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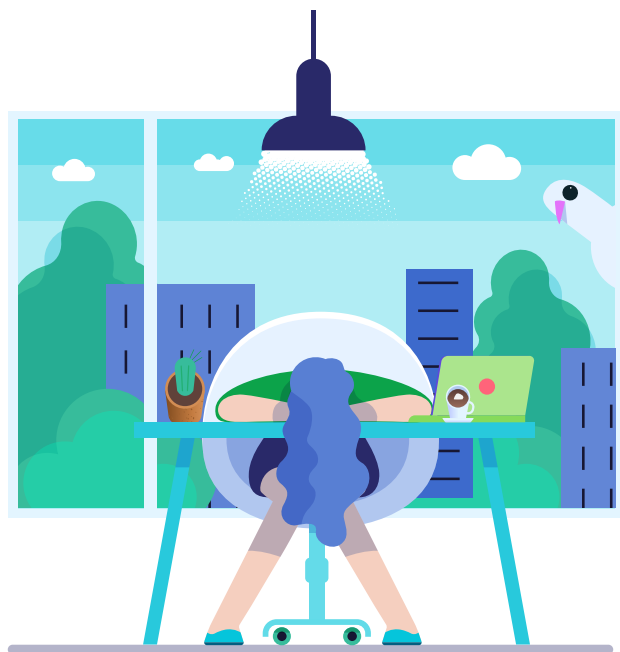
# TECH ON DECK

Whether bursting with bells and whistles or simple and straightforward, a wide variety of technology solutions can prove to be game-changers for school nutrition operations.

BY PATRICIA L. FITZGERALD

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**Let's be honest.** Few of us relish the prospect of adopting a new technology in our personal or professional lives. Sure, we may be intrigued by the promise of the sales and marketing messages, but often we drag our feet, particularly when facing the road to implementation. Whether it's merely a new interface on one's Facebook profile page or a whole new process for inventory management, we're driven out of our comfort zones and compelled to *learn*—and learn it well enough to put the tech to regular use.

Although we may be dragged into it, metaphorically kicking and screaming, in most cases we soon come to embrace the new technology, wondering how we ever got along without it! Before we know it, we've fallen right back into a brand-new comfort zone. This process is something we need to trust when it comes to embracing new technology. It *will* be a good thing. It *will* improve your capabilities, program, efficiency, outcomes and so much more.

Once you are in the right frame of mind, where should you begin? With technological innovations upping the game in so many different areas of a school nutrition operation (never mind life in general), how do you identify the priorities? Assessing your operation for obvious areas of improvement is a good step. Also, look at your short- and long-term goals. Where could new technology make a difference? Budget is an important factor. Training requirements must be considered, too. These are all valuable drivers that you will need to determine for yourself and your program. But what *School Nutrition* can do *right now* is offer a little inspiration.

*SN* reached out to a number of school district directors from all across the country, operating meal programs of different sizes and scopes. We asked them to identify the “game-changing” technologies that have saved their bacon (so to speak) on the job in recent years. Some of their answers are relatively low-tech solutions, while others are major software systems with numerous modules and features. Some are commonly used resources, applied mindfully to improve foodservice operations. In certain cases, the technology is identified as a generic category, while other references cite specific vendors and products. And a few examples *aren't* resources that you can procure for love or money, such as “a great administrative assistant and a top-notch IT department,” both of which Pamela Suyematsu, SNS, credits as “a must for conquering technology.”

The compilation that follows is by no means an exhaustive list of options. Instead, allow it to serve as a representative collection of ideas to help focus your own thoughts about what new technology might make a difference in *your* school meal operation.

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*References to specific companies and products in this article are the opinions of the interviewees and do not represent endorsement by School Nutrition or SNA.*



## Meal Management Systems

Point of sale. Student accounts. Menu planning. Inventory management. Applications processing. HACCP record-keeping. Professional Standards training. Human resource management. And. So. Much. More. There are a few tech vendors that offer multi-component, integrated packages with the capability to address all or select areas of K-12 school meal operations. The specific solutions that a district chooses to apply depend on many factors, but the directors who responded to *SN* are more than satisfied with their tech partners and systems.

Scott Ziobrowski, Director of Food Service, Hilton (N.Y.) Central Schools, looks to **Nutrikids** to deliver tech assistance on multiple fronts. “We’ve been using it for over 15 years—it was created locally, about 10 miles away,” he recounts. “It’s a very user-friendly POS and management system that we use to track meals and inventory and plan menus. This system, paired with **Nutrislice**, has been a lifesaver, says Ziobrowski. “While it’s not a direct download from our info in

Nutrikids, it has a great platform, the company is very customer service-oriented and it fulfills all of our needs, especially the online ordering program for some of my schools.”

Jane Anderson, Food Service Director, Lawton-Bronson (Iowa) Community School District, started using **NutriStudents K-12** this year to help plan her menus. “They have such a variety of different menus to pick from, and each week is compliant with our state’s requirements,” says Anderson, noting that she can build menus that feature student favorites, as well as brand-new items. She also values the program for helping her plan her USDA Foods order for next year and gives a shout-out to the client rep who answers any and all questions. Anderson describes the software as an overall paperwork- and time-saver. “I’m so glad I switched programs this year!”

Pam Suyematsu, SNS, Director, Nutrition Services, Ontario (Ore.) School District, calls **Heartland School Solutions** “an everyday necessity for nutrition information, production sheets, recipes, inventory and point of sale.” Meanwhile, Tom Houle, Director of Food & Nutrition, Nashoba (Mass.) Regional Schools, consulted his team members before responding. “We agree that the most helpful technology we are using right now is our **Mosaic** POS software system,” he reports. “Mosaic allows us to use bulk entries when counting meals served, which is a huge time saver. We are also able to send bulk emails and notifications to families through the software.” Houle adds that it was easy to modify Mosaic’s program to allow for Pandemic EBT reporting in line with state requirements.

Bookkeeping is among the many hats Vickie Speltz wears as director of the small Lewiston-Altura (Minn.) School District #857, so she values *anything* that can make this chore easier and more efficient, which is why **Wordware**, used for POS functions, gets her nod. “It’s very user-friendly and easy to customize,” Speltz says, also giving the program kudos for being easy to learn and for its phone-accessed technical support.

“For my menus, I have NutriStudents K-12,” Speltz continues. “This program is amazing. It does everything for you and saves money, especially on labor costs.”

She cites such features as an accompanying nutritional guide, production sheets, cook-book and photo images of menu items that can be used to market meals to students and parents alike. A 36-year school nutrition veteran, Speltz is particularly impressed with how the company caters to its customers. “[They are] a super, client-based group of people—the kind of company that puts you first,” she explains.

Haytham Abdulhamid, School Nutrition Services Software Support Specialist at Alexandria City (Va.) Public Schools (ACPS), is pleased with the integrated system provided by **PrimeroEdge**. “It connects the entire operation, including menu-planning, production, inventory, POS, student eligibility, meal ordering, digital signage and a parent portal,” explains Abdulhamid. The companion SchoolCafe program provides a secure online system for student accounts, with a parent portal integrated with POS terminals. He’s excited by a new, app-based mobile POS system the company has launched called ExpressPoint. “It will allow more options for serving breakfast—and lunch—in classrooms, setting up grab-and-go stations and serving in non-traditional locations,” he notes.



## Data-Driven Decisions

“Something I’ve just started using a few months ago, but am hopeful about its potential, is **MenuLogic K-12** software,” says Dan Gorman, Food Service Director for Montague Area Public Schools and Whitehall District Schools, both in Michigan. The business intelligence software allows analysis of menu information, production and sales data. Impressed with the training and support of the install team, Gorman is looking forward to his staff reviewing data regularly and learning to use the information to make decisions and work toward sales and profitability goals.







## Communications

In addition to school nutrition-specific software, Gorman is a big fan of putting universal tech to good use in his school meal operation. **“Smartphones, texting,”** he cites above all else. “I have a staff of about 40 people, and back-and-forth communication via text has really helped us to share quick information and answer questions.”

He also describes himself as “a fan of the Google world.” All staff members are on **email**, which was, Gorman reports, a difficult, years-long transition. Today, they use **Google Docs** to build delivery lists, while a production and ordering document is updated and shared via **Google Sheets**. He’s also intrigued by the potential of the pandemic-breakout tech: **Zoom**. “I think Zoom-type technology is going to offer more direct communication with staff when directors and supervisors can’t make it to each site,” he predicts. “It will open up staff training and other opportunities.”

Other respondents also cited Google and Zoom as invaluable tools. Scott Ziobrowski reports that during the pandemic, his team began using Google Docs for all remote ordering, deliveries to families and K-6 in-school classroom meals. “It’s great, because orders go directly into an Excel spreadsheet, which is

easy to manage from a production standpoint by my cook-managers and my remote feeding team,” explains Ziobrowski.

ACPS’s Haytham Abdulhamid has made extensive use of the Google-powered **G Suite**, describing all the programs in the package as “powerful, real-time collaboration tools.” Google Docs and Sheets are used to write operation plans, parent communications and announcements to Café managers. **Google Sites**, a web-page creation tool, also gets a shout-out as easy to learn and implement. Sites can be open to the public or restricted to a limited audience. “We built the site mainly for internal communication with our cafeteria managers,” Abdulhamid explains, noting, for example, that it’s a reference place for web-ordering links that are unique to each vendor; this helps facilitate the procurement process of menu items for managers. It also provides central access to district-wide staff resources for human resource management.

Meanwhile, Abdulhamid’s boss at ACPS, Cynthia Hormel, MM, RDN, SNS, Director, School Nutrition Services, cites Zoom as her most recent game-changer: “It allows us to have face-to-face conversations at the spur of the moment, as needed, similar to picking up the phone, only we can see one another, so it’s like having a one-on-one conversation in the office.” She also values how Zoom provided a remote capability to conduct staff trainings, collaborate with other district and building leadership teams, etc. “The uses are endless,” she says.

Years ago, Nadine Mann, PhD, RD, LDN, Child Nutrition Program Chief Financial Director, East Baton Rouge Parish (La.) School System, pioneered the game-changing development of a scannable meal application. “I hounded USDA in the Southwest Region to get approval to count a scanned application as an original, which led to the household application,” Mann recounts. “It was huge, because we went from 30 people managing applications-processing to three.”

What does *she* see as game-changing today? “With CEP in place and all meals claimed as free, Zoom meeting software is the most important software. I have more meetings per day, with no travel time adding to the already-long, tiring days,” she notes.



## Marketing

**Canva**, the super-easy, template-centric design software, allows Pam Suyematsu, to create professional-looking marketing materials for her program. She also relies on Nutrislice to share daily menu details through high-impact digital signage. “I am always one to promote my program to parents and the community. With training, these and other tools let me provide a lot of eye-catching information with minimal effort,” Suyematsu explains.

“One lifesaver technology for us is the ability to use software to publish our menus on the web and through an app. Parents and students are able to see what we offer daily by accessing our menus using their intelligent devices,” says Sebastian Varas, MBA, RDN, SNS, Nutrition Services Director, Canyons (Utah) School District, specifically citing Nutrislice as their go-to solution. “We are able to feature pictures of our food, plus include menu details, such as nutrition information, ingredients, carb counts, common allergens and the use of local products.”

Varas is particularly pleased with a feature that allows students to rate meals



using a five-star system. “The feedback we get from our community drives decisions for future menu-planning,” he explains. Another plus, says Varas, is the ability to customize messages to the community that go beyond menu particulars. “When our schools transitioned to remote learning during the pandemic, we disseminated curbside meal pickup information through Nutrislice. Families knew what menu items we offered, site locations and all other details pertaining to distribution.”

At Lawton-Bronson (Iowa) Community School District, Jane Anderson values the *Cafeteria Connection* parents’ newsletter that is a component of her NutriStudents K-12 system. Customizable to add district-specific information, the newsletter features “great” articles, says Anderson.



## Food Safety

In Alexandria, Va., Cynthia Hormel deals with the vulnerability of aging buildings and above-ground power lines. “Any time we have high winds, storms, snow, etc., we lose power to some or many of our schools,” she recounts. To minimize the food-safety risk—and costs of lost product—during power outages, Hormel implemented use of a temperature-tracking device for the district’s walk-in coolers and freezers. “This has been a lifesaver,” she notes. “When the power is out, we can track temps and make smart decisions regarding storage and safety.” Today, the system is available as an app that she and her team can check anytime, anywhere.

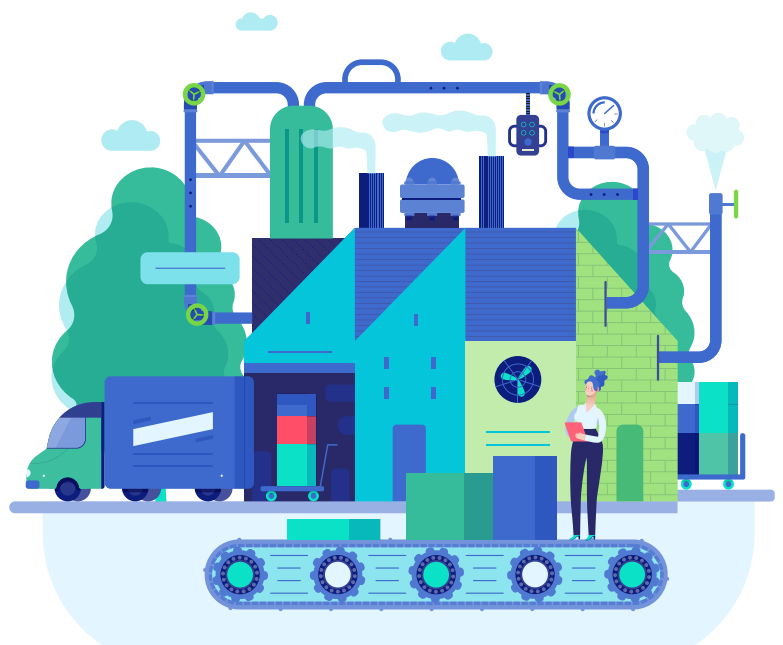
There are so many platforms out there, but no one-size-fits-all solution.

The “right” solution will be the one you—and your team—are most comfortable with.

## Ever-evolving Options

If *School Nutrition* interviewed another 10 school nutrition directors, we’d probably hear enthusiasm for integrated software systems developed by other loyal K-12 tech vendors (along with more love for Google and Zoom). And at the rate that new tech is being rolled out, if we published a follow-up to this article next winter, it’s likely that the list would look radically different again.

Scott Ziobrowski cautions against expecting a tech solution or vendor to get 100% positive reviews from your school nutrition peers. “There are so many platforms out there, but no one-size-fits-all solution,” he observes. The “right” solution will be the one you—and your team—are most comfortable with. **SN+**



*Patricia Fitzgerald is editor of School Nutrition.*

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