How to Feed a Hungry Band
By Ann Rodino, Former Food Chair and Booster President, Fishers H.S., IN

Have you found yourself saying “yes” to feeding your marching band kids? And if so, are you wondering just how to go about it? Maybe I have some help for you in this article; I hope so! Even if you don’t directly use any of these tips, maybe they will spur you to think of your own unique ideas to take care of the food needs of your marching band. I can tell you with assurance that as the “food mom” or “food dad”, you will be among the best-loved adults in the organization...everyone is happy to see the person bringing the food!

I spent four years as the food committee chair for our band booster group, and I’ve also spent more than thirty years in the food service industry. The job is hectic at times, but I never found a shortage of willing parents to help me with all of the various aspects. So the first thing I need to tell you is don’t feel like you have to do it all yourself. Recruit help to solicit donations from restaurants in the community; recruit help to deliver donated food to the site where you’ll be serving the band; recruit help to serve and clean-up. Everyone has different talents. Don’t be afraid to reach out...you’ll discover a wealth of parents willing to help you. Be specific in what you need. You’re more like to get a positive response if you ask for “6 people to serve and clean-up” or “2 people to pick up the food donation at 4:00” or “8 people to fix four boxes of mac and cheese” than just saying “please help the food committee if you can.”

In our school system, we cannot use the kitchen facilities in the high school without paying a fairly hefty fee. So other than being able to get ice from the kitchen area (under supervision of the custodian or food service worker at the school), we have no access to anything to keep “hot food hot and cold food cold”. Even under these restrictions, it’s possible to serve safe food if you keep some basics in mind. First, the “hot food hot” item; if you’re serving the food in less than an hour, you should be okay if you simply insulate the food. You can do this simply by throwing (clean!) bath towels over the food containers...group them together and cover them up. If you’re looking at a serving time of longer than about an hour, you’ll need to utilize crock pots, insulated food containers, or chafing dishes. “Cold food cold” can be easier...unless you’re on site for a marching band competition early in the season and it’s still in the eighties. Ice is your best friend! Get plenty from your school’s kitchen if possible, or maybe you can get a local restaurant to let you fill up several coolers.

Additionally, your volunteers need to have clean hands! When we served food to the kids at the high school, it’s easy for parents to be able to go wash hands before food service begins. On site at a marching band completion, this can be more problematic, and that’s where wet wipes and hand sanitizer will be your best friends. Whether we are at the

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school or on site, we always kept a big jug of hand sanitizer available for the volunteers and the kids...just put the hand sanitizer at the beginning of the serving line for the students. You can’t make them use it, but at least it is there. And of course, keep lots of food service disposable gloves available. Again, maybe you can get a donation from a restaurant in your community; it never hurts to ask.

Well, what do you feed everyone? In our organization, we fed our marching band kids, as well as the directors, staff, and adult volunteers. So make sure you count everyone! Nothing is more sad (or more stressful!) than running out of food. At our home football games, we would feed 200 people. At band competitions, the number would range around 225, so check with your booster president, band director, props person, anyone you need to in order to get an accurate count of the mouths you need to feed.

We were very lucky to have several local restaurants step up and help feed our kids. Find out if you have any parent connections to a restaurant in the area...that helped us to secure entrée donations from two local restaurant franchises. And even after their kids have graduated, keep asking! They are usually happy to continue supporting the local high school marching band.

So we had our entrees...if you’re getting a donation of hamburgers or chicken sandwiches, that’s great! But if you have to come up with some ideas on your own, here are a few band favorites: chili cheese dogs, sloppy joes, “breakfast for dinner” with egg casseroles. Purchased entrees can be had for a reasonable amount from some local merchants...the local Arby’s couldn’t make a donation and they no longer had the $1 roast beef sandwich available. But the local manager agreed to shave a little weight off the meat in each sandwich so that I could purchase them for $1. You never know until you ask! And the sandwiches were still plenty of food.

We always had one fresh fruit or vegetable available at each meal. Make it easy on yourself and stick with some tried and true favorites. Baby carrots with ranch dressing on the side is always popular. Use fruit that’s in season. Watermelon is great in August; switch to apples and grapes as the competition season progresses. This is one item that we asked our parents to donate and we never came up short! So send out the call for “5 watermelon, cubed” or “25 pounds of grapes, washed and off the stems” or “6 bags of apples, washed”. You won’t find one parent to donate all of the apples for that meal, but you’ll have different one step up and bam! you have all your apples. And if you're wondering how we handled the apples, we had one or two volunteers stationed in the serving line with cutting boards and apple slicers...they just sliced as they went and gave each student half of an apple...easy!

Find out what kind of food allergies you have; you’ll want to make sure that you have something available for everyone. Get this information from whoever maintains the
student information in your group. And you’ll probably have some vegetarians too…mac and cheese makes a nice side dish, but it can also serve as the main dish for the vegetarians in your group.

We did always keep a separate “peanut butter and jelly” table set up…that works for your vegetarians and lets the kids have something to fill up on if they’re still hungry after the meal. Just keep the table away from your main serving table if you have peanut allergies in your marching band.

And speaking of kids getting filled up...we did try to have enough food to have “seconds” of the main entrée and the fruit or vegetable. I didn’t do seconds on prepackages chips or cookies; those can be used for another meal and that will help keep your costs down. On some of the more popular entrees (Steak n Shake hamburgers or McDonald’s McChicken sandwiches), we would cut the extra sandwiches in half so that more students could get seconds. Get to know your students...sadly, a few of them will try to hog more than their share, so you may have to watch to make sure that the food is as evenly distributed as possible!

I’m sending along some of our menus, if you would like to look at them. Here is where good record-keeping will make your job easier (and easier for the person who takes over after you!). I would always make notes of the menu, the amount of food we served, and then note what was leftover or what we ran short on and what I would do differently the next time. The biggest problem I had with this was just making myself sit down and make the notes right after the meal. Right after for me meant sometime over that weekend! Don’t wait! You think you’ll remember, but trust me, you won’t. And it just makes thing so much easier...that should be your motivation.

So to sum this all up...ask for help from your band parents, ask for help from local restaurants, take copious notes after the meals, and don’t be afraid to stick with tried and true menus! I did many different jobs while my son was in the marching band, but the one that I enjoyed the most was working the food committee. Jump in and do it; there’s lots of help out there and you just can’t beat the great feeling you get when you walk into the cafeteria with the food and the entire marching band breaks into applause!