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Managing Special Food Needs in Schools

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INTRODUCTION

All foodservice systems must manage special food needs. These needs include the typical food allergies such as milk, peanuts, and wheat as well as other conditions such as celiac disease. Considering that about 5-8% of children have some form of food allergy (1,2) and almost 1% of children have celiac disease (3), this is a concern that foodservice directors cannot ignore. While a team of doctors, nurses, principals, and teachers help manage these conditions in schools, it is the school foodservice director's role to ensure that meals served at school do not expose students to foods that can harm them. Future foodservice directors in the school setting need to know the laws regarding these special food needs and where to find aid in the form of funding and information to help deal with the laws. They will also need ideas of how to keep food safe and how to go above and beyond the minimum requirements to enhance the eating experience for students. Every school foodservice director needs to know how to deal with laws regarding special food needs, apply safety techniques to prevent exposure to the harmful foods, and increase the satisfaction of students with allergies or celiac disease.

DEALING WITH LAWS

Because school is a publicly-funded institution, the federal government has set several laws to ensure high-quality meals for students which are nutritionally adequate and safe. The increasing prevalence of food allergies and celiac disease among school-age children has caused special interest in protecting these students. Between the years of 1997 and 2007, an 18% increase in food allergies among children was noted (4). Also, the incidence of celiac disease in children increased from 0.2% to 0.7% between the early 1990's and the early 2000's (3). The

increasing prevalence of food allergies and celiac disease has reinforced the need for foodservice managers to protect students by following the laws.

Explanation of the Laws

Since no foodservice manager wants to deal with lawsuits, each must know what the laws are in order to manage them. Regulations by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and those made through the National School Breakfast and Lunch Programs declare that schools must make substitutions to school meals for students with food-related disabilities (5). Severe food allergies (5) and celiac disease (6) are considered disabilities in these regulations while less severe food allergies are not. This means that if a child brings a written document from a physician documenting a severe allergy or celiac disease, a foodservice manager must make dietary modifications to meet that child's needs (5). These modifications must not increase the price of the meal for the student with the disability. Managers can make meal alterations for children who have mild allergies or who lack doctor's notes, but the law does not require it.

Resources to Help Foodservice Directors Manage the Laws

Foodservice directors can seek sources of funding to help cover the costs of preparing specialized meals. Not only do these meals require increased labor time, expensive specialty products must sometimes be purchased as well. To handle this concern, directors should first look to general district funds. If these funds are unavailable or inadequate, federal funding is an option with programs like the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (5). Directors can also apply for Medicaid or the Maternal and Child Health Services Block Grants. Money from these sources can be used to procure special foods, supplements, or equipment as well as attain consultation services of a registered dietitian. Future foodservice directors who want to know

specific details about these funding sources should search the corresponding websites, the links to which are available in the appendix of this paper.

For technical assistance, referrals, and information, foodservice directors can contact several local and federal agencies and programs. Some of these include the state's Title V director of Maternal and Child Healthcare, the Food and Nutrition Information Center of the USDA's National Agricultural Library, and the National Food Service Management Institute at the University of Mississippi (5). While some of these sources offer training materials on the internet, others can be contacted through phone or email with questions related to federal regulations. Again, foodservice directors wanting to know more should search information about these resources on the internet.

APPLYING SAFETY TECHNIQUES

Staff Education to Prevent Cross-Contamination

In addition to simply substituting meals, schools must also apply several methods to keep foods safe from cross-contamination. Since school foodservice directors will not be in the kitchen every day, they should make sure that their cooks know how to keep food safe. Preparing a separate meal for a group of students with peanut allergies is not helpful if traces of peanuts travel to the meal substitute through the gloves of a worker or a utensil used in serving. Teaching staff to change gloves often and sanitize countertops and equipment before and after using potentially allergenic and gluten-containing foods can ensure meals are prepared safely (6,7).

Staff education can take place in many forms. First, directors should make sure that all staff members are trained well in food safety principles. Some schools even require cooks to be ServSafe certified in addition to carrying a current food handler's permit (6). Since cooks in

schools often work for years in the same position, directors should make sure that the employees do not become careless over time. They should periodically visit and observe kitchens within the school district to monitor cross-contamination. Directors can also hold in-service meetings or pay cooks to attend periodic trainings (7). These measures will help to keep food safe for students with allergies and celiac disease.

Management Decisions to Help Keep Food Safe

Along with staff education, several decisions made by managers play an indirect but significant role in preventing cross-contamination. For instance, directors are responsible for keeping the working conditions pleasant so that the workers will not become hurried. Stressed cooks are more likely to forget to change gloves or wash hands after working with allergenic or gluten-containing food. Some ideas of ways to keep working conditions pleasant include: hiring enough staff, employing principles of work simplification, and improving work flow through the kitchen. By implementing these and other strategies, directors help employees keep food safe.

The layout of kitchen equipment and supplies also plays a role in preventing cross-contamination. For example, a chicken and rice meal normally safe for celiac patients would be a hazard if the rice had come into contact with wheat flour in dry storage. Foods served to students with special food needs must be stored and served in separate locations and containers (6). However, because space costs money, most schools cannot afford to have completely separate areas for all types of foods that may cause adverse food reactions. While foodservice directors who plan the layout of a new kitchen should consider the potential for cross-contamination, most will be in school districts with established kitchens. Still, slight adjustments to the placement of kitchen equipment and the location of storage can help keep foods safe. For example, some schools place gluten-free products on the top shelf of storage (6). Another idea is to have a

separate area to prepare gluten-free items (7). Each facility will require specific measures to fit that facility, and the manager's responsibility is to determine what will work best in each setting.

The foodservice manager's key role in meal planning and procurement should be done keeping special food needs in mind. Although it is impossible to plan around every need, certain foods like omelets or salads are naturally gluten-free, and peanuts in recipes can be switched out for similar ingredients which are less common allergens (7). Various rice and bean dishes are examples of meals that are inexpensive, well-liked by many students, and devoid of unsafe foods. Meal plans that are free from the common allergens will reduce the need to even prepare substitute meals, and this will reduce the expenses of specialty products and increased labor time.

Because of the pervasiveness of gluten, peanut and soybean oil, milk, and other allergenic foods, foodservice directors must be especially careful during procurement. When purchasing foods, directors must carefully read labels for hidden allergens and gluten-containing foods (7,8). The foodservice director should also weigh the costs and benefits of purchasing specialty products. Often, these products are purchased because the decreased labor costs outweigh the higher price of the items (6,7). Each director should consider all the options during procurement to determine which products best fit his or her individual foodservice system.

INCREASING STUDENT SATISFACTION

While it is important for school foodservice managers to deal with laws and basic safety techniques, truly running a successful foodservice organization requires more effort. It demands that managers go the extra mile to enhance the eating experience for students. Each should consider the needs of the students to know which food safety techniques are most appropriate. For example, it may be a good idea for a school that has several students with severe peanut

allergies to create a table for these students. However, if another school only has one severely allergic student, the same practice would probably make the student feel ostracized. Thus, the foodservice manager of a school district should consider the special needs at each school within the district.

The school setting provides a particular challenge in increasing student satisfaction because of the relatively low budget and strict federal guidelines. However, a manager can find ways to accommodate special needs while still creating appetizing meals. For instance, the manager should search for ways to modify regular menu items by simply substituting allergen-free and gluten-free dressings and sides (7). Using more signs to designate allergen-free and gluten-free foods may help students feel safer eating in the cafeteria (7,9). Furthermore, managers can individually prepare meals for students when the number of special trays needed is minimal (6, 7). Student satisfaction will increase when students feel like their individual needs are met.

A variety of other methods can also increase student satisfaction. One example is using websites to inform students and parents about the nutritional quality and contents of meals (7). Some schools use the child nutrition link on the school or district website to inform parents (6). By providing access to the menus, parents can plan their child's meals ahead of time. Also, foodservice directors can offer incentives to employees who create tasty alternative dishes for students with special needs. The students can even take part in a taste panel to try out new foods. This would help students with special needs become involved and more accepting of the foods served. Whatever they do, it is important for school foodservice directors to keep the big picture in mind. The goal is to provide safe, nutritious, and tasty food to students. Too much emphasis

on safety must not jeopardize taste. The foodservice director's role is to make the eating experience as enjoyable as possible for students with and without special food needs.

CONCLUSION

The school foodservice director should seriously consider his or her role in protecting students who have special food needs. Each has a stewardship to comply with laws, keep foods safe, and make the eating experience enjoyable for all students. Because food is often associated with powerful emotions and memories, the school foodservice director has the ability to shape a significant part of a child's school experience. For example, consider a child recently diagnosed with celiac disease. The director can arrange the menu to accommodate this child's needs so that he or she does not feel excluded. Rather than reminding the child of the foods that cannot be eaten, the manager can exhibit all of the appealing foods that can be eaten.

Directing the school foodservice system means more than simply making sure children are fed. It involves planning appetizing meals, purchasing the right ingredients and supplies, and ensuring the production of safe foods for all students. The increasing prevalence of allergies and celiac disease demonstrates the need for competent school foodservice directors who can fulfill this role. As future trends continue to change the school nutrition system, foodservice directors must be at the forefront of implementing new strategies to keep students safe from adverse food reactions.

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- (9) Creating a safe space for special needs students. *Food Manag.* 2008;43(8):48.

APPENDIX-RESOURCES FOR FOODSERVICE DIRECTORS

Funding Resources:

<http://idea.ed.gov/explore/view/p/%2Croot%2Cdynamic%2CTopicalArea%2C9%2C>

<http://www.cms.gov/>

<http://www.mchb.hrsa.gov/>

Information Resources:

<http://www.nal.usda.gov/fnic>

<http://healthymeals.nal.usda.gov/menu-planning-0>

<http://www.nfsmi.org>