Choosing a Menu Planning Approach That Works for You

A Comparison of the Various Menu Planning Approaches

Understanding the various menu planning approaches is necessary to help you select the right one for your SFA/school. If you have already determined the best menu planning approach for your school, this section will serve as a review for you. If you are an SFA/school in the process of selecting a menu planning approach or an SFA/school considering a change in approach, this chapter will provide a comparison of all five menu-planning approaches.

Making the best choice can be challenging; however, correctly implementing the selected approach is necessary not only to serve reimbursable meals but also to meet nutrition goals. This chapter provides a brief overview of each menu planning approach and compares the various approaches to help you make the best choice for your SFA/schools.

Meeting the Nutrient Standards and the Dietary Guidelines

Regardless of your SFA/school's menu planning approach, school meals are required to meet the target nutrition goals or standards.
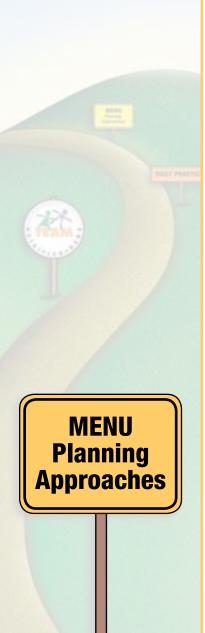
You Have Choices!

Recognizing that SFAs/schools differ greatly, USDA has established five menu planning approaches to allow flexibility in meeting the SMI nutrition goals.

The five menu planning approaches are as follows:
◆ Two food-based menu planning approaches
  • Traditional Food-Based Menu Planning
  • Enhanced Food-Based Menu Planning

MENU Planning Approaches

◆ Two nutrient-based menu planning approaches
  • Nutrient Standard Menu Planning
  • Assisted Nutrient Standard Menu Planning
◆ Alternate menu planning approaches (any reasonable approach)

When implemented correctly, each of the five menu planning approaches can help you offer meals that meet the SMI nutrition goals.

Food-Based Approaches

The Traditional Food-Based Menu Planning Approach

Under the Traditional Food-Based Menu Planning approach, reimbursable school meals must comply with specific *meal pattern* requirements by offering a certain number of food items from specific food components in specific amounts at breakfast and lunch.

These food components are:
◆ Meat/meat alternate
◆ Vegetables and/or fruits
◆ Grains/breads
◆ Fluid milk

Food component requirements and minimum portion sizes for breakfast and lunch are discussed in more detail in Chapter 2. The Traditional Food-Based Menu Planning Meal Patterns for both school lunch and school breakfast are included in Appendices B and D.

The Enhanced Food-Based Menu Planning Approach

The Enhanced Food-Based Menu Planning approach is a variation of the Traditional Food-Based Menu Planning approach. It is designed to increase calories from low-fat food sources in order to meet the *Dietary Guidelines*. The required four food components are retained, but the quantities for the weekly servings of vegetables/fruits and grains/breads are increased for lunch. Also, there is an optional age/grade group for breakfast.

This menu planning approach is discussed in further detail in Chapter 2. The Enhanced Food Based Menu Planning Meal Patterns for both school lunch and school breakfast are included in Appendices C and E.

MENU Planning Approaches

Nutrient-Based Approaches

The Nutrient Standard Menu Planning Approach

Nutrient Standard Menu Planning (NSMP) is a nutrient-based menu planning approach that uses USDA-approved computer software to analyze the specific nutrient content of menus in order to plan menus. Reimbursable meals are based on planned menus meeting the required age/grade-appropriate nutrient standards, averaged over a school week.

This approach is designed to give menu planners flexibility in planning menus that meet the nutrition standards. The analysis must be periodically updated to reflect any changes in the menu, products purchased, or student selection patterns.
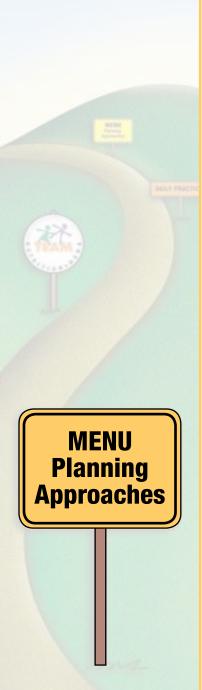
The Assisted Nutrient Standard Menu Planning Approach

Assisted Nutrient Standard Menu Planning (ANSMP) is a variation of Nutrient Standard Menu Planning. It is for SFAs/schools that lack the technical resources to conduct nutrient analysis themselves but want to use a nutrient-based menu planning approach. Instead, SFA/schools use an outside source such as a consultant, another SFA, or the State agency, to plan and analyze menus that are based on local needs and preferences. This approach requires contracting with an outside source to provide the service.

The outside source must provide SFAs/schools with recipes, product specifications, and other documentation to support the menu analysis. The menus and analyses must be periodically updated to reflect any changes in the menu, food products, or student selection patterns.

Both NSMP and ANSMP approaches are discussed in Chapter 3. The requirements for meals planned with NSMP or ANSMP are also included in Appendix F.

MENU Planning Approaches

MENU Planning Approaches

Alternate Menu Planning Approaches

These menu planning approaches allow State agencies and SFAs to develop their own innovative approaches to menu plans—subject to the guidelines established in the regulations.

There are two types of alternate menu planning approaches – (1) minor modifications and (2) major changes or new alternate menu planning approach.

Minor Modifications

There are three minor modifications available to schools using one of the food-based menu planning approaches. State agencies may or may not require prior approval or may establish guidelines for using these modifications. Refer to Chapter 2, Using a Food-Based Menu Planning Approach, for a detailed discussion on these modifications.

Major Changes or New Alternate Menu Planning Approach

SFAs must have prior approval from their State agency to make major changes to one of the established menu planning approaches or develop a new menu planning approach. The plan for the alternate menu planning approach must be available in writing for review and monitoring purposes by the State agency. No formal plan is required—guidance material, a handbook, or protocol is sufficient. The guidelines must address how the following requirements are met:

◆ Offering fluid milk as defined in Federal regulations
◆ Including Offer Versus Serve (OVS) for high school students
◆ Establishing OVS requirements similar to those specified in Federal regulations
◆ Meeting the RDA and calorie levels, indicating the age/grade groups served, and how the nutrient levels are met for those age/grade groups
◆ Following the requirements for counting food items and products toward the meal patterns
◆ Identifying a reimbursable meal at the point of service
◆ Explaining how the alternate menu planning approach can be monitored according to Federal regulations
◆ Following the requirements for analysis procedures and for approved software

Comparison of Menu Planning Approaches*

	FOOD-BASED MENU PLANNING		NUTRIENT-BASED MENU PLANNING
	Traditional	*Enhanced*	*NSMP/ANSMP*
How Meals Are Planned and Evaluated	Meal Pattern	Meal Pattern	Nutrient analysis; must contain minimum required menu items.
Serving Sizes	Minimum quantities as established for meal pattern	Minimum quantities as established for meal pattern	As established by the menu planner to meet the nutrient standards
Computer Hardware and Software	◆ Not required ◆ State agency will conduct nutrient analysis upon SMI Review	◆ Not required ◆ State agency will conduct nutrient analysis upon SMI Review	◆ Menu planning is based on the nutrient analysis ◆ SFA/school must have hardware and USDA-approved software and use nutrient analysis to plan meals to meet the age/grade appropriate nutrient standards prior to serving reimbursable meals
Reimbursable Lunch	A minimum of five food items in specific quantities must be offered from the four components: ◆ 1 M/MA ◆ 2 V/F ◆ 1 G/B ◆ 1 fluid milk	Same as Traditional (Except increased quantities of V/F and G/B)	The number of menu items for the day in the planned quantities to meet the week's target levels must be offered (with a minimum of three menu items): ◆ Entrée ◆ Fluid milk ◆ Side dish
Offer Versus Serve: Lunch	◆ OVS is required in senior high schools (as defined by the State educational agency)-students must select three of the five items ◆ OVS is optional in grades below the senior high level-schools can choose to have students select either three or four of the five items	Same as Traditional	OVS is required in senior high schools (as defined by the State educational agency). If three items are offered, student can decline one. If four or more offered, student can decline two ◆ Students must always take the entrée ◆ OVS is optional in grades below the senior high level. The number of menu items that students can decline is the same as high school requirements

*This chart does not include the Alternate Menu Planning Approach (Any Reasonable Approach). See page 10 for more information.

Comparison of Menu Planning Approaches* (continued)

	FOOD-BASED MENU PLANNING		NUTRIENT-BASED MENU PLANNING
	Traditional	*Enhanced*	*NSMP/ANSMP*
Age/Grade Groupings: Lunch	Established ages/grades: ◆ Ages 1 and 2 ◆ Ages 3 and 4 ◆ K-3 ◆ 4-12 ◆ 7-12 (optional)	Established ages/grades: ◆ Ages 1 and 2 ◆ Preschool ◆ K-6 ◆ 7-12 ◆ Grades K-3 (optional)	Options: ◆ Established grade groups: Preschool, K-6, 7-12 (Grades K-3 optional); ◆ Established age groups: Ages 3-6, 7-10, 11-13, 14-17; or ◆ Customized age groupings
Reimbursable Breakfast	A minimum of four required food items in specific quantities must be offered: ◆ 1 fluid milk and ◆ 1 V/F and ◆ 2 M/MA or 2 G/B or 1 M/MA and 1 G/B	Same as Traditional	The number of menu items for the day in the planned quantities to meet the week's target level must be offered (with a minimum of 3 menu items).
Offer Versus Serve: Breakfast	◆ OVS is optional for all grades ◆ Students must select at least three food items from the four items offered	Same as Traditional	◆ OVS is optional for all grades ◆ Students may decline a maximum of one menu item, regardless of number of items offered
Age/Grade Groupings: Breakfast	Established ages/grades: ◆ Ages 1 and 2 ◆ Preschool ◆ K-12	Established ages/grades: ◆ Ages 1 and 2 ◆ Preschool ◆ K-12 ◆ 7-12 (optional)	Options: ◆ Established grade groups: Preschool, K-12 (Grades 7-12 optional); ◆ Established age groups: Ages 3-6, 7-10, 11-13, 14 and older; or ◆ Customized age groups

*   This chart does not include the Alternate Menu Planning Approach (Any Reasonable Approach). See page 10 for more information.