

How To: Start a Food Backpack Program

1. Have a plan for how the program will work logistically and funding/cost. Know who and how many participants you will have as part of the program and how long you will be running the program. Administrators are often overwhelmed with organization requirements and the program will need to be low impact on the staff to be approved.
2. Determine what your space needs will be before implementation. Will you need onsite storage during the week/on Fridays? Will the bags be packed off site and delivered? These requirements will help the administration visualize the impact on space needed, which is often at a premium
3. How much does it cost? Each program is different, but a general price range to think about is between \$2.00–6.00 per bag depending on where food is purchased, how much labor is involved, and if you are purchasing in bulk.
4. Who is eligible to participate in this program? The program should be open and available to any family in the program who needs it and should have a rolling admission process. Families may need it for a few weeks, or months, to get them through a difficult time, or need to be added mid-year due to a financial situation. Qualifying students based on participation in the free/reduced school meals program may miss many of the very students that need the program the most. These students may have families who:
 - Do not understand the federal free/reduced price school meals program form
 - Whose first language isn't English
 - May not have returned the form on time
 - Missed the cut off by just a few dollars
5. Where do you get food?

Food can come from a variety of places. You can open an account with your school department food supplier, which allows you to use their deep discount, but keep your own accounting and invoicing. You can also purchase food from bulk retail stores, like Costco or Sam's Club, and specialty items (like soy milk) from grocery stores. Your local food pantry may be able to donate certain items that you use a lot, like applesauce cups, mac-n-cheese, cans of tuna, etc. You can also open an account with your food bank. There are a lot of options to purchase or receive free/reduced items.
6. Should I accept food donations? Yes, but we suggest that you ask for very specific things. For example, an item we use is shelf stable milk, but it is expensive, and we use it each week. When corporations or groups ask if they can donate, we ask them to do a milk drive. This ensures we get items that will help us cut costs and can be easily donated. Keep a list of items that people can easily donate that would be helpful to you. It's important to try to keep food consistent across all students involved in the program. If you are soliciting donations for specific items, you might want to consider what happens if you don't receive enough for all students. Will you purchase more? Or have another fundraiser?

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7. What goes in the bags? Each program handles what type of food they send home differently; the bags can be all shelf-stable foods or can include fresh food, which requires refrigeration and food safety handling. Some programs send the same food each week, some programs rotate the menu for more options and variety. In all cases, the bags typically contain 2 breakfasts, 2 lunches, and some healthy snacks. These are the meals that students would have access to in a typical school day.
8. What about allergies or dietary restrictions? There are many dietary restrictions to be concerned about, including nut allergies and lactose intolerance, as well as dietary restrictions for personal or religious reasons, like students who are kosher, or vegetarian. It is important to collect dietary restriction information on the opt-in forms and have this tracked by school. You can avoid these allergies and restrictions by having a nut free, dairy and meat free program, or you can develop a menu and system that helps to work to get each student a bag that is right for them. Some programs mitigate these allergies by providing meat free, high protein sandwiches for the kosher/halal/vegetarian students, replacing sun butter for peanut butter in sandwiches, replacing milk and cheese sticks with soy milk and meat sticks, and more. It will be important to determine the level of organization that you want to take on with your own program.
9. Who packs the bags? To ensure that this program has a light impact on staff, Weekend Backpack Programs usually use volunteers, and or community members to pack the bags each week, either onsite or at a central location. Volunteers pack the bags onsite or deliver them on Friday morning and safely store them so that school staff can distribute them at the end of the day on Friday.
10. What kind of supplies will I need? Big plastic tubs to store and tote food and rolls of blue painters' tape to label tubs. We use colored stickers to affix to bags that indicate if they are vegetarian, or nut free, etc., for ease of distribution. If you are assembling any of the food on your own, you will need tablecloths that can be cleaned with a sanitizer spray, disposable gloves, and Ziploc bags for appropriate items.
11. What kind of bags or backpacks will I need each week? This depends on the type of program you have, and the type of food you send home. In many programs, they use plastic grocery store bags, or the black plastic bags you get at a liquor store, which can be purchased in bulk. These bags are then placed inside a child's existing backpack that go home. Other programs use reusable bags (insulated if they are sending fresh food home) that require students to bring them back each week to be refilled. Again, this just depends on each program and how they would like to organize weekly.