Shaking It Up!
SMALL CHANGES LEAD TO BIG FLAVORS

WORKING WITH YOUR PROCUREMENT PARTNERS

As a school nutrition operator, you may be responsible for procurement or support the process. Effectively communicating and collaborating with your procurement partners can help you plan and serve meals consistent with the meal patterns and dietary specifications **AND** appeal to your students.

PROCUREMENT PARTNERS

Procuring lower-sodium foods for school meals is a process that requires open communication and collaboration among everyone in the school food supply chain. As the School Food Authority (SFA), you are responsible for the proper use of school nutrition program funds to provide nutritious foods to students. You (and/or your cooperative purchasing group) may source food from distributors, manufacturers, local producers, the USDA Foods in Schools Program (USDA Foods), and the USDA Department of Defense Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program (USDA DoD Fresh).

Distributors, Manufacturers, and Brokers

You primarily work with ***distributors*** to acquire lower-sodium products. However, it can also be helpful to reach out to ***manufacturers*** who may be willing to develop lower-sodium products to your specification. ***Brokers*** note your needs and work with distributors and manufacturers to find and develop lower-sodium products.

Local Foods

Cultivating your menu with foods directly from ***local producers*** can help you replace higher-sodium menu items.

USDA Foods in Schools

USDA Foods can be your partner in acquiring produce, foods, and food products that will help you lower the sodium content of your meals. USDA Foods are available through three ordering options:

USDA Foods Direct Delivery

USDA Foods that are available for direct delivery are held to lower-sodium standards. USDA manages the specifications of direct delivery USDA Foods and has made sodium levels as low as possible across the spectrum of foods available. USDA Foods may be lower in sodium than what you are sourcing commercially.

USDA Foods Processing

Multi-state commercial processors ***(manufacturers)*** or ***in-state processors*** convert USDA Foods bulk items into products. While USDA sets nutrition standards for the bulk ingredients themselves, processed end products are not guaranteed to be lower in sodium. It is the resposibility of the SFA to evaluate available processed end products for sodium and other nutrition criteria.

USDA DoD Fresh

The government leverages its buying power by contracting with ***(local) producers*** for weekly deliveries of a wide variety of fresh produce, which is naturally low in sodium.

PROCURING LOWER-SODIUM PRODUCTS

Brokers, distributors, and manufacturers, collectively known as vendors, want your business and want to work with you. They want to know what products you are looking for and want to hear feedback regarding their products' quality and acceptance from students. Below are a few pointers to make the most of your conversations with vendors.

Check out the ***Scoping Out Sodium in School Menus*** and ***Sodium Swaps: Utilizing Product Substitution*** worksheets on ICN's ***Shaking It Up!*** website to learn more about identifying products lower in sodium.

1 Prepare to speak with vendors ahead of time by:

- **Evaluating your menu.** Familiarize yourself with the sodium levels of your current products and recipes. Identify the highest-sodium contributors in your menu.

  Use a cycle menu to help you analyze:
  - The type and frequency of menu items you offer,
  - Similarities among products needed for recipes, and
  - Menu items and recipes that contribute the most sodium in a weekly menu.

  A cycle menu allows you to "plug and play" menu items into different daily and weekly menus to see how they impact sodium totals.

Highest-Sodium Contributors

- Menu items with high sodium amounts per serving, such as:
  - Pizza
  - Cheese
  - Chicken patties, nuggets, tenders
- Frequently offered menu items with nominal-to-moderate sodium amounts per serving, such as:
  - Salad dressings
  - Ketchup
  - Commercially-prepared salsa

- **Setting sodium limits.** Set the sodium levels of your current products and recipes as your initial maximum sodium limits. During each procurement cycle, substitute a subset of your highest-sodium contributors with those that are slightly lower in sodium. Use the new sodium levels as your new maximum sodium limits for the next procurement cycle. Let your brokers and vendors know that you will not consider any products above your maximum sodium limits. This approach reduces your weekly sodium totals gradually over time. Your students will be less likely to notice any taste differences!

Year 1
Regular Pizza Sauce
220 mg sodium/serving

Year 2
Low Sodium Pizza Sauce
120 mg sodium/serving

Year 3
Pizza Sauce Made from Scratch
70 mg sodium/serving

- **Conducting market research.** Products that are high in sodium are typically commercially processed, packaged, and prepared foods.* The range of sodium in these products can be quite large. Obtaining the information you need about lower-sodium product options is an ongoing effort as it can become frequently outdated due to:
  - Product information not being readily available,
  - Varying product ingredients and formulations by different manufacturers, and
  - Rapidly changing manufacturing processes.

When engaging in market research, it's important to know **WHO** to reach out to and identify how they can help with procuring lower-sodium products. What do they have to offer?

*The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) defines "commercially processed, packaged, and prepared foods" as "processed multiple-ingredient foods that have been packaged for direct sale to consumers, for use in food establishments including, but not limited to, restaurants or for resale to other members of the food industry, as well as foods that are prepared by food establishments for direct consumption."

In the following table, review potential vendors and questions to ask to help you obtain lower-sodium products:

Current/New Vendors	Manufacturers
• Do you provide a low-sodium version of [product] or a similar product that is lower in sodium? • What is the product's cost and availability? • Is it a special order? • Do you have any product recommendations? If a broker or vendor approaches you with new lower-sodium products, be sure to ask for: ◦ Product catalogs ◦ Nutrition information ◦ Taste-testing samples to use ◦ Brochures ◦ Crediting information • We identified via [another school district, trade show, catalog, etc.] that you carry [low sodium product]. Would you be interested in working with our school district?	• We are interested in having you make [low-sodium product] for our school district. Would you be willing to discuss the specification, amount, pricing, timing, and delivery? *Solicitations must be open and competitive if above the micro-purchase threshold level.*

In addition, consider:
- Replacing heat-and-serve food products with a recipe to prepare in the kitchen. Research standardized recipes for the desired food product to add as a menu item. Check out the Child Nutrition Recipe Box (CNRB) to get started!
- Working with your State agency to determine if there are USDA Foods direct-delivered products that could be a lower-sodium alternative to a product you are currently sourcing commercially.

2 Discuss your menu needs with vendors.

After evaluating your menu, setting sodium limits, and conducting market research, you are ready to speak with your brokers or vendors. Share your findings from your market research and ask if they know of low-sodium products that might fit your menu needs. Brokers and vendors can help find lower-sodium versions of products, or alternative lower-sodium foods similar to those on your current menu. After identifying lower-sodium product options, compare the sodium amount, serving size, unit price, and meal contribution of each product.

If you are looking to **substitute** current menu items with similar, lower-sodium versions, be sure to provide the current products':
- Name
- Description
- Sodium amount
- Serving size
- Crediting information

Consider the following lower-sodium cheese pizzas:

Nutrition Facts
8 servings per container
Serving size 1 Slice (149g)
Amount Per Serving
Calories 280

	% Daily Value*
Total Fat 7g	9%
Saturated Fat 3g	15%
Trans Fat 0g	
Cholesterol 15mg	5%
Sodium 470mg	20%
Total Carbohydrate 39g	14%
Dietary Fiber 4g	14%
Total Sugars 4g	

CN XXXXXX
Each 5.26 oz. portion of Cheese Pizza provides **1.50 oz eq meats/meat alternates, 2.75 oz eq grains**, and ⅛ cup red/orange vegetable for the Child Nutrition Meal Pattern Requirements. [Use of this logo and statement authorized by the Food and Nutrition Service, USDA MM/YY].
CN

While the serving sizes are the same, the sodium amounts and crediting for meats/meat alternates and grains are different. You would need to consider how each pizza impacts your weekly menu in terms of total sodium and meal pattern component contribution.

Nutrition Facts
8 servings per container
Serving size 1 Slice (156g)
Amount Per Serving
Calories 360

	% Daily Value*
Total Fat 16g	21%
Saturated Fat 9g	45%
Trans Fat 0g	
Cholesterol 35mg	12%
Sodium 540mg	23%
Total Carbohydrate 34g	12%
Dietary Fiber 2g	7%
Total Sugars 4g	

CN XXXXXX
Each 5.49 oz. portion of Cheese Pizza provides **2.00 oz eq meats/meat alternates, 2.00 oz eq grains**, and ⅛ cup red/orange vegetable for the Child Nutrition Meal Pattern Requirements. [Use of this logo and statement authorized by the Food and Nutrition Service, USDA MM/YY].
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3 Seek student input!

Before substituting a menu item for a lower-sodium product, it's essential to seek student input. The lowest cost lower-sodium product may not be the tastiest option for your students. If your students won't eat it, it's not a suitable replacement!

Taste-testing activities and surveys can provide you with valuable feedback and help gain student acceptance of lower-sodium menu items. Utilize vendors to support you with taste testing. Generally, you can request a few product samples from your vendors at no cost—you just need to ask! They may even want to be *onsite* the day of testing to prepare samples for serving students in the serving line or eating area.

Check out Team Nutrition's Popular Events Idea Booklet to help you plan a taste-testing event for elementary or middle school students!

PROCURING LOWER-SODIUM PRODUCTS CHECKLIST

Use the checklist provided below to help you procure the best-tasting lower-sodium products from your vendors.

Evaluate your menu

- ☐ Familiarize yourself with sodium levels of all products and recipes in your menu
- ☐ Identify the highest-sodium contributors
- ☐ Set maximum sodium limits for all products
- ☐ Identify a subset of your highest-sodium contributors to replace with lower-sodium versions

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- ☐ Conduct market research to familiarize yourself with potential lower-sodium substitutes

Discuss menu needs with vendors

- ☐ Notify vendors of maximum sodium limits
- ☐ Share which menu items or products you are looking to substitute with lower-sodium versions
- ☐ Share findings from market research
- ☐ Identify lower-sodium product options

Seek student input

- ☐ Reach out to vendors to obtain samples
- ☐ Implement taste-testing activities and surveys

Incorporate new products and recipes into menu

- ☐ Set new maximum sodium limits

PROCUREMENT PARTNERS SUCCESS STORY

Nancy Coughenour, MS, RD, LD, SNS

Nancy Coughenour, recently retired Food Service Director of Shawnee Mission School District, began the journey of offering lower-sodium school meals over 15 years ago. Nancy's primary sodium reduction strategy was to evaluate the sodium content of products in her menu and recipes and compare them to potential new products every procurement cycle. The goal for each product was to never go higher in sodium than its current level and, when feasible, continue to move it downward. Nancy's individual product approach gradually reduced the overall sodium content of their menus through the years. Shawnee Mission has met the sodium target 2 levels with no significant challenges or student outcry.

Shawnee Mission School District Profile

Location: Shawnee Mission, Kansas

Enrollment: 27,500+ students;
34 elementary schools,
5 middle schools,
5 high schools

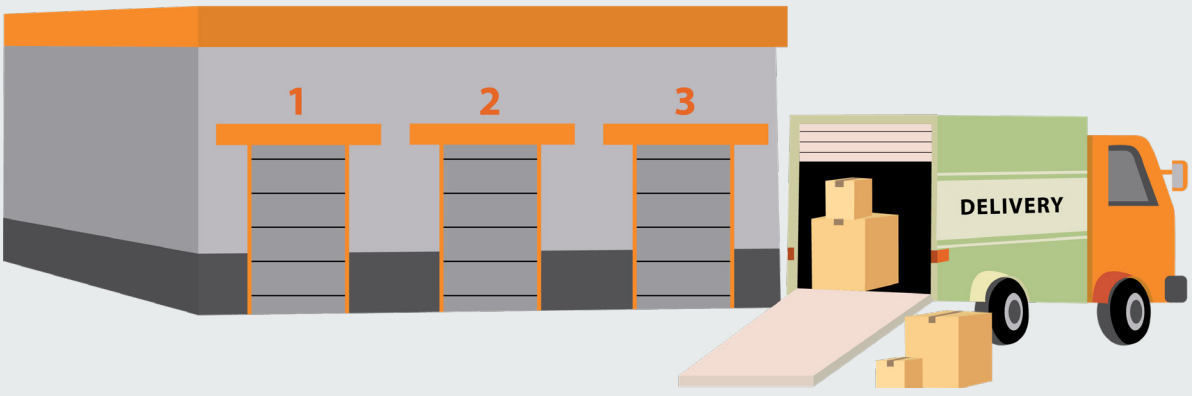
Website: Shawnee Mission School District

Of course, part of this sodium reduction journey involved working with her procurement partners, particularly manufacturers. She did this by talking to representatives directly during school visits and at school nutrition food and trade shows. Nancy explains, "*Every time I saw a manufacturing representative, I provided them feedback– 'Yes, we like your product, and this is why,' or 'No, we won't use your product, and this is why.' I was very specific and a little blunt at times. For certain products [that tended to be higher in sodium, like potatoes], I would show them that they needed to be at or below a certain sodium level to be considered if a company wanted my business. We would not go backward, and I would tell them that.*"

In addition to direct verbal feedback, Nancy also provided manufacturers with taste-test data of products she was willing to consider using in her program. Her managers sampled about 200 products with their students across all demographics and grade levels in a regular school year. For each product, she tracked the vendor that brought it in, the manufacturer, meal contribution, and nutrient data, in addition to the student feedback, and provided that information to the manufacturers.

Nancy's relationship with manufacturers is just one example of how school nutrition operators can work with their procurement partners to reduce sodium in school meals. Her parting words of wisdom, "*As a food service director, you need to do what is right for kids. If manufacturers and brokers hear [the need for lower-sodium products] enough, they'll take it back to their manufacturing plants and make the product.*"

Work with your vendors to plan, procure, and serve meals that are lower in sodium and appeal to your students!



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