upLIFT

LEARN. INSPIRE. FEED. TEACH.

Webinar Series

Increasing Student Participation in Rural Communities

November 17, 2026

1:30 PM - 2:00 PM

Professional Standards Learning Codes: 4110, 4120

ARIZONA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Meet Your Host



Kim Ruiz, RDN

HEALTH AND NUTRITION SERVICES SPECIALIST

Welcome!

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LEARN. INSPIRE. FEED. TEACH.

upLIFT was designed specifically for child nutrition professionals like you. It offers resources to help you LEARN about nutrition, get INSPIRED on meal choices for your participants, FEED students healthy meals, and TEACH others in your community about your programs.

You can look forward to materials and monthly webinars featuring unique upLIFT content showcasing Arizona child nutrition professionals, and providing ongoing inspiration throughout the year. This will empower you to upLIFT your programs in your own unique way!

Overview

1. Benefits of Boosting Participation
2. Valuable Insights and Marketing Strategies
3. Practical Steps and Resources

Benefits of Boosting Participation

Benefits of Increasing Participation

Student involvement in school meal programs correlates with a 14% decrease in the likelihood of food insecurity for households that have at least one child receiving a free or reduced-price lunch.*

Aside from alleviating food insecurity, school meal participation also…

- **Supports Good Nutrition:** Students participating in school lunch consume more whole grains, milk, fruits and vegetables than those who do not.
- **Boosts Learning:** Eating a nutritious lunch has shown to improve cognitive function, increased concentration in class, higher test scores, and fewer sick days.
- **Improves Health Outcomes**: Balanced school meals help manage calorie intake and deter unhealthy eating habits, resulting in overall positive health outcomes.

*Huang, J., & Barnidge, E. (2016). Low-income children's participation in the National School Lunch Program and household food insufficiency. Social Science & Medicine, 150, 8–14.

Focus on Rural School Nutrition

Nutrition Powers Learning

Consistent access to balanced meals supports child development, attention, attendance, and academic success.

Location Shapes Access

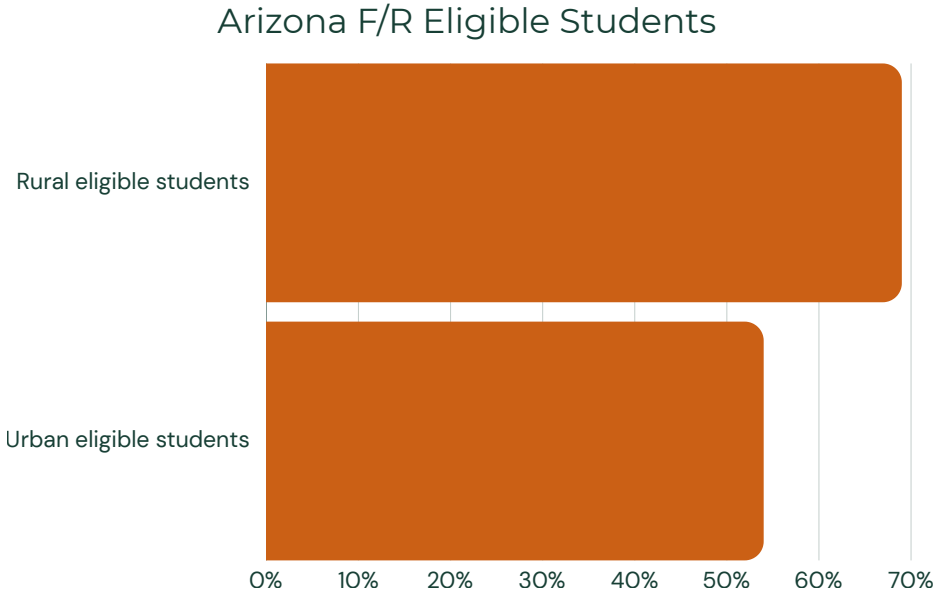
Distance, limited vendors, staffing constraints, and household economics create challenges that rural communities must solve locally.

Rural communities encounter considerable difficulties in securing reliable access to nutritious foods, revealing a distinct gap. School meals are pivotal in tackling this challenge. How can rural schools maintain and enhance their efforts in supporting their communities?

Addressing the Gaps

Participation Gaps are Solvable!

While urban areas contain a higher number of qualifying children, rural schools face a higher concentration of need relative to their student populations.



Transportation

Long routes and schedules can disconnect students from meal access.

Stigma

Program stigma or service design may unintentionally signal difference.

Awareness

Families may not know eligibility, menus, or how to enroll.

Rural Landscape

Understanding the Rural Landscape

Lean Infrastructure

Fewer suppliers, longer distances, limited kitchens, and lean staffing constrain delivery.

Connected Communities

Strong relationships accelerate trust, referrals, and volunteer energy.

Access and Isolation

Distance and limited broadband can make outreach inconsistent.

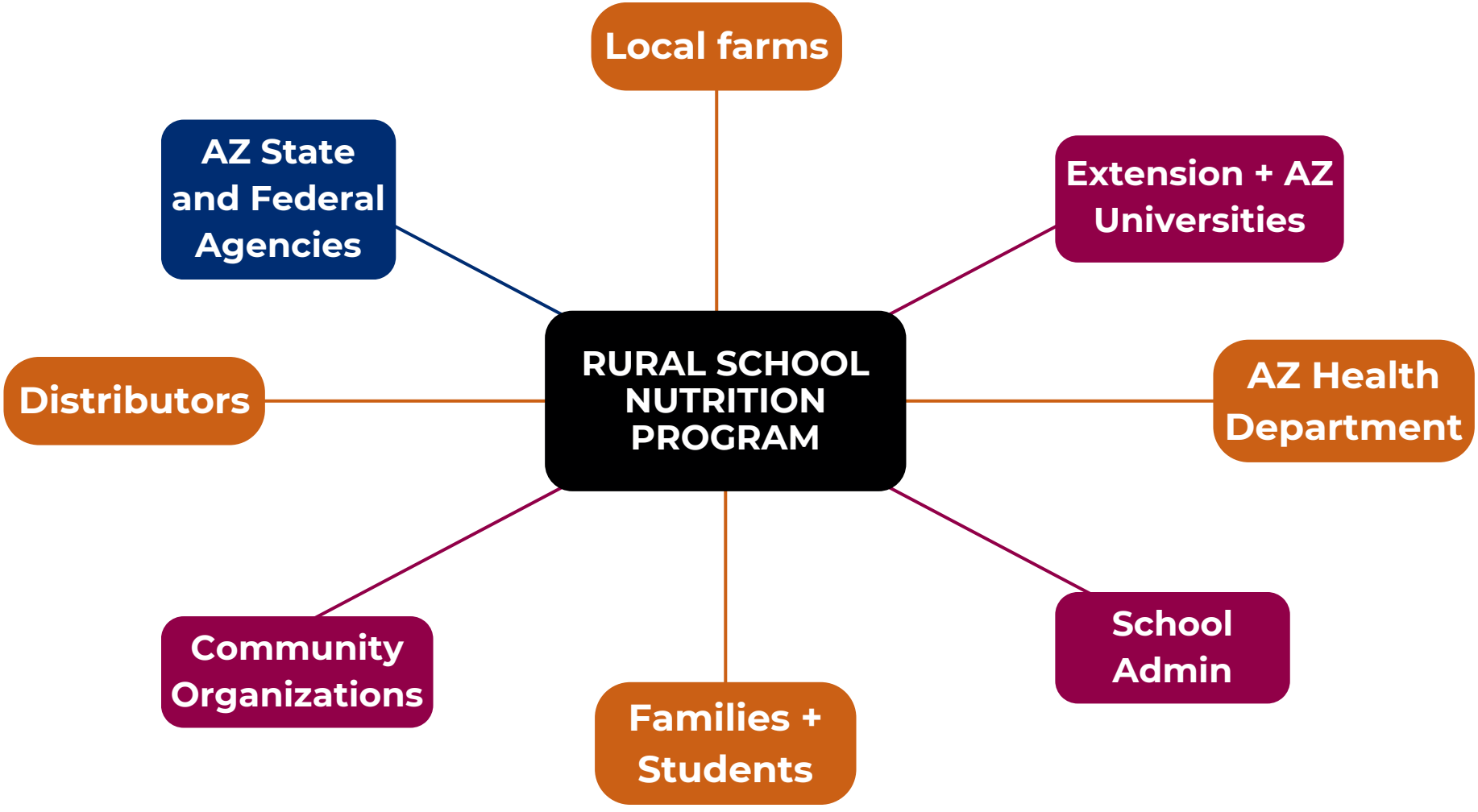
Economic Pressure

Seasonal work, transport costs, and tight home/school budgets affect meal decisions.

Valuable Insights and Marketing Strategies

Rural School Nutrition Program Ecosystem

Local Ecosystem



Partnerships

At the very least, the following partnerships can improve food quality, foster community engagement, facilitate resource sharing, and promote nutrition education...

FARMS
Fresh seasonal food + community connection

AZ STATE/FEDERAL AGENCIES
Training, technical assistance + producer links

AZ HEALTH DEPARTMENT
Wellness support + nutrition education

SCHOOLS + FAMILIES
Feedback, engagement + promotion

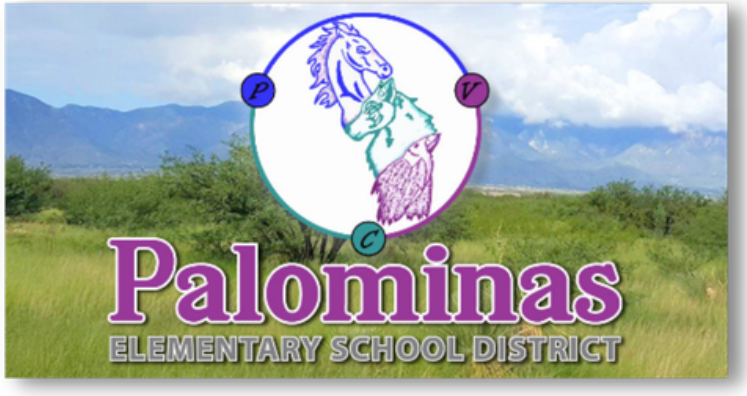
Build patience into your partnership strategies, and view each partnership as an opportunity for learning rather than a final agreement.

Palominas Elementary School District

Procurement of Local Foods as Infrastructure

880 students

- 3 sites
- 44% free/reduced-price eligibility



"Heart of the community"

Arizona-grown, with a focus on Cochise County—linking nutrition integrity, wellness and lifelong healthy habits.

Palominas Elementary School District

Palominas Makes Local Available on the Menu

~20%

of the menu from local products

- Offerings - Weekly farm-fresh Friday, Daily Local produce + salad bar, monthly harvest of the month
- Partners span farms, SHACs, Wellness Committee, Extension, state nutrition, health agencies and families.

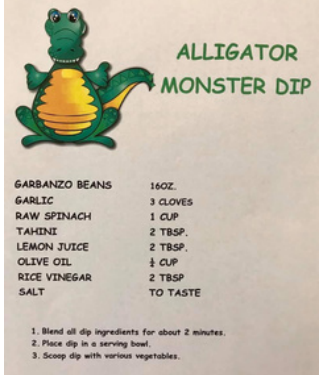


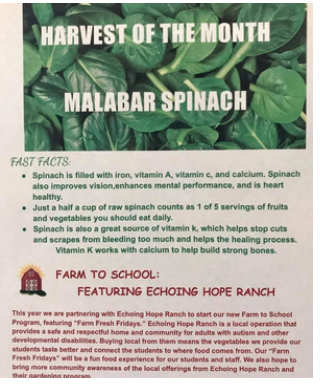


Palominas Elementary School District

Turn the Cafeteria Into a Place of Discovery

- Farm Vists and Virtual Tours
- Hydroponic Greens and Harvest Events
- Scratch and Speed-scratch meals
- Flavor stations and taste-tests
- Family harvest nights







Palominas Elementary School District

Promote Incremental Growth

+5%

local product growth per year—or 1–2 items annually

- **First Step: LEARN** - Research items needed, visit farms, request samples, verify seasonality and availability, negotiate price, ensure certification and insurance, confirm delivery and payment
- **Second Step: ADAPT** - Plan seasonally, adjust recipes, communicate often with both farm/distributors and staff, use what is available, pivot without blame

Palominas Elementary School District

Make the meal visible, social and worth choosing

SHOW

Tell the sourcing story

TEACH

Managers join education

DIGNIFY

Use empowering language

REWARD

Use materials + small incentives

WELCOME

Build positive rapport

BLEND

Trusted outreach + digital

















Palominas Elementary School District

Operational Excellence to Boost Participation

- **Focus on the Meals:** Quality meals, economic budgeting, recipes that encourage staff pride
- **Use Your Resources:** Know your equipment, sufficient planning, focus on daily flow
- **Prioritize Safety:** Training on food handling, sharing, and waste
- **Enhance the Experience:** Positive staff environment, consistent scheduling, staff praise and promotion
- **Boost Team Morale:** Use all their talents; but stay flexible
- **Remember the Outcome Goal:** Lifelong healthy habits for students that are being served!

Practical Steps and Resources

Ways to Gain Attention and Participation

- **Focus on the Community -** Hold family events that rely on cultural relevancy and perform outreach locally
- **Make use of Digital Media -** Keep messaging relevant to rural communities and smaller groups
- **Participate in School Promoted Activities -** Use school promotions to your advantage, provide non-food incentives, collect and highlight testimonials from parents teachers, admin, etc
- **Use the Cafeteria as a Space for Learning -** Cafeterias can be another classroom for food literacy

Increasing Reach

Traditional

Flyers • community meetings • newsletters

Personal, trusted and locally grounded

Trade-off: limited scalability

Digital

Social media • texting • email

Broader reach and measurable response

Trade-off: requires digital access

RECOMMENDATION → BLEND OF BOTH

Reducing Stigma

Language can reduce stigma—or reinforce it

"Good food, grown close to home, for every student."

DIGNITY
Invite; never label

EMPOWERMENT
Choice, agency, belonging

CULTURAL RELEVANCE
Reflect local foods and voices

Sample Plan for Increasing Participation



Assess
Stakeholders + resource map

Build
Partners + procurement + marketing

Pilot
Launch + feedback + adjust

Sustain
Improve + expand + measure

Increasing Reach

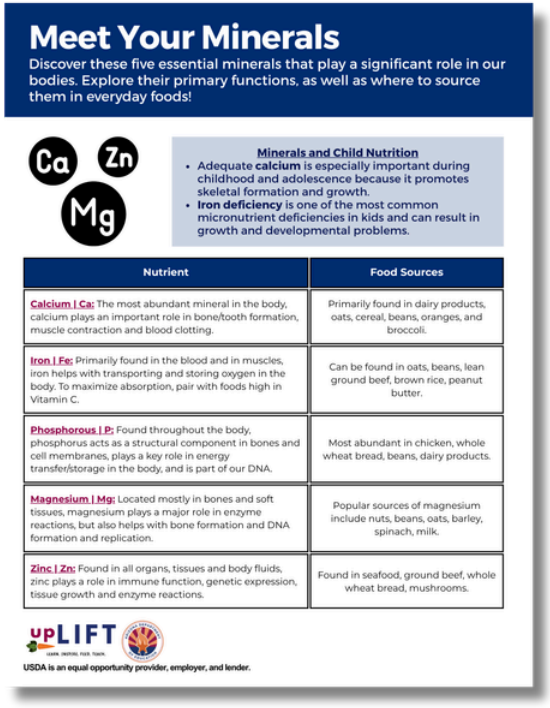
Measure the School Meal Experience as a Whole



Summary

- **Emphasize local development:** Prioritize building relationships within your community, actively listening to their needs, and demonstrating ongoing improvement.
- **Seek diverse partnerships:** Explore partnerships that are accessible to you, whether they are local or further afield.
- **Tailor rural procurement:** Understand that rural procurement varies for each entity; communicate your needs to farms, distributors, state agencies, and local organizations for support.
- **Engage your audience:** Use school promotions, digital media, and the cafeteria as platforms for education and marketing to effectively reach your audience.

Resources



Meet Your Minerals

Discover these five essential minerals that play a significant role in our bodies. Explore their primary functions, as well as where to source them in everyday foods!

Ca Zn Mg

Minerals and Child Nutrition

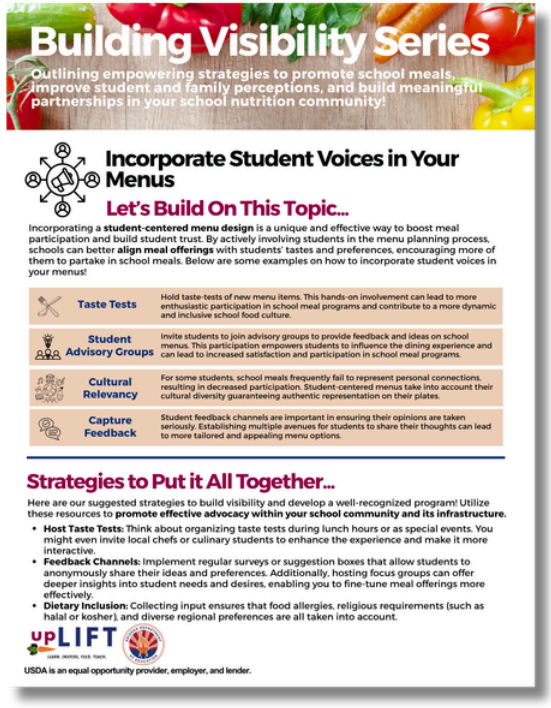
- Adequate **calcium** is especially important during childhood and adolescence because it promotes skeletal formation and growth.
- **Iron deficiency** is one of the most common micronutrient deficiencies in kids and can result in growth and developmental problems.

Nutrient	Food Sources
Calcium | Ca: The most abundant mineral in the body, calcium plays an important role in bone/tooth formation, muscle contraction and blood clotting.	Primarily found in dairy products, oats, cereal, beans, oranges, and broccoli.
Iron | Fe: Primarily found in the blood and in muscles, iron helps with transporting and storing oxygen in the body. To maximize absorption, pair with foods high in Vitamin C.	Can be found in oats, beans, lean ground beef, brown rice, peanut butter.
Phosphorous | P: Found throughout the body, phosphorus acts as a structural component in bones and cell membranes, plays a key role in energy transfer/storage in the body, and is part of our DNA.	Most abundant in chicken, whole wheat bread, beans, dairy products.
Magnesium | Mg: Located mostly in bones and soft tissues, magnesium plays a major role in enzyme reactions, but also helps with bone formation and DNA formation and replication.	Popular sources of magnesium include nuts, beans, oats, barley, spinach, milk.
Zinc | Zn: Found in all organs, tissues and body fluids, zinc plays a role in immune function, genetic expression, tissue growth and enzyme reactions.	Found in seafood, ground beef, whole wheat bread, mushrooms.

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Nutrition Knowledge Fact Sheet



Building Visibility Series

Outlining empowering strategies to promote school meals, improve student and family perceptions, and build meaningful partnerships in your school nutrition community!

Incorporate Student Voices in Your Menus

Let's Build On This Topic...

Incorporating a **student-centered menu design** is a unique and effective way to boost meal participation and build student trust. By actively involving students in the menu planning process, schools can better **align meal offerings** with students' tastes and preferences, encouraging more of them to partake in school meals. Below are some examples on how to incorporate student voices in your menus!

Taste Tests	Hold taste-tests of new menu items. This hands-on involvement can lead to more enthusiastic participation in school meal programs and contribute to a more dynamic and inclusive school food culture.
Student Advisory Groups	Invite students to join advisory groups to provide feedback and ideas on school menus. This participation empowers students to influence the dining experience and can lead to increased satisfaction and participation in school meal programs.
Cultural Relevancy	For some students, school meals frequently fail to represent personal connections, resulting in decreased participation. Student-centered menus take into account their cultural diversity guaranteeing authentic representation on their plates.
Capture Feedback	Student feedback channels are important in ensuring their opinions are taken seriously. Establishing multiple avenues for students to share their thoughts can lead to more tailored and appealing menu options.

Strategies to Put it All Together...

Here are our suggested strategies to build visibility and develop a well-recognized program! Utilize these resources to **promote effective advocacy within your school community and its infrastructure.**

- **Host Taste Tests:** Think about organizing taste tests during lunch hours or as special events. You might even invite local chefs or culinary students to enhance the experience and make it more interactive.
- **Feedback Channels:** Implement regular surveys or suggestion boxes that allow students to anonymously share their ideas and preferences. Additionally, hosting focus groups can offer deeper insights into student needs and desires, enabling you to fine-tune meal offerings more effectively.
- **Dietary Inclusion:** Collecting input ensures that food allergies, religious requirements (such as halal or kosher), and diverse regional preferences are all taken into account.

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Building Visibility

https://www.azed.gov/hns/nslp/uplift/

Looking Ahead

Join us next year!

January upLIFT Webinar

January 19, 2027

1:30 PM - 2:00 PM

upLIFT will be taking a break in December! We wish you a joyous holiday season and prosperous new year!

Keep an eye out for more details on January's upLIFT webinar!

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Thank you!

Any questions?
Please type them into the Q&A now.

If you are attending the live webinar, you will receive an email once attendance has been completed. Once you have received this email, your training certificate will be available in Arizona Professional Learning Development (APLD).

If you are watching the recorded webinar, you can access the survey link and certificate of completion at the end of the webinar slides.

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Congratulations!

You have completed the recorded webinar: Increasing Student Participation in Rural Communities

To request a certificate, please go to the next slide.

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Information to include when documenting this training for Professional Standards:
Training Title: Increasing Student Participation in Rural Communities
Professional Standards Learning Codes: 4110, 4120
Please Note:

- Attendees must document the amount of training hours indicated regardless of the amount of time it takes to complete it.

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