinated effort by parents and guardians, school nurses, teachers, school staff, students, and the FNSD team.

It is the policy of the Somerville Public Schools that all children with a diagnosed life-threatening allergy have an up-to-date epinephrine auto-injector, an Allergy Action Plan / Epinephrine Order signed by a medical professional, a Medication Administration Plan signed by the parent and school nurse that includes a plan for field trips. If a student has an allergy to wheat, dairy, egg, or soy and will be eating school-prepared meals, they will meet with FNSD to discuss appropriate substitutions / accommodations.

Meal modifications may also be requested to accommodate other medical conditions and disabilities. Each request must include a note from a state-licensed healthcare professional documenting the medical condition and/or disability

SPS FNSD website: <https://somerville.k12.ma.us/allergies>

Dynamic, Online Menus

In some cases, a student may have personal diet preferences. For students who do not choose to pack a lunch from home, our online menu has filtering abilities that can help a student to make choices. Please note that supplier challenges have historically led to slight differences in menu items from the listed menu. It is important for a student with rigorous personal diet preferences to talk to the FNSD serving staff about any questions or concerns as they take their meal.

Students and families can find the menu on the [FNSD webpage](#) by clicking on the [school breakfast and lunch menus](#) link toward the top of the page. Within the menu software, the user chooses their school and can filter for allergies or dietary restrictions.

Many of our students follow dietary guidelines based on their home religions, as do many of our FNSD staff members. Students in some religions may find it helpful to filter the school menu for vegetarian and vegan meals, which are regularly eaten by staff who eat halal food, for instance.

Community Feedback

The FNSD receives and welcomes regular feedback from the community. Positive feedback is shared with the staff, who enjoy working with students and supporting them by preparing and providing healthy meals.

Every email and request is considered on a case-by-case basis, and we always take the time to research information that may be required in response to community members' questions or concerns. The director approaches any concerns by reviewing the issue, talking to FNSD staff and site lead at any school mentioned by the community member, and developing a response to the question or providing clear and transparent reasons why an issue can or cannot be resolved through FNSD. In some cases, emails provide valuable feedback that lead to improvements in our systems. We always strive to communicate in a timely manner with community members.

We are particularly proud of menu changes and recipe development we have made in response to focus group requests that we provide more multiculturally appealing meals. In the last few years, several of our staff members have developed recipes from their countries of origin that we now produce in our kitchens. Our newer meals include chicken or tofu masala and naan, chicken or bean fajita bowls, bean and cheese pupusas, potato cauliflower curry, jambalaya, chicken taquito, and General Tso chicken.

Current Logistical Challenges

FNSD continues to prepare high-quality, delicious, and nutritionally-sound meals despite several recent challenges.

Until June 2022, the Winter Hill Community Innovation School at Sycamore Street was the home of a full FNSD production kitchen that served all schools in our district. The production kitchen at Sycamore Street included several large walk-in refrigerators, freezer capacity, and dry storage capacity, as well as a loading dock for deliveries and professional-grade catering equipment. Since summer 2022, the WHCIS kitchen has not been available to us. During the 2023-2024 school year, following significant research and discussion, SPS and the City of Somerville determined that the best available option is to make improvements to the kitchen at

the Albert F. Argenziano School to serve as a new production kitchen. We currently use the kitchen at AFAS for some production tasks. However, until updates can be completed, the AFAS space is significantly smaller, has limited storage space, and less equipment for preparing meals. While the space is helpful, it is not the same as a full production kitchen and has affected our meal production. Without adequate storage space and the delivery dock at the WHCIS, we can no longer source local foods from local farmers. For instance, SPS had an annual event where students and families came early to school and helped shuck corn. The corn was then cooked and served at lunch. Without the WHCIS delivery hub / warehouse capabilities, it is impossible to hold the corn shucking event.

Without access to a full-scale production kitchen that can send meals out to the PK–8 cafeterias for reheating, we can only offer limited scratch-cooked meals. (Our PK–8 school kitchens only have steamers and ovens.) The scratch-cooked meals include popular items like vegetable chili, pasta with meat sauce, and tacos. The current estimate for completion of upgrades to the AFAS kitchen is January 2025.

In addition to our production kitchen, Somerville High School has a full production kitchen that is big enough to accommodate the high school service for 950 students. The SHS kitchen is at capacity serving the high school students.

Additionally, staffing has been an ongoing problem since the start of the pandemic and we have not returned to pre-COVID staffing numbers. Before COVID, every building was fully staffed and there was a substitution list of people who could step in for staff members unable to come to work due to medical, bereavement, and other reasons. Now, multiple schools deal with understaffed shifts every day. In terms of production, staff are working harder to cover for missing colleagues. Staff must go above and beyond in order to get food prepared and the work done for service in these circumstances. Understaffing also makes it difficult to complete preparatory tasks for subsequent meals which would make the following shifts easier, and support a higher quality of meal for students. Understaffing has had a dampening effect on staff morale.

Summary

The Food and Nutrition Services Department is a self-operated and funded department that works within the parameters of federal regulations to provide almost 5000 meals per day on average to 70% of our students despite challenges. We always work to improve and respond to community input and needs and have provided multiple avenues for students to eat healthy, nutritious, and delicious free meals in our schools.

We encourage families and community members to use our website as a resource for school meal and nutrition information: <https://somerville.k12.ma.us/fnsd>

As well, if there are leaders who would like to tour one of our cafeterias to see our amazing and hardworking FNSD team operate, please reach out to [Director Mancini](#)