

FROM THE GROUND UP

Building Strong School Nutrition Programs



Session Descriptions

Wednesday, October 21 – Friday, October 23, 2026

Keynote and General Sessions

Wednesday, October 21 – Opening General Session

Child Nutrition Foundations – Demystifying the History and Legal Structure

Melissa Rothstein and Julie Brewer, Level One Consulting

Have you ever wondered how we got here? Does following “the rules” make you wonder if it’s all just myth and legend? From struggling farmers and undernourished soldiers to counting whole-grain rich servings and distributing Summer EBT cards, this session shares a brief history of the Child Nutrition Programs and the legal and regulatory structure that underpins your everyday work. You’ll leave knowing how to research the requirements yourself and inspired to be a part of history while nourishing the future.

Thursday, October 22 – Keynote General Session

Rooted in Courage: Building a Foundation for Sustainable School Nutrition Leadership

Antoinetta Mosley, I Follow the Leader

School nutrition professionals carry tremendous responsibility. Every day, they navigate staffing challenges, changing requirements, competing priorities, and the pressure of serving students well. In seasons like these, sustainable leadership requires more than perseverance; it requires courage.

In this keynote, Antoinetta Mosley explores the Four C’s of Sustainable Leadership: Courage, Collaboration, Candor, and Confidence. Through stories, reflection, and practical application, participants will examine how courageous leadership helps create healthier teams, stronger relationships, and cultures where people feel valued, supported, and empowered to contribute.

Participants will leave encouraged and equipped with practical ways to lead from a foundation that can withstand pressure and change. In the keynote, School Nutrition Directors and their teams will have the opportunity to engage around the 4 C’s:

1. **Courage.** Enhance understanding of courage-fueled leadership and how courageous decision-making builds psychological safety and belonging, even in lean and high-pressure times.
2. **Collaboration.** Strengthen collaboration by gaining tools, skills, and strategies to build resilient teams and foster cross-departmental relationships that sustain your program.

3. **Candor.** Explore a candor framework to strengthen communication, particularly around difficult conversations that move your program forward.

4. **Confidence.** Reflect on personal strengths and leadership style to build the confidence needed to lead sustainably from the ground up.

*To expand your learning, consider attending the educational session, **Confidence Under Pressure: Leading Lean Without Losing Your Team***

Friday, October 23 – Closing General Session

Building Strong Systems: Software Procurement and Proposed Rule Comments

Rachel Findley and Becky Sharpe, NC Department of Public Instruction, Office of School Nutrition

In the closing general session, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI), Office of School Nutrition will provide step-by-step instructions for completing a software Request for Proposal (RFP) using the newly developed software procurement template. The updated template and instructions will feature a rubric process for identifying the ideal software system vendor for your program while maintaining compliance with state and federal procurement regulations.

If the meal pattern proposed rule is available for comment, the second half of the session will be used to gather feedback from School Food Authorities related to the rule's impact on North Carolina school nutrition programs. Your feedback is critical in preparing our State Agency's comments to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), so don't miss our final session!

Educational Sessions

Wednesday, October 21

From Surviving to Thriving: A Guide for School Nutrition Leaders

Kristen Dubiel, Kim McCall, and Jennifer Ozkurt, North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, Office of School Nutrition

Discover a year-round leadership resource created to support School Nutrition Directors at every stage of their journey. Learn how the School Nutrition Administrator Guidebook and Calendar can help streamline operations, track important deadlines, strengthen leadership skills, and support staff development. Don't miss the opportunity to add these tools to your toolbox!

This session will be hands-on. Use of a charged laptop or device with access to your work calendar application is recommended. Attendance does not require access to these tools, but checking your Canvas login, NCDPI course access, and your organization's technology policies regarding Calendar subscriptions may help you get the most out of the session.

Can You Read This? Developing Digital School Nutrition Resources Everyone Can Use

Tracey Bates, North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, Office of School Nutrition

Ginger Starling, North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, Office of Exceptional Children

Digital accessibility refers to the design and development of digital content, applications, and services that are usable by all people, including those with disabilities. Come learn about upcoming federal requirements, strategies and resources for designing compliant menus, newsletters, social media, presentations, and other digital content that is accessible for your entire school community.

Nail the Numbers: Building a Budget from the Ground Up

Jamie Narron, Tara Simpson, and Amber Sharpe, North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, Office of School Nutrition

A strong school nutrition program starts with a solid financial foundation. In this introductory session, participants will learn the essential building blocks of creating a practical and effective budget. We'll break down the budget process into manageable steps, including how to identify and estimate revenue and expenses. Whether you are new to budgeting or looking to strengthen your approach, this session will provide the tools and confidence needed to build a budget. Each participant is asked to bring their school year 2025-2026 FC1-A and participation report.

Beyond the Checkboxes: How to Use Your NSLP Monitoring Form for Programmatic Success

Jennifer Brown, Sheryl Harris, Pam Sheets, and Victoria Homick, North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, Office of School Nutrition

Go beyond compliance and discover how the new 2026-2027 North Carolina Onsite Monitoring Form can become a powerful tool for program improvement. Participants will explore best practices for conducting meaningful monitoring, identifying strengths and areas for growth, and using findings to drive programmatic success.

Putting the Pieces Together: Connecting Meal Counts, Contracts, and Documentation in Charter and Non-Public School Nutrition Programs

Dana Edwards and Kristen Dubiel, North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, Office of School Nutrition

Effective program management in charter and non-public schools requires more than keeping records—it requires understanding how the pieces connect. This can be difficult with the many hats the Administrator wears. In this session, participants will explore the relationship between meal counting and claiming, meal contracts, and required documentation explaining how each component supports accurate reporting, compliance, and successful program operations.

ABCs of NCDA&CS Food Distribution

Walter Beal and Kirk Smitherman, North Carolina Department of Agriculture & Consumer Services, Food Distribution Division

You can't spell "nutritious & delicious school meals" without "NCDA&CS"! Join the North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (NCDA&CS), Food Distribution Division's dynamic duo as they walk you through the many different services NCDA&CS provides for School Food Authorities (SFAs) and how to best utilize them to fit your schools' needs. Learn tips from the ordering, warehousing, and storage of United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Foods to managing logistics and deliveries. And let's not forget North Carolina Farm to School! We guarantee that you will walk away learning something new!

Behind the Curtain – Turning your CFO into your program's biggest advocate!

Debra Dixon Doss and Terry K. Haas, North Carolina Association of School Business Officials

Does the thought of meeting with your Chief Finance Officer (CFO) make you want to hide in the stockroom or cooler? You aren't alone! Is the CFO really a Wicked Witch, or just a misunderstood advocate with a spreadsheet?

Building a great relationship with them is the secret to a thriving school nutrition program. At the end of the day, it all boils down to two things: rules and money. In this interactive and fun session, we will bridge the gap between what you know (meals, operations, and federal rules) and what they know (district budgets and bottom lines).

What you'll learn:

- Why Talk to the CFO? Discover why building this relationship matters.
- Brain Collisions: How your nutrition knowledge and their financial expertise work together to navigate federal regulations.
- Building Financial Knowledge: How to read financial statements like an absolute pro without getting a headache.
- Demystifying the Year-End Audit: Finally answer the age-old question: "Why on Earth are they asking for all of this stuff?!"

Leave your fear of finance at the door and join us to gain the confidence, terminology, and tools you need to make the CFO your program's biggest advocate!

Cultivating SUN Meals To-Go: From Ground-Level Basics to High-Yield Programs

Tamara Baker, Jana Saur, and Thompson Bertschy, Carolina Hunger Initiative at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Tikiyha Ancrum, North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, Office of School Nutrition

Join the Carolina Hunger Initiative and NC Department of Public Instruction, Office of School Nutrition, for an insightful session for new and returning summer non-congregate meals sponsors. Come ready to

learn the basics of early preparation, the application and integrity process, and a timeline for success. The team will dive into the weeds of menu planning, multi-day economics, marketing, key partnerships, and safety. Innovative sponsors will also share their experience and how they mastered the registration process with QR code check-ins. Lastly, presenters will dig into the myths and facts of non-congregate meals, leaving you feeling prepared. Have no fear; you can do this!

Thursday, October 22

Buy Right, Serve Right: Your Hands-On Tour of the USDA Food Buying Guide

Chef Garrett Berdan, SproutCNP

Discover why the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Food Buying Guide (FBG) is the go-to reference for Child Nutrition Programs in this hands-on, live walk-through of a registered account. Learn how to quickly find regulations and meal pattern requirements for those moments when you just can't remember the rules. Watch the search features, the Recipe Analysis Workbook, and the Shopping List tool in action as we build a grab-and-go salad from start to finish. You'll leave confident and ready to make the FBG an everyday resource for your school nutrition program.

Oh No, They Didn't! Cash Management Missteps and How to Avoid Them

Pam Sheets, Kim McCall, and Cathie Masters, North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, Office of School Nutrition

Cash management procedures are more than just another item on your to-do list - they're at the core of a financially successful school nutrition program. This session will share some real-life examples of poor cash management procedures and how to avoid them in your school nutrition programs. You'll gain tools for writing sound procedures, best practices for monitoring your procedures, and other resources to help set you up for success. Join us so we can help it all make "cents"!

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Let’s Talk Afterschool Meals!

Tamara Baker, Dr. Jessica Soldavini, and Jana Saur, Carolina Hunger Initiative at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Are you a Child and Adult Care Food Program At-Risk Afterschool Meals (CACFP ARAM) program operator OR are you interested in operating this program? If so, we want to hear from you! This listening session for current and potential program operators will explore what is working and what improvements and support are needed for CACFP ARAM program operators to get started and thrive. Don't miss this opportunity to share your experiences, discuss ideas for expanding and marketing the program, and to learn from others!

Blueprint for Buying: Building Blocks of Procurement

Bettie Lyons, Global Scholars Academy

Nadine Goodwin Blake and Gretchen Mauney, Central Park School for Children

Navigating the procurement of goods and services can be a daunting task, particularly for charter and non-public schools. Without a structured framework and an understanding of the federal regulations, School Food Authorities (SFAs) may face delayed timelines, budget overruns, and non-compliance risks. To prevent these pitfalls, SFAs need clear, repeatable processes to procure goods and services. Attendees will gain an understanding of the key decision points of the Procurement Plan and the structural differences of executing informal, formal, emergency, and sole source purchasing methods in charter and non-public school nutrition programs.

From Manager to Leader

Dr. J. Bryan Martin, Paradox Partners, LLC

Individuals in key positions often find themselves focused on the day-to-day management of tasks to the point of losing sight of their role as a leader. This session will focus on helping define the characteristics of strong leaders and best practices in handling the challenges they face.

Lay the Groundwork: Understanding the FC1-A

Jamie Narron, Tara Simpson, and Amber Sharpe, North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, Office of School Nutrition

Understanding the FC1-A is the groundwork for making sound program and financial decisions. This session will introduce you to the FC1-A by breaking down sections, terminology, and how to begin connecting it to the day-to-day operation of the school nutrition program. Each participant is asked to bring their school year 2025-2026 trial balance printed from the Local Education Agency's (LEA's) financial software and FC1-A.

We recommend attending this session prior to attending The Sky's the Limit: Analyzing the FC1-A.

Laying the Foundation: Menu Planning for Success

Margaret Cameron, Gaston County Schools

Build a strong foundation for effective school nutrition menu planning by exploring the essential principles, regulations, and practical strategies that guide successful menu development. Participants will gain insight to create balanced, appealing, and operationally sound menus while understanding how thoughtful planning supports the entire school nutrition program.

This session is intended for new or beginner menu planners. We recommend attending this session before the session Building on the Foundation: Forecasting, Flexibility, and Continuous Improvement.

From Surviving to Thriving: A Guide for School Nutrition Leaders

Kristen Dubiel, Kim McCall, and Jennifer Ozkurt, North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, Office of School Nutrition

Discover a year-round leadership resource created to support School Nutrition Directors at every stage of their journey. Learn how the School Nutrition Administrator Guidebook and Calendar can help streamline operations, track important deadlines, strengthen leadership skills, and support staff development. Don't miss the opportunity to add these tools to your toolbox!

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Confidence Under Pressure: Leading Lean Without Losing Your Team

Antoinetta Mosley, I Follow the Leader

Leading a school nutrition program with limited resources requires more than resourcefulness; it requires confidence. In this workshop, participants will take an honest look at their personal strengths, opportunities for growth, and leadership style. Participants will explore how to lead with confidence and steadiness even when pressure is high. Through reflection and practical tools, attendees will leave better equipped to build a healthy culture where people show up not only for the program but also for each other. *Recommended Pre-Work: Take the free [16personalities test](#).*

The Sky's the Limit: Analyzing the FC1-A

Jamie Narron, Tara Simpson, and Amber Sharpe, North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, Office of School Nutrition

Now that the groundwork is in place, it is time to reach for the skies. This advanced session will take participants beyond simply understanding to analyzing the FC1-A. Participants will learn to calculate a financial summary and other key indicators that provide insight into program performance. The sky is the limit on what you can achieve when you understand your financial data and key performance indicators. Each participant is asked to bring their school year 2025-2026 trial balance printed from the Local Education Agency's (LEA's) financial software and FC1-A.

We recommend attending Lay the Groundwork: Understanding the FC1-A prior to attending this session.

Building on the Foundation: Forecasting, Flexibility, and Continuous Improvement

Margaret Cameron, Gaston County Schools

Take menu planning to the next level by exploring forecasting strategies, menu flexibility, and the use of data to drive continuous improvement. Designed for experienced menu planners, this session will examine how to respond to changing participation, preferences, inventory, and operational realities while maintaining compliance and program goals.

This session is intended for more experienced menu planners. We recommend attending Laying the Foundation: Menu Planning for Success prior to attending this session.

Assessing and Addressing Unique Mealtimes Needs

Leslie Raby Otts, North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, Office of School Nutrition

This session will review how school nutrition professionals can create safe, inclusive environments for students with food allergies, intolerances, or medical dietary needs. Participants will learn to identify common dietary restrictions and understand legal and policy requirements. The session will provide practical strategies for meal planning, classroom management, and cafeteria procedures that minimize risk and support student well-being.

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SPECIAL SESSION (Registration Required; Offsite Session):

Beyond the Barn: Inside Modern Dairy Farming with NCSU and The Dairy Alliance

Cami Lewis and Terin Coe, The Dairy Alliance

Cindy Marion and Gary Gay, North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, Office of School Nutrition

The Dairy Alliance is excited to partner with the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, Office of School Nutrition and sponsor two live farm tours at North Carolina State University's Dairy Farm. Experience the dairy story firsthand, beginning with a visit to the Randleigh Dairy Heritage Museum and continuing with a behind-the-scenes tour of the farm. Participants will learn how North Carolina dairy farms operate, including how farmers care for their cows, support animal well-being, and produce the nutritious milk served to students across the state. The experience will conclude with a sample of delicious Howling Cow Creamery ice cream, made locally at NC State. This unique experience will connect school nutrition leaders with North Carolina dairy farmers and provide an engaging, educational look at the journey from cow to carton—and ultimately to the school cafeteria.

Participants will:

- Explore modern dairy farming practices and production methods by gaining a first-hand look at how dairy farmers prioritize cow care, animal well-being, environmental stewardship, and sustainability.
- Connect local dairy farming to Farm to School initiatives by discussing the role of North Carolina dairy farms and local milk production in school nutrition programs, agriculture education, procurement of dairy products, and connections between students and their food sources.
- Recognize the nutritional value of dairy foods in school meals by identifying key nutrients provided by milk, yogurt, and cheese and understanding their role in supporting student health, growth, and well-being.
- Discover resources available to school nutrition programs from dairy farm families and The Dairy Alliance, including nutrition education, recipes, farm-to-school resources, professional development, and tools that help schools incorporate and promote nutritious dairy foods.

Note: A separate registration is required for this session. All participants are required to sign a waiver to participate in the tour and to travel to and from the farm via bus provided for the session.