

David Tokofsky

Food For Thought

Child nutrition programs deserve the school board's time—and attention



School board members spend much of their time focusing on two big items—student achievement and personnel. Personnel is the biggest single cost in the budget. Academic achievement drives almost all of our decisions. Both determine our ability to be re-elected.

But do board members understand that school food service programs are probably the second largest part of the budget? School cafeterias certainly are the single largest source of federal revenue. Do we consider the impact that good nutrition or, more relevantly, the lack of good nutrition, has on achievement? Parents certainly know that hungry children don't learn.

I taught in the Los Angeles Unified Schools for 12 years and served for another 12 years as one of the seven members on the LAUSD Board of Trustees. As a board member, I represented 800,000 voters and 125 schools, almost all in the federal Title I program with large percentages of students eligible for free and reduced-price breakfast and lunch.

Over the years, I have observed how board members lack understanding about the role of the school food service program. I am dismayed that board members often dismiss it as an auxiliary service not worthy of time and attention,

because it deserves both.

Let's talk about the issues.

What is your wellness policy?

First, and most important, is the well-being of the children in our care. As successful adults, we rarely experience short-term or long-term hunger. We know that skipping breakfast means we won't perform well, but we have choices.

What about the kids in public schools whose choices are limited for any myriad reason associated with poverty, urban life, or necessity? It could be lack of food or money, or parents who are too busy to provide breakfast. Maybe the parents have gone to work before their children leave for school. This is a chronic problem for many of these children. How well can they perform in the classroom?

It always amazes me when school boards, administrators, and parents get all riled up to make sure breakfast is available on test days. What about non-test days when the children are expected to learn the information for the test? The problem continues after lunch if the children in our care don't receive healthful, nutritious meals. No Child Left Behind becomes unattainable if we leave the child's food issues on the side. This is food for thought—and school board action.

In recent years, thanks in part to legislation enacted by Congress in 2004, districts now are looking at the food available on campus and the opportunities for physical activity throughout the school day. The wellness policies that many districts are embracing are an acknowledgment of our responsibility to address the whole child as part of academic success.

Food for thought resolution

I have taken some of what I have learned to put together a list of questions and considerations that all school boards should request. It is in the form of a board resolution that you can adapt for your locality.

Whereas, student academic achievement is not only dependent on quality teachers and administrators along with a safe and supportive learning environment, but student academic achievement also requires that all students are physically and mentally ready to learn, including having access to healthful meals; and

Whereas, the locally elected school board must comply with all federal and state nutrition program requirements; and

Whereas, it is requisite for the locally elected school board and its superintendent to provide a quality food program while focusing on a solid and balanced academic program as well as a fiscally balanced district budget;

Therefore be it resolved that to assess all

of the above the board of education asks the superintendent to present in an open public meeting an independent assessment of the school district's food service program by the following date; and

Be it further resolved that the assessment of the school district's program include at a minimum the following data for analysis:

A) The proportion of enrolled students being served at each school in the district based on the total enrollment and school lunch eligibility of each school, and

B) The physical condition of the cafeterias of each school and the preliminary analysis of the repairs, equipment, and enhancements needed; and

C) The number of employees in food services and all costs associated with said workforce; and

D) The quantity and quality of the training invested in the workforce in food services; and

E) The financial balance and fiscal condition of the food services program in the district; and

F) The effectiveness of management and business processes including technology in food service operations.

And be it finally resolved that the superintendent provide preliminary conclusions and recommendations along with a district draft plan for food services to the board of education, and that the report summarize at a minimum whether:

1. Students, especially at-risk students, are being effectively served at all district locations, and

2. The district is maximizing all federal and state entitlement dollars as well as local public and private funds for food services; and

3. All nutritional guidelines are being met or exceeded; and

4. The food service program is employing effective business processes in its operation.

Wellness policies should be a wake-up call for school boards. We have a responsibility to our children and our communities to provide a strong nutrition program. This means that we need to keep informed about food service operations so that we can make good policy decisions and decipher lip service from state capitals.

What is your food service budget?

Part of this effort is fundamental to our responsibility as custodians of public funds. Do you know what your food service budget actually is? More importantly, do you know whether you are maximizing the potential that the food service program has for generating revenue?

Los Angeles Unified is leaving millions of dollars on the table by not reaching as many children as we could and should. Do you know how many children in your district are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch? Of those eligible, how many actually participate? Every child who is eligible represents an opportunity.

Next, is your food service program operating efficiently? Do you have the information to evaluate this, or do you wait until a federal or state audit finds you deficient and then react impulsively? Many districts invest in technology believing that the computer will provide effective management and oversight. Purchasing technology without addressing the whole picture will ultimately waste resources and result in an embarrassing set of newspaper articles about ineptitude in government.

Finally, what role does your food service program play in your human resources allocation? My district gave more than 2,000 part-time cafeteria workers health insurance and other benefits without increasing student participation in the federal program. Now it is in a budget crisis compounded by a state revenue shortfall.

For many urban districts, the food service program is an opportunity to offer jobs to otherwise underemployed individuals. Balancing this social justice issue with the efficient use of personnel and control of labor costs requires effective and inspired management. It certainly has an impact on district-labor relations, and that is always critical for school boards.

If we recognize that we have an opportunity to provide training and job skills for constituents who may lack employability, we are fulfilling some of our most important policy goals as elected officials. If we fail to raise the community's general economic standards through thoughtful employment, we are contributing to higher economic and social costs. By providing a living wage and benefits for this class of worker, we reduce dependence on other social services.

It is not surprising when well-trained employees with a sense of ownership about their work actually reduce costs. We would never accept educating kids to work in the fast

food industry as a goal. Why would we model that for their parents?

This may seem overwhelming for a part-time lay board member. We ran for office to change kids' lives, not compete with McDonald's. That is why I often think districts turn to outside companies as a means of laying aside the board and superintendent's responsibility for food service. I think this is a mistake.

Are you accountable?

Federal law is clear that a local educational agency cannot assign responsibility for compliance to a third party. While the district might assign operational oversight duties to a management company as part of a contract, accountability rests with the district.

Houston found this out the hard way when an audit revealed that claims for breakfast reimbursement were overstated, and the district had to refund them. The contractor who was responsible for the errors, which were found to be intentional, was not penalized.

In September 2007, Philadelphia fired its food service contractor with two years still left on the agreement because losses had grown to a completely unacceptable level. Several investigations are still ongoing, but the district still does not know how deep the losses are. The only saving grace in this example is that Philadelphia did not outsource employees, too, so day-to-day operations could continue without a total cafeteria shutdown.

These are extreme cases, but they provide food for thought and board study. Outsourcing can work, but it's not always a viable answer. In any case, contracts must be carefully monitored for compliance so that other facets of the district are not harmed. Know the big picture beforehand so you don't learn by trial, error, and tragedy.

A board should consider all of its operations and options when evaluating and assessing food service operations. Using strategists who can work with the existing program may achieve many of the results the district wanted from outsourcing.

I encourage all of you to invest some time to review and consider what you are doing with your food service program. Learn what is required for effective and responsible oversight and management. Know the people who deliver food to your kids. Know the nutritional content of the food. Know the technology involved. Know the choices that are available to you as policymakers and leaders.

In short, it's food for thought. ■

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