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TO: Statewide Procurement (SWP) Child Nutrition Directors

FROM: Angelice Lowe, Program Director
 Child Nutrition Programs

Date: December 3, 2021

RE: SWP Meal Pattern Flexibility Guidance - SY 2021-2022 - EXTENSION

Alabama State Department of Education (ALSDE) Child Nutrition Programs (CNP) has reevaluated the SWP meal pattern flexibility guidance. Based upon recent documentation from ALSDE SWP vendors, all School Food Authorities (SFAs) **participating in ALSDE SWP** are now automatically approved for the following flexibilities granted under COVID-19: Child Nutrition Response #90:

1. Whole grain rich meal pattern requirement
2. Vegetable sub group meal pattern requirement

No further action is required of SFAs, and approval will be effective immediately and extend through June 30, 2022.

ALSDE CNP expects that the flexibilities provided will only be utilized as needed, and that schools will seek to meet the meal pattern requirements to the greatest extent possible. In the event you need to implement these flexibilities, indicate substitutions on production records. The attached vendor letters will serve as documentation for these flexibilities.

Program operators should direct any questions concerning this guidance to the School Program Staff at 334-694-4657.

Angelice Lowe
 Child Nutrition Programs Director

Attachments:
 Merchants Foodservice Letter
 Wood Fruitticher Food Service Distribution Letter



November 17, 2021

Dear Alabama Child Nutrition Customers,

First, thank you for your continued patience and professionalism as we navigate through the ongoing supply chain and labor challenges that continue to impact our industry. The recent weeks have been especially difficult for our employees and customers who depend on us daily for essential products to run their operations effectively. As with our previous update, labor shortages continue to be the biggest challenge. We have implemented numerous measures to retain employees including sign on bonuses pay increases, referral bonuses, enhanced PTO programs, and other benefits. Recruiting measures have also been elevated to attract new employees by working with county, municipal and state agencies, schools, community colleges and truck driving schools along with using print and digital advertising and billboards along major thoroughfares.

This week we also started using temp labor drivers from three temp labor agencies. We have had some success with these drivers and plan to continue to utilize them in the near term. Please note temp agency drivers will not be wearing Merchants uniforms or driving a Merchants tractor but product will be on a Merchants trailer.

Supply chain issues continue to present challenges as well. Currently we are only getting about 83% of the cases we order from suppliers. Meaning for every 1,000 cases we order; we are shorted over 170 cases of product. These shortages are also compounded by supplier delivery drivers who miss dock appointments and deliver late. To improve our outbound service to schools, we continue to provide suppliers with extended lead time on purchase orders and we have increased safety stock on items where possible. Our outbound fill rate on schools since the first of August has averaged 94.17%.

To help improve supply and service, we have expanded the micro purchase bid to include products that may be suitable alternatives to contract items that are in short supply. Unattended deliveries or key drop deliveries are still being offered and we encourage you take advantage of them. To improve communications, we have a shipment notification email tool called Active Alert. Active Alert emails you when your order ships and again about an hour before it arrives. If you are interested in key drops or Active Alerts, please call, or email and we will get you set up.

In closing, to relieve pressure of the back-to-school rush in early January, we ask that you place orders and take deliveries during the Thanksgiving and Christmas breaks if you are on key drop or if you can meet the truck. By taking deliveries during the Christmas and Thanksgiving breaks, this will help us spread out the cases and provide better service to all in January.

Wishing you a joyous and abundant holiday season.

Yours Truly,
The Merchants Foodservice Bid Team
1-800-844-FOOD (3663)
BidTeam@MerchantsFoodservice.com



November 15, 2021

To our Alabama School Customers,

I wanted to give all of you an update on where our service levels currently stand. The labor market that we are dealing with has not improved since our last communication to you. Much like the staffing situation you are all facing, there just simply aren't enough workers to fill all of the open jobs in our industry. The aging demographic trends of our nation's population along with the proposed expansion of social spending by our government are likely to ensure that it will be a long time before the labor markets stabilize if they ever do at all. I have heard more than one economic analyst in the last few weeks mention that these are the best labor markets we will see in any of our lifetimes. Let's hope they are wrong!

Many schools have been able to receive orders on Saturdays and others have lined up trucks to come pick up product at the warehouse. This has been an enormous help and we can't thank those schools enough for taking that pressure off of our warehouse and drivers. We would like to ask any and all schools that are able to receive orders during your Christmas break. It would go a long way towards getting everyone caught up and could possibly even get all schools a little ahead of schedule going into the spring semester.

As the tight labor market and supply chain disruptions are now projected to last well into 2022 and possibly 2023 we will also be asking schools to receive orders periodically throughout next summer. The best way to keep all of us from falling behind is to stay way out ahead of our inventory needs. And with inflation still accelerating, buying earlier should help lower your overall cost of goods.

We are so humbled by the kind words and encouragement we have received from so many of you. We are blessed to have the opportunity to work with you and your teams. Thanks again and have a safe and restful Thanksgiving.

Ford Hamilton
President and CEO

2900 Alton Road Birmingham, AL 35210

Phone 205.836.9663

Fax 205.836.9681

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