

Military OneSource Podcast — Why School Lunch Programs Matter for Military Families

Episode transcript

Bruce Moody: For military parents, mornings can feel like a mission of their own. That's why school lunch programs aren't just a convenience; they're a vital support system.

Hi, I'm Bruce Moody, and joining me today is a school nutrition director and retired military spouse here to unpack how these programs work and why they matter to our military community.

So, before we get started, I do want to remind you that Military OneSource is by the military, for the military. We are your first line of support, giving warfighters and their families tools to stay well and thrive. You can visit our website. You can call us anytime. We've got our phone number and our website address in the program notes, along with a link that you can use to send us your questions, your comments or ideas for a future episode. We'd love to hear from you.

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Okay, let's jump into today's conversation. Amy Maclosky, welcome to the podcast. You're from Arlington County Public Schools?

Amy Maclosky: Yes, I am. And thank you.

Bruce Moody: It's good to have you with us. So, what is it that you do?

Amy Maclosky: I'm a school nutrition director for Arlington Public Schools.

Bruce Moody: Nice. And for those who don't know, Arlington is right next door to Washington, D.C. It's also where you find the Pentagon and lots and lots of military families. Can you tell us a little bit about yourself and your connection to the military?

Amy Maclosky: Sure. I've been working with school nutrition programs for more than 20 years. I started as a cafeteria manager. My husband was in the military, and we were stationed outside of San Francisco, and I started working as a cafeteria manager. It's a great job to do if you're moving a lot. And we moved to Virginia, and I picked up where I left off, and I continued to grow, and now I'm a school nutrition director.

Bruce Moody: Nice. So we are going to have a conversation. It's going to be about the National School Lunch Program. So, let's start at the start. How did this program begin, and what was the original goal behind it?

Amy Maclosky: Yeah, so the school lunch program started as a response to food shortages during World War II and the desire to ensure kids receive proper nutrition to support their education and health, so that they could be ready to be better students and to eventually serve their country.

Bruce Moody: Okay, good. So proper nutrition and the benefits that follow.

Bruce Moody: And so in the Pentagon, what we're calling that now is nutritional readiness. And we know that nutritional readiness doesn't just apply to our people in uniform. It begins in childhood. Kids who are well fed, they grow up strong mentally and physically. This supports strong families, which in turn supports strong warfighters. So how do school lunch programs set up this foundation for both nutritional and financial readiness?

Amy Maclosky: Well, students who participate in school nutrition programs overall have better nutritional intake than students who bring lunch from home, or of course, students who don't participate in any meal program. And financially, the free and reduced lunch program can help families who are challenged with paying for meals during the day. We provide breakfast and lunch to students who qualify. In addition, we have community eligibility provision programs that provide school meals to all students.

Bruce Moody: So let's talk about military students. For example, the role that the school lunch program would play for families during times of military stuff like transition or during a move or when the spouse is away. What makes these school lunches, these programs, particularly convenient during these moments?

Amy Maclosky: Well, sure. School lunches are convenient. They're well-balanced meals. You don't have to worry when you send kids to school. You can trust that we're meeting all of the criteria that we need to for the National School Lunch Program, and you can feel really safe in participating and knowing that kids are getting a well-balanced meal. They're not hungry during the day, and they're ready to learn.

Bruce Moody: Can you share a story that illustrates how sending a child off to school, knowing that they'll have a nutritious meal, takes off some of the pressure on parents?

Amy Maclosky: Yeah. I mean, having to grocery shop during the week and make sure you have something to put the lunch in and a ice pack, and a water bottle and something that kids will eat and not having them come home with half of their lunchbox still full of packages is a big stressor for parents. So being able to just feel like you can look at the menu—we have ours posted online—go through, help kids pick out what they like, and then just send them off to school. Makes it really easy.

Bruce Moody: That's interesting. I was just thinking back, I never had an ice pack in my lunch when I was growing up, which is probably....

Amy Maclosky: They all have ice packs now.

Bruce Moody: Oh, they all do. Okay. Okay. Well, how does a balanced school meal help a child learn?

Amy Maclosky: Well, they're getting all the nutrients they need. Getting a balanced meal helps kids to make it through the day, not be hungry, not have a stomach ache, not have a headache and be really ready to focus.

Bruce Moody: Now, from your perspective, how do you use lunchtime to build community?

Amy Maclosky: Well, our Farm to School program helps us to build community. We bring in food that's locally grown, and we have brought in farmers to talk to kids about what they're eating, and I think it gives them a real sense of what they're eating, where they're eating, and what the farmers mean to the school lunch program.

Another way to build community is to normalize the free and reduced lunch program and have all the kids come together and sort of build the school community. Schools that have high participation in the free and reduced meals program and the meals program in general have strong communities because all the kids can come together and feel like they're a part of something.

Bruce Moody: So I wonder what you think about this. There are some who look at school meals, and they look at them as part of a long-term investment into the next generation of our military. So here's the idea. Kids, they grow up and they consider going into the military and they look back and they see that the military took care of them. And that would in turn make them feel more inclined to serve. What do you think of that connection?

Amy Maclosky: I think that that's a great perspective. I think coming from a cafeteria manager and a food service director background, we are doing this job because we're passionate about feeding kids and doing something good for our country. And I think it's the same in preparation for providing a service. And it's providing a service for our country. So I think that there's a great relationship there.

Bruce Moody: We appreciate you being with us today. You know, before we wrap up, what would be your final thoughts to share about the value of school lunch programs for military families?

Amy Maclosky: I think school lunch programs are valuable for all students. They're especially valuable for students who are stressed or in transition in any way, which may be a military family at any time. It could be any family. But I think it's a great program that people should be able to trust that we're offering great meals for kids, and you can feel confident that it will help the school day go better.

Bruce Moody: Nice. And we'll put a link to the website for the National School Lunch Program, also DODEA's school meal program and a bunch of other links for people who want to contact Military OneSource. Amy Maclosky, thank you so much for joining us today.

Amy Maclosky: Thank you so much. It was a lot of fun.

Bruce Moody: And I want to remind you that Military OneSource is by the military, for the military. We are your first line of support, giving war fighters and their families tools to stay well and thrive. Call us anytime. Visit us anytime. We've got our number and the website address in the program notes. There's also a link you can use to send us your questions or comments, maybe an idea for a future episode, and be sure to subscribe to this podcast wherever you get your podcasts, because we cover a wide range of topics to help military families navigate military life.

I'm Bruce Moody. Thank you for listening. Take care. Bye-bye.