

Whether you're still coming out of your Thanksgiving food coma or you're stressing over the menu for your next holiday gathering, there's no denying that food is on the brain more than ever this time of year.

Especially when you work in education, that phrase takes on a double meaning. "Food on the brain" is also the undeniable correlation between good nutrition and academic success that any educator has seen play out with their students. Without a doubt, healthy students make better learners.

When you pair that with the fact that our students may eat as many as two out of their three daily meals at school, you can see why child nutrition is a huge point of emphasis for our daily operations. In fact, it's exactly the reason we task just over 150 people with having nothing but food on the brain when they come to work each day. It's that important to us.

Between breakfast and lunch, our 22 school cafeterias see an average of more than 16,000 transactions each day, all handled by a tremendously patient and committed staff who care deeply about our students. Last year, that amounted to just over 1.4 million total meals. (Fun fact: That included about three tons of a timeless favorite, chicken nuggets, and nearly 30,000 gallons of milk.)

We comply with the mounting nutritional guidelines that regulate everything from calorie counts to sodium levels – because we know it's what is best for our kids. But that doesn't mean we shy away from innovation. Our foodservice team has introduced such options as customized noodle and soup bars, sushi and Domino's personal pizzas. Through creative business partnerships and continuous experimentation, they turn around healthy *and* tasty menu options. All things considered, that's a rare combination.

A thriving foodservice operation is critical for students who may get their most nutritional meal of the day at school. The population of Lakota students qualifying for free and reduced meals has grown to almost 20 percent (up from 16 percent five years ago). In partnership with the Faith Alliance and the Butler County Success program, we even applied that same federal funding source to a summer feeding program that delivers lunch to multiple Lakota communities.

Our child nutrition program is consistently cost-neutral, meaning it covers all its costs with revenue. That's possible because of many things, including a catering program that has minimized outsourcing of foodservice needs and saved the district considerably as a result.

Just like in our homes, food is oftentimes the common denominator for bringing people together. That's precisely the reason we open our cafeterias up to any family member who wishes to join their child for a meal during the day. It's also a big reason behind Lakota traditions like grandparent luncheons and our annual Thanksgiving meal, which literally almost tripled our traffic two days last month.

Just like in our classrooms, our cafeterias operate on high quality and experience – and I'm thankful for a team that delivers both in a cost-conscious and innovative way.

*Robb Vogelmann is the acting superintendent of Lakota Local Schools.*