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CHAIN REACTION

How will you prevail over expected supply chain challenges and get the products you need for meal service in SY2020-21?

A Special Digital Supplement to School Nutrition's Ongoing Coverage of the COVID-19 Pandemic



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BY PATRICIA L. FITZGERALD

CHAIN REACTION

How will you prevail over expected supply chain challenges and get the products you need for meal service in SY2020-21?



If anyone sees a certified crystal ball up for auction on eBay, it's well worth mortgaging the house to get ahold of it. Everyone *wants* to know what's going to happen in the months to come. Everyone *needs* to know what's going to happen in the months to come. And *no one* has any reliable predictions. This has led school nutrition operators and the vendors that serve the K-12 foodservice market to become enmeshed in a frustrating Catch-22 dilemma.

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THE QUANDARY

A phrase coined by author Kurt Vonnegut, a “Catch-22” indicates a frustrating situation of contradictory conditions that impede resolution. Vendors need school nutrition professionals to forecast and place product orders earlier than ever (we’ll discuss the reasons why later), but school nutrition teams are still awaiting word from their district administrators about what school schedules—and corresponding meal service—will look like, with the clock ticking ever closer to the expected start of the new year.

Even with a plan, participation is exceedingly difficult to predict, since this is (as we keep saying) a completely unprecedented situation. Data from previous school years—and even data from curbside emergency feeding efforts last spring—may be poor projections given drastic, new circumstances. How many kids will eat school meals at school? At home? What types of menu items can be served in classrooms? Picked up in the cafeteria and taken elsewhere to eat? Sent home? How will different combinations of variables impact potential participation?

Margins for *all* of the players in the K-12 segment have always been thinner than thin: for districts, distributors, brokers and manufacturers. The pandemic shut-downs wiped out any surplus funds. In the year ahead, no one can afford, literally, to get it wrong

by ordering too much or too little.

And yet, a spirit of cautious optimism prevails. In recent weeks, *School Nutrition* connected with several district directors and a number of industry representatives, and they all shared a pragmatic positivity. School nutrition will get it done—it won’t necessarily be pretty and it will definitely *not* be business as usual. But kids will not go hungry. Schools *will* have menu items for trays (or containers, bags and boxes).

There are several core ingredients to making this happen, and both operators and industry will need to meet in the middle when it comes to applying best practices and fresh ingenuity. To help you do your part in meeting this challenge, *School Nutrition* shares the reflections, anxieties and advice offered by leaders representing several different links in the school meals supply chain.

CRACKS IN A ONCE-FIRM FOUNDATION

Most of us take the supply chain for granted. Oh sure, it can be hard to get certain produce items—and we’ll see prices jack up—following an unusual weather event that wipes out a crop.

Or there’s a short-term run on popular items when a blizzard or hurricane threatens. And yes, most school nutrition operations have encountered their fair share of substitutions in a distributor’s delivery from time to time. But, in general, as both individual consumers and as foodservice professionals, we enjoy amazing reliability in this country in getting what we want, when we want it.

That bubble was burst for everyone by the infamous toilet paper shortage that dragged on for nearly two months in Spring 2020. Other supermarket shelves stood empty for various periods: pasta and rice one week, frozen vegetables the next, fresh chicken and beef after that. (Most of us *still* struggle to score disinfectant wipes.) While retail dependability has largely bounced back, many challenges in the *foodservice* supply chain continue to persist, including obtaining certain ingredients or materials (especially some that come from beyond our borders), addressing COVID-19 outbreaks among agricultural and factory workers, problems in the trucking industry (which had started more than a year before the pandemic) and other ripple effects. “It’s





BACK TO SCHOOL SNAPSHOT

Judi Reynolds, SNS, Director of Food Services
 Fallbrook Union High School District, California

THE PLAN: Our first day is August 17. The current plan is to have half the students in school on Monday and Tuesday and the other half on Thursday and Friday. We hope to send three days' of food home on Tuesdays and Fridays. We're still awaiting word from USDA if we will be sending five days of meals for our online students at home.

We typically offer the same items daily at breakfast and a two-week lunch rotation. We have planned a weekly rotation for both, although we likely will go back to our original cycles after the first few weeks.

We took a shot in the dark, making sure that we didn't order more than we could hold. We know we can run to a restaurant depot if we need something our distributor cannot supply. We are incredibly flexible with our menus; there's almost always *something* we can come up with.



really the perfect storm," says Quentin Layne, National Account Manager, Non-Commercial, **Basic American Foods**.

Gary Vonck, Vice President, Education Division, **KeyImpact Sales and Systems**, worries that many district directors are unaware of these issues. "They rely on industry to take care of them," he notes. Jose Quiñones, National School Business Development Manager, **J.T.M. Food Group**, concedes that industry has helped school nutrition operators to feel something like individual kings and queens in their districts, allowing them to live in a bit of a bubble when it comes to the harsh realities of supply chain challenges.

It's time to remove any blinders and understand *why* industry is asking for school nutrition directors to step up with thoughtful forecasts and other information about the menu items you intend to serve. "We're not trying to put pressure on you because we want your business," explains Layne. "It's just that we can't wait until later to hit the gas. We can't wait to go full throttle when we should be two miles down the road already." Product reliability will require directors to reconsider the "we've-

always-done-it-that-way" mindset. "We used to be able to do three-week lead times, but *now* it's six- to eight-weeks," says Layne.

Mimi Ford, Vice President Sales, Education & Management Channels, **J&J Snack Foods**, is frank in her concern about SY2020-21. "I think it will be worse than the COVID reset. There are too many variables. We don't have enough information about distributor inventory. We don't know enough about what menus schools are planning. We need to start building out our pipeline now," she says.

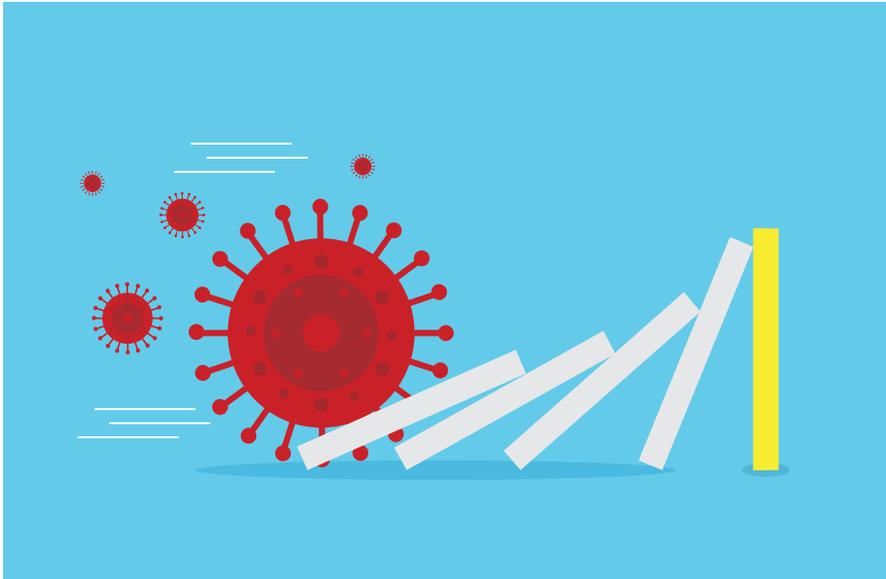
One reason for this heightened apprehension is that the pandemic has presented schools with some new competition in the supply chain. "Retail is on fire right now," says Vonck. It is, frankly, a more reliable channel for manufacturers and distributors. A product is scanned at the point of sale and is immediately tagged for "replenishment." No forecasts about possible participation necessary. Manufacturers are not going to reduce line times at processing plants that have been assigned to retail products in favor of items going to schools and restaurants. This is especially true of the larger

companies. One industry member has it on good authority that a cereal giant can't get any cereal bars directed to its foodservice division; *all* supply is headed straight to retail.

Jessica Shelly, MBA, SNS, Director of Student Dining Services, **Cincinnati Public Schools**, understands that competition is a powerful driver, but she wants to ensure that certain members of industry—especially those *not* directly involved in the K-12 segment—don't take her business lightly. "We are the biggest economic industry in Cincinnati," she says, referencing her school meals operation. "My purchases keep farmers in the field, factory workers on the line and truck drivers on the road." Shelly is more than willing to work *with* her industry partners in addressing supply chain challenges, but also is ready to wield her purchasing power when needed.

INVISIBLE INVENTORY

Another challenge to the K-12 food supply chain? Many distributors have warehouses still full of bulk and other menu items that were forecasted by schools, and purchased on their behalf, before they closed abruptly last



 **BACK TO SCHOOL SNAPSHOT**

Jodi Muchler, School Nutrition Director
West Washington School Corporation, Indiana

THE PLAN: August 5 is our tentative reopening date, but we don't have a plan yet. We're very small: 900 students in one big building in the middle of a corn field. The superintendent has established committees to discuss a plan; I'm on two of them. Meanwhile, I'm trying to do some scenario planning, knowing that even if we start in a "normal" mode, within a few weeks, schools could close, and we could have to go back to feeding remotely.

It's given me a lot of comfort to hear from directors that have been doing this for 30 years and that are three times my size saying that they are struggling, too. I know that we'll all do what we have to in order to survive.

spring. In the switch to emergency feeding, many of these items never turned into orders or moved on to districts. "Those are real dollars on the shelf," says Vonck.

GSFoods Group is a distributor that works exclusively in the K-12 channel. CEO Sean Leer, who also serves as Industry Advisory Council Chair for SNA, explains that it's his job to have product on hand for schools, even if they haven't gotten their orders in. "We have to buy it on a guess. We're making a financial commitment and the products become either our asset or our liability. We hope and pray that

they order it," he says.

If there's one message that Quiñones wants resonating with school nutrition directors, it is the importance of "knowing what you have in inventory at your distributor, at your own sites and at your processor. Once you know what you already have—and you already own—then you can create your menu. Not before," he advises.

Judi Reynolds, SNS, Director of Food Services, **Fallbrook Union (Calif.) High School District**, gets it. "I realized a few weeks after COVID hit that our distributor had been hit *hard*. They had been bringing in products that schools

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Keep doing what you were doing pre-COVID. Don't change. Even if you have to go from service and dining in the cafeteria to the classroom, figure out a way to make the items you used before work again.
”

ordered regularly and then menus shifted on a dime, and they got stuck with those when everyone went to IW [individually wrapped] products," she recounts. "I added up the totals on their specials list, and it was close to a million dollars' worth of product! I can only imagine the chain reaction effect it also has had on brokers and manufacturers."

And Ford worries that "we haven't seen the worst yet" when it comes to the financial impact of the COVID crisis on school districts. "I don't think enough people are talking about this," she says. Shelly knows all too well that money is hemorrhaging from her program, especially without vending and a la carte revenues. While she hopes to find ways to resurrect that income during the school year, initially, "We gotta keep the big picture, the *big picture*," she insists. "We can't let a la carte be a distraction from the main mission of getting meals to kids."

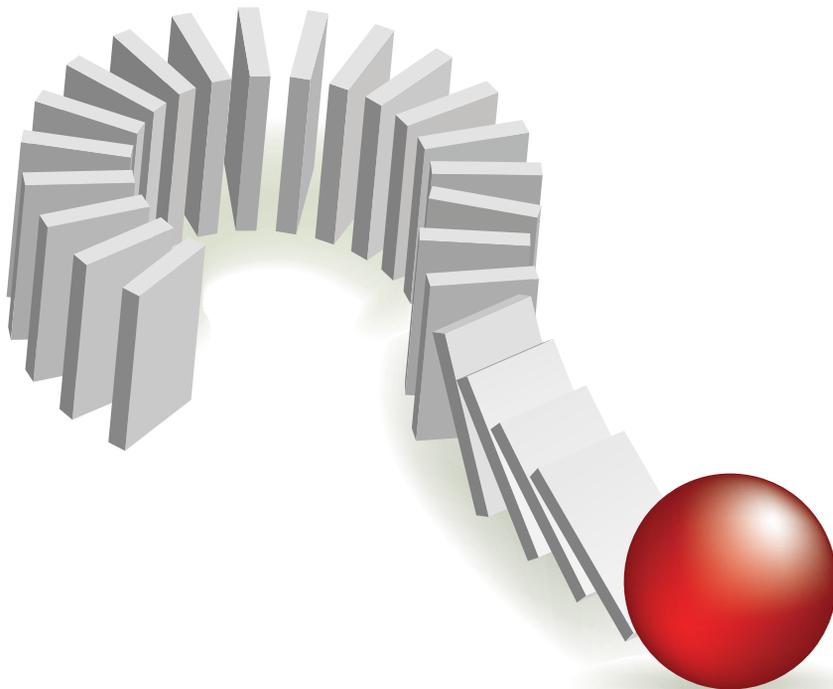
IW: EVERYONE'S NEW FAVORITE ACRONYM

"There's plenty of food," asserts Leer. "It's just not necessarily what customers want and how they want it." IW items constitute a particular concern for industry and operators alike. Manufacturers and processors that are accustomed to making items in bulk sizes for foodservice sometimes can (and have) retooled their lines for this

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type of packaging, but it comes with strings attached, including costs that may have to be passed along to the school customer. Vonck estimates that the transition from bulk to IW items carries a 7- to 10-cent surcharge.

There is incredible pressure on manufacturers to create the same—or significantly more—overall volume of IW items. In fact, demand for these is up across other foodservice segments, too, especially those, like schools, that have had to pivot to a take-out model. Food banks represent even more demand for the tight supply of IW products. And, frankly, when the largest districts in a state or region spec IW products, they usually get them at the expense of a smaller school system. “During COVID shutdowns, the big districts—especially those with storage and freezer capacity—*did* eat up the supply of IW items,” says Vonck, who recalls characterizing the IW situation as “the toilet paper of foodservice.”

When an operation transitions from a bulk product to an IW product, the output really changes, which is why the lead time must change,” explains Quiñones. “Plus, I used to have 100 customers buying that product—now I have 500 customers buying that product.” But increased demand, re-tooled manufacturing and packaging lines are only parts of the equation. The film used for most IW items is at a premium, manufactured overseas—and *everyone* wants it. Menu ingredients are another factor in play. For example, “When everyone went to IW sandwiches, they all wanted to use the same bread,” recounts Vonck.

UNWRAPPING POSSIBLE IW SOLUTIONS

Is there a strategy for addressing the unique challenges of getting IW products in significant volume on a tight timeline? Vonck advises that, when it comes to menu-planning, directors should “Keep doing what you were doing pre-COVID. *Don't* change. Even if you have to go from service and dining



BACK TO SCHOOL SNAPSHOT

Chris Burkhardt, SNS, Executive Director of School Nutrition
Cleveland Metropolitan School District, Ohio

THE PLAN: We’re about two weeks from finalizing our district plan and we’re presuming schools will reopen on August 17, as normal. We know it will be a combination of remote and in-school. With that as our premise, we’re planning on grab ‘n’ go carts and milk coolers to distribute breakfasts at the front door. For lunch, we’re expecting everyone to come through the cafeteria line and eat in different locations around the school to practice social distancing. We just don’t have the equipment to deliver to every classroom—and we don’t have the labor or the time to prep meals early enough for transport.

We’re planning to serve all meals—in-school and remote—in multi-compartment foam clamshells. We’ve tried to eliminate foam products in recent years, and reduce our carbon footprint, but the next closest environmentally friendly packaging option is five times more expensive.

We’ll have no a la carte service and only limited options in order to get all kids through the line quickly. We’re going to keep a four-week cycle menu, but a lot of our customization options and items that are tough to assemble will be going away. Over the last three years, our menus have emphasized three factors: handheld, bold flavors and customizable. We’re only cutting the customizable. To date, all of our COVID meals have been cold, but we’re hoping to transition to hot items, because we can see that menu fatigue is taking over.

 **BACK TO SCHOOL SNAPSHOT**

Sally Nicholson, RDN, LD, Director of Food Service and Nutrition, Lexington County School District One, South Carolina

THE PLAN: Although a reopening date hasn't been set yet, we know that elementary schools will have two options: all students returning, with every other Wednesday off, and students staying in the classroom with the same teacher *or* parents may choose a virtual elearning option. Middle and high schools will be similar: Students will operate on an A/B day schedule, with every Wednesday being virtual *or* students can opt for all virtual learning.

All meals will be enjoyed in the classroom. Meal delivery services (including from parents) will be prohibited. Students will pick up meals from mobile carts positioned in various locations around the school. All menu items will be pre-packaged and/or wrapped. Parents are encouraged to use an online payment system; cash payments will be accepted at specific times in the cafeteria each morning, with all received funds going to the student's account; no change will be returned. We'll be using a five-day cycle menu.

in the cafeteria to the classroom, figure out a way to make the items you used before work for you again without the IW processing."

Vonck is not being glib in this advice; he knows it's no simple solution, especially if school nutrition teams must send a significant portion of meals home. Still, he insists that school directors must find creative alternatives. Because "if you have to jump into making *everything* IW, manufacturers simply won't be able to keep up with it," he warns. "It's just not feasible." Vonck works up some quick math to illustrate: Overall participation during the spring was only about 30% of the same period in the previous school year. If there's a jump up of an expected (and hoped-for) 70% of free/reduced-price students participating in the coming year, that alone would more than double the current demand for IW items.

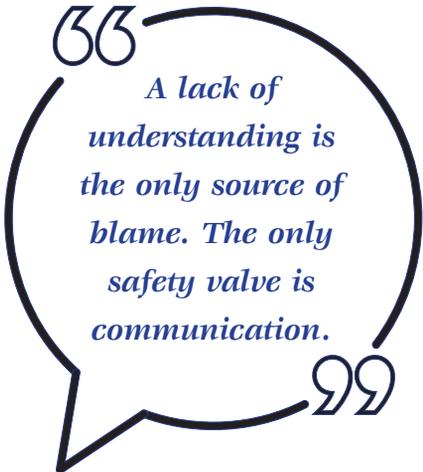
Most industry working in the K-12 foodservice segment recognize that some districts may be under a mandate to serve IW items, but they hope that many will use their bulk items and manage the individual portioning

and packaging in their own operations. Reynolds is one director who is keeping that in mind. "I have been building my menus off of what distributors have had to get rid of; what other districts stopped ordering, such as bulk items of cinnamon roll dough, etc.," she notes. "It's not difficult for us to individually wrap an item for service."

But for a large district like Cincinnati Public Schools? Managing its own IW packaging for side dishes or take-home items is just not in the cards. "It's too labor-intensive," says Shelly. "I'd rather we put our labor into entrées." The result is a "really diverse bid" for her operation. "I *am* worried about a bottleneck, with everyone wanting the same things at the same time, and that's why we are trying to be diverse in our IW items," she explains.

TAKE-OUT TRIALS

Asking schools to manage their own IW packaging not only transfers a labor cost, it also means they directly bear the packaging materials (and equipment) costs—and headaches. This is on top of obtaining other supplies required to provide meals in a grab 'n' go format.



In **Cleveland Metropolitan School District**, Executive Director of School Nutrition Chris Burkhardt, SNS, and his team have made the decision to use a three-compartment foam clamshell for *all* meals. "We met with packaging manufacturers and did a lot of testing. Once we settled on a product we liked, and had identified an initial order of 1,500 cases, we were told that they couldn't meet our needs," he recounts. "There aren't a lot of manufacturers making this product to begin with, but we did find another one with similar performance and cost specs. We should be good for the first 30 days, but what will late September look like?"

As this example illustrates, packaging will be a "big hurdle" for Cleveland and other districts, contends Burkhardt. "Everyone is going to be using the same approach, and the market isn't ready for it."

ROCKIN' THE PIVOT

Industry isn't asking schools to bear the full weight of responsibility in solving supply chain challenges this coming year. Since the start of the crisis and the pivot by schools to emergency meals, many manufacturers, brokers and distributors blew up their own business models to help schools meet their shared mission.

"We've worked with local suppliers to make new products available to schools," explains Leer. As one example, GS Foods Group bought raisins and juices from a supplier and paired these



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Jessica Shelly, MBA, SNS, Director of Student Dining
Cincinnati Public Schools, Ohio

THE PLAN: Our Board announced our plans just last night. Schools will reopen on August 24. Students will attend school in two groups: Monday and Tuesday or Thursday and Friday, with alternating Wednesdays. It's going to be a heavy lift, but our team has been trained in quality assurance.

In the morning, students will come in, do a temperature check, pick up a grab 'n' go breakfast and eat in the classroom. We've actually had a lot of practice with that at our high schools. Lunch will be served in the classroom, and it's going to take a lot of coordination with principals about our systems and schedules. We will give boxes of meals for take-home on remote-learning days.

We're going to pull back and go with a two-week cycle menu. Although, because of the different groups of kids coming in, I can actually do a three-day menu, which is an opportunity to save some money and manage inventory better.

We were considering buying a new POS system to manage mobile meals, but then we realized that we were going to have problems with kids who didn't have money in their accounts at the classroom point of service. We decided the money we would use on the POS upgrade would be better spent on just feeding all kids, regardless of account balances. We know this is going to make our meal charge debt go way, way up, though. I'm hoping for an angel to come out of the woodwork.



with bulk products the distributor had on hand to create a breakfast kit for schools. His team also started opening up #10 cans and cupping applesauce and other fruits to provide as IW items to their school accounts. "We need to make an 'easy' button for our school customers," says Leer. "We know many of them don't have time to do that. They need new products that work and have value." It was, he says, a fresh opportunity for his own business to pivot.

Basic American Foods took its 28-lb. bag of dehydrated potatoes and shrunk it to a 1.5-oz. pouch containing two servings of vegetables. "We got so much interest in this product, now we're having a hard time keeping up," says Layne, noting that it's also a popular item for food banks (and giving a shout-out to USDA for important labeling waivers that have allowed the company to meet customer demand with a speedy response). Now, in the face of uncertain back-to-school service models, Basic American is doing its own scenario planning about how its products can be used in

different preparations. "We're asking ourselves, 'How can the same food be prepared in different ways, with different labor constrictions, while maintaining quality?'" he explains.

Tyson is another that company prioritized the pivot last spring. "When the wake of COVID-19 caused everything to shift in March, we immediately threw out our plans and reached out to our customers to understand what they needed for immediate support and tried to step in everywhere we could to help," says Gena Bumgarner, Vice President, Tyson K-12. "Then our conversations shifted to the future state of school foodservice, and we looked to provide solutions based on all the feedback we were hearing from operators."

For J&J Snack Foods, business was down 70-80% at the height of school shutdowns. Since, it has rebounded to be down just 40% of normal levels "and we're thrilled with that," reports Ford. "We pivoted quickly. We have 25 to 30 SKUs of 160 core K-12 products," she explains, citing a shaker salad and an IW pretzel as two examples. In fact, a

few of the company's items have seen significant *growth*, especially as more schools are offering summer meals this year than ever before.

J.T.M. is also concentrating on ensuring a steady supply of its top-sellers in such categories as burgers, taco meat and mac-and-cheese. "About 80% of the directors I've talked to have said that if they used to offer six to eight menu options, they are scaling back to two to three," says Quiñones, advising directors to: "Reduce your options until you get more control of your own supplies. Be sure you know your own top-sellers—and what are the top-sellers in neighboring districts? The distributor is not going to bring in eight types of burgers." In fact, he says, "This is a great time to revisit your bid and clean it up and make it more manageable."

Meanwhile, "We've told our sales force not to push new products," reports J&J's Ford. "We're not going backward, but we're focusing on making sure we're never out of stock on any of our core items. We've told our plants: Foot on the gas."



BACK TO SCHOOL SNAPSHOT

Alyssia Wright, EdS, Executive Director of School Nutrition
 Fulton County Schools, Georgia

THE PLAN: We'll reopen on August 17 with all students on campus attending a traditional school setting, with families given the option to enroll their students in virtual learning. We will serve grab 'n' go meals on campus and students will eat in the classroom or other designated spaces to optimize social distancing. Online learners will have the option to pick up take-home meals once a week.

We did not change our cycle menus: We have a one-week cycle for breakfast and a four-week cycle for lunch. But for the take-home meals, we're starting with a one-week cycle for all meals, although we may expand that as the school year progresses.

I am worried about what we'll do if we can't get food items in. It's very much a reality, so I'm working on a procedure for approved substitutions with our distributor.

It may not be pretty, but this industry is second to none. The folks in K-12 are not to be messed with. We'll all find ways to get it done.

YOUR BEST GUESS

There's an important distinction between placing orders and forecasting demand. Forecasts don't lock you in, but they are extremely valuable tools for your vendors. "Just communicate your thoughts. We understand that most of you are doing this a little blind," says Vonck. "But tell us what you're thinking, and plan to follow up in the first few weeks," he continues, anxious that, at press time, many directors are "either buying at levels pre-March 13 or not buying anything right now."

A number of directors concede that last year's numbers are, indeed, the basis of their forecasts, orders or both. "Right now, we're using past projections," says Walter Campbell, Executive Director, Nutrition Services, **Charleston County (S.C.) School District**. "There is still a strong possibility that all students will return—with those who choose to go with online learning only being as high as 10%." Alyssia Wright, EdS, Executive Director of School Nutrition, **Fulton County (Ga.) Schools**, also used last year's numbers to forecast her needs for the first month of the coming school year. "We may be initially high, but we'll adjust numbers as we need to," she explains.

But even without hard data—and/or with possibly inflated participation—industry is rising to the challenge. "We know there are still a lot of questions around how SY2020-21 will be managed and our customers' ability to forecast their needs has been greatly hindered," Bumgarner acknowledges. That's why Tyson and other vendor partners are proactively reaching out to directors and distributors to "keep a pulse on what back to school will look like," she continues. "Based on the feedback, we optimized our portfolio to better help our operators work through uncertain demand. Continual communication has been key in evolving and adapting to the schools' needs."

Basic American's Layne shifted an annual in-person K-12 summer summit to a virtual platform and has tapped the expertise of several directors, asking them to share their needs with his team. "Communication is the first and foremost foundation of any great idea," he notes. "Collaboration can't occur until communication starts."

Similarly, J.T.M.'s Quiñones is participating in several ongoing group discussions to address concerns, including a regular meeting of SNA Patron companies. He's also a member of a Texas-based taskforce that is bringing

suppliers, distributors, directors and the state agency to the table. "It's been very helpful in allowing us all to understand more about the roles of different stakeholders," Quiñones notes. "We've spent more time than ever before understanding operations, labor, equipment, even how far it is from the cafeteria to the classroom. We've really been able to get into our customer's shoes. It's giving us a chance to develop options that will fit in multiple service models: curbside, cafeteria and classroom."

Quiñones also says that this experience has introduced vendors to "a whole new sheriff in town": the superintendent. Industry has gained a new appreciation for the power of the superintendent in making decisions that affect a school meal operation.

But there should be *mutual* exploration among the other links in the chain. That's why Ford encourages directors to ask more questions to improve their understanding of the full supply chain. "One domino affects the whole chain. What is the warehouse availability? What is the availability of packaging film? Do you know *that* lead time? If you are changing to an IW product, what is the impact of the extra steps related to printing artwork on the packaging?" Directors also can do their part to be more intentional and specific about *how* products will be used, she urges. "Do you want the IW item to be ovenable? Or will the packaging be removed before heating?"

Burkhardt reports a certain degree

“
*We will just go with the flow and
 make it happen.*
 ”



BACK TO SCHOOL SNAPSHOT

Walter Campbell, Executive Director of Nutrition Services
 Charleston County School District, South Carolina

THE PLAN: We're looking at August 18 to reopen, but a lot can happen in a month and a half—the start date is a moving target.

We're planning to set up for meal service in both classrooms and in the cafeteria. But we *prefer* that they come to the cafeteria, wherever they eat. Either way, our packaging will keep meals safe, hot and easily transported. Whether it's a school of 100 students or 3,000 students, our system is set up to adjust to every situation.

We had been using a three-week menu cycle featuring a number of choices. We're now streamlining our menu to a two-week cycle, with fewer items per day. Some of these are items that can be cross-utilized, like our burger for Salisbury Steak Day. We know some manufacturers and brokers are going to have a tough time as we streamline our menu. We have our “what we want to order” set and initial orders are ready, but our distributor's warehouses are still packed, so they haven't placed these [with manufacturers] yet.

We know there are going to be some last-minute issues, which is why we ask a lot of questions and confirm orders over and over. We've had warnings of price increases and shortages, so we're ready to shift and change menu items if needed. Our team has been through hurricanes, so we're *always* ready to shift if needed.

level of communication is vital across the entire food supply chain. “We need to be ‘open-book’ with each other,” insists Vonck.

Leer agrees: “We wrote to our suppliers, explaining that we need brutal honesty [about product availability]. We told them: ‘If we fail, we'll own it. But if you fail, you gotta own it,’” he recounts. “It's about prioritizing clear and honest communication.”

For Tyson, “Managing the supply chain in the face of uncertain demand is a big conversation that we're having with manufacturers across the board,” says Bumgarner. “Our challenge will be staying out in front of the demand shift as more foodservice operations open up.”

Layne echoes the value of cross-industry transparency, noting that if distributors can share where the big pulls are in their inventory or what products are sitting on shelves, it can be valuable for suppliers in making appropriate adjustments in manufacturing line times. “We can all talk more in order to solve inventory issues,” he says. “And let's make this a continued practice as we go forward.”

Ford also emphasizes the need for ongoing communication, especially “as your strategy changes and you're tweaking your menu mix,” she says, urging directors to identify alternatives and back-up plans. “It's *not* going to be a normal year. We're all anxious about another major shut-down,” agrees Layne.

MUTUAL APPRECIATION SOCIETY

The directors that *School Nutrition* reached certainly won't be pointing any accusatory fingers at industry. Far from it. They uniformly cite great relationships with their vendor partners and

of chicken-and-the-egg second-guessing when it comes to forecasting and ordering in the current environment. The dialogue tends to get circular, he cites: “‘What do you want?’ ‘What do you have?’ ‘We'll have what you want!’ ‘We'll take what you have.’ ‘So, what do you want?’ ‘Well, what do you have?’”

Meanwhile, Shelly is expecting upticks in lunch and breakfast counts, because “we'll be right there in the classroom,” she says. A pre-pandemic high school grab ‘n’ go breakfast program really increased participation dramatically, so she's using that as one means of estimating her participation. But Shelly encourages her peers to look at the bigger picture when it comes to making projections: “It can't just be a snapshot in time. You can't just look at data points, you need to look at data *trends*. What was happening when you had peaks and troughs?”

EVERYONE ACCOUNTABLE, NO ONE BLAMED

If there are product shortages in the coming year—and, to be realistic, there likely *will* be—“We hope our school customers will be patient. No one should go negative; no one should be blaming their distributors or manufacturers,” urges Vonck. He expects certain shifts in his own priority management. “My team is going to be doing a lot more logistics work. We're going to be spending more time *finding* products for our school partners than we are *showing* products. We need our people to focus on chasing orders.”

Indeed, there should be no finger pointing in the wake of any shortfalls between supply and demand. “No one is to blame. A lack of understanding is the only source of blame,” states Vonck. “The only safety valve is communication.” This philosophy doesn't involve only the connections between vendors and schools—this



DIRECTOR-TO-DIRECTOR ADVICE



“We came up with a list of must-have items for Day One and recognized the ones that we expected to be particularly hard to get—like the clamshells or 6-oz. cups for fruit. We think every district will want these, so we did that forecasting and shared it with our vendors. We’re just waiting on the district plan to actually place orders.”—*Chris Burkhardt, Ohio*



“Don’t get in a rut with your menu items. Be creative and flexible. Try new things; use what’s available. Stay in contact with your industry partners and realize how difficult this has been on *them*. Keep an eye on Facebook; the posts in the different groups are so helpful.”—*Judi Reynolds, California*



“Make use of bonus items available in your state’s commodity warehouse. They send out communications, and I review the list and grab whatever I know I can incorporate. I can get creative. I can make adjustments. Also, *ask* about other surplus items. In the spring, I would send a weekly email to my state telling them that I needed diced chicken, apple-sauce, salsa, and they often were able to find it for me.”—*Joni Mulcher, Indiana*



“Talk with other district directors. We’re not in competition; we’re all willing to share. Take someone else’s idea and make your own spin on it. Remember that if we keep students at the heart of what we do and what we plan, we will come out on the other side stronger and better.”—*Walter Campbell, South Carolina*



“We all have to give each other some grace—and that starts with ourselves, too. It’s hard for me to swallow bringing back things we’ve eliminated, like foam trays or straws. But remember that this is a *pause*. It’s just one year. It’s not a reversal. Our priority must be on securing for kids what is most necessary. I would rather spend my money on fruits and vegetables—and the labor to prep them—than on compostable packaging that is three times the price.

“Don’t let fear drive decision-making—or prompt information hoarding. I’ve seen social media posts of operators mentioning a cool product they’ve discovered and pointedly saying, ‘I’m not going to tell you what it is, because I don’t want it to run out.’ It’s just like hoarding toilet paper! Don’t let us lose sight of the fact that we’re all in this *together*.”—*Jessica Shelly, Ohio*



“Be willing to flex and flow on a daily basis. Be solution-oriented and look for the hard ‘yes.’ Remember that some of the best solutions come from staff. Ask for their suggestions and input. Make sure you encourage and thank your team for all they are doing. Make room for grace.”—*Sally Nicholson, South Carolina*



“No matter how your district is returning to school, the operation *will* be different, so go in with eyes open early. Plan with your internal team, as well as with district leaders and vendors. Communicate what you will need to keep some kind of financial solvency in your program. Make sure everyone remembers why we are here, why we do what we do and why we must continue on. We are stronger *together!*”—*Alyssia Wright, Georgia*

praise them for all their efforts over the last four months.

“I don’t know where we’d be without our industry partners,” says Shelly. “I don’t think I’ve ever felt so bonded in our relationship before. They are so responsive, compassionate and available. They aren’t just questioning; they are *listening*. They aren’t pushing product, they are listening to

— “
*You can’t just look at data points,
 you need to look at data trends.*
 ” —



what we need, and asking, ‘How can I make it better?’”

Burkhardt agrees. “Everyone has been fantastic to work with,” he notes. “Every occasion I’ve had to pick up the phone, I’ve always gotten someone on the other end, bar none. I ask questions and within the same day, I get answers. The communication has been phenomenal from all sides: distributor, manufacturer, broker.”

Joni Muchler, School Nutrition Director, **West Washington (Ind.) School Corporation**, is a brand-new director, the first her small district has ever hired, and with less than one year on the job. She credits help from a distributor rep, as well as from a J.T.M. broker, with getting her up to speed and through the crisis. “All through the spring, they’d tell me: ‘Here’s what we can get for you.’ ‘Here’s what we can offer.’ ‘Don’t hold your breath for that product; make sure you have another option.’ They’ve had my back,” she reports. “And we’ve had a lot of conversation about what may be difficult to get in the fall.”

Wright is braced for the possibility of shortages, given that every week of meal service during the shutdown, there were one or two menu items that were unavailable. “It was critical for us to work *with* our distributor and determine what substitutions were available,” she recounts, explaining that frequent communication mitigates the need for blame.

Directors are also learning more about the challenges that vendors are facing, which only deepens their appreciation for their industry partners. “I have a better understanding now than I did in March, due to their effective communication,” credits Sally Nicholson, RDN, LD, Director of Food Service and Nutrition, **Lexington County (S.C.) School District One**. Wright agrees: “It’s

critical to maintain communication with both the distributor *and* the manufacturer, so that each could understand what we needed in our forecasts, the timing of deliveries and a back-up plan.”

For Campbell, “We absolutely understand all the challenges that our vendors are facing. But that doesn’t mean taking ‘no’ for an answer. We will find a way to get our students what they need. Last spring and this summer, we have had to use multiple avenues to get products, from direct ship to using more than one distributor,” he reports, and he stands ready to do that again, if necessary.

But Shelly concedes that she still knows only a fraction of the pressure that industry partners are feeling. “And I *have* been trying to listen to them about what they’re dealing with,” she says. It makes her a little uneasy about her projections. “I don’t want to exaggerate our numbers; but I don’t want to under-promise, either.”

SHIFT HAPPENS

At the end of the day, everyone comes back to that spirit of fundamental optimism. “I believe in the resilience of our directors,” affirms Vonck. “They can rise to it.” Leer agrees: “Our customers are so darn creative and ingenious.”

Directors are ready to demonstrate that ingenuity, with a Plan A, Plan B, Plan C, Plan D.... “I can’t see any point in worrying about what will happen six weeks from now,” says Reynolds. “I think there will be food, and whatever is available, we’ll figure out how to use it in a delicious menu offering. I can only do my best to create a plan that we think will work, and be ready to change if need be.” She’s prioritizing a supply of beef crumbles, diced chicken and ingredients to make sauces, pastas and rice. “We will just go with the flow and make it happen.”

This is a great time to revisit your bid and clean it up and make it more manageable.

“We’re prepared to be flexible if situations change again,” pledges Bumgarner. “We know that feeding kids is a critical component for the health and safety of our communities, and we’re ready for that demand when it does come.”

Layne echoes this sentiment. “It may not be pretty, but this industry is second to none. The folks in K-12 are *not* to be messed with. We’ll all find ways to get it done,” he says. “I’m hoping to be an enabler of those heroes.”

Leer also makes a point to extend credit to others who are supporting the work of school nutrition operators and industry alike. “I’m truly amazed by all of the actions that USDA has taken,” he says. “And I’m blown away by SNA. Everyone is standing on their heads, wanting to come through for you.”

Quiñones gets a little emotional when he reflects on the strength of the operator-industry partnership in the K-12 segment. “You’re not alone. And through SNA, you have the opportunity to learn from so many others. This is the time to walk together, side by side, and show the value and strength of being a member of this Association,” he notes.

“Don’t lose heart,” urges Bumgarner. “Don’t stop the work you’re doing. You are needed. Your mission is noble.” And speaking for Tyson, as well as the K-12 segment at large: “We stand ready to serve you in your mission.” **SN**

Patricia Fitzgerald is editor of School Nutrition.

is for Thank You

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