

Serving More Than Meals: The Essential Role of Frozen Foods in School Nutrition

Frozen foods are an essential pillar of school nutrition programs. From helping menu planners manage tight budgets to ensuring students have access to nutritious foods year round, frozen plays a critical role behind the scenes of school meals. Findings from a March 2026 focus group hosted by the American Frozen Food Institute (AFFI) and the School Nutrition Association (SNA) illustrate why frozen foods are so important to school nutrition plans and the implications of restricting their use. Focus group participants included school food service professionals from elementary, middle, and high schools nationwide.

Why are Frozen Foods Used in School Meals?

Frozen foods are a critical tool for school nutrition programs, helping teams consistently serve nutritious, high quality meals while managing operational challenges. From planning and storage to preparation and menu variety, frozen options support efficiency without sacrificing nutrition or quality.

According to school nutrition administrators, frozen foods enable school nutrition programs to:

- Serve foods that are fresh and high quality.
- Provide year-round access to fruits and vegetables with the same nutritional benefits as fresh options.
- Reduce food waste.
- Provide access to foods that school nutrition administrators are unable to prepare on site.
- Address the constraints of limited storage space.
- Save time in meal preparation and service using frozen entrees or pre-chopped and peeled vegetables and potatoes.

What Happens if Frozen Foods are Restricted?

Restricting frozen foods would create immediate and significant challenges for school nutrition programs. Many kitchens rely on frozen options to bridge gaps in staffing shortages or skill gaps, equipment limitations, and time constraints. According to focus group participants, without frozen foods, serving consistent, nutritious meals to students becomes far more difficult.

*If you wanted to get many of these foods in peak season...[the kids] wouldn't even get to enjoy it as often as they'd like. **The use of frozen foods has really been able to give us all the nutrients and time back.***



*I don't see it being a feasible operational model to not allow frozen food in the capacity we're doing it right now. **Food costs would rise incredibly.***

According to school nutrition administrators, without frozen foods, schools would face:

- Higher costs, added time, and complex logistics tied to fully scratch-made meals.
- Staff skill gaps that make scratch cooking unrealistic at scale.
- Limited kitchen equipment that cannot support fully scratch preparation.

What School Nutrition Administrators Said About Specific Frozen Foods:

- **Frozen produce:** As nutritious as fresh, budget friendly, allows for flexibility, offers year-round access to premium seasonal produce.
- **Frozen pizza and prepared entrees:** Time savers that meet current strict nutrition guidelines, student favorites, scratch-prepared versions are not always feasible.
- **Frozen fruit smoothies:** Student favorites, zero-waste solution to provide students with their daily produce serving.
- **Frozen potato products:** French fries and tater tots remain student favorites, eliminate prep and peeling time, and cut labor processes and costs.



Bottom Line

Limiting frozen foods in school meals would jeopardize schools' ability to consistently serve healthy foods to students, putting both nutrition and access at risk. For millions of students, school meals are a reliable source of daily nutrition, and frozen foods make that possible.



*Two of the biggest [frozen] items in my division that if we took away there would be a huge mutiny amongst students would be the **spicy chicken sandwich** and the **pizza**.*



I think frozen foods has one of the hugest benefits for schools... just the quality and the nutrients that they're still getting in these foods.