

The Lunch Bunch Starter Kit



Many teachers are interested in starting their own Lunch Bunch experience, but they aren't really sure how to do it. This article will hopefully provide you the **insight, confidence, and inspiration you need to get started**. We want you to know from the start, however, that it takes time to create a Lunch Bunch that is reliable and predictable. We have made lots of mistakes and traveled down a lot of paths that didn't produce workable results! Our hope is that our story can help you avoid making many of the pitfalls we made.

So, take the time to read this Lunch Bunch Starter Kit. Take time to decide the best way to develop your own Lunch Bunch. Find some teachers who are willing to make the connections with the kids that can eventually change the culture and climate of your school. **We have experienced this change in culture, and we want you to share the same sense of what it's like to have a great school.**

How to Read the Starter Kit....

This Starter Kit is **color coded**. Why? Well, the colors we use for Lunch Bunch are red and green. So, it works out that each time we write something that sounds like a 'Lunch Bunch' principle, we'll have it highlighted in red or green.

The Lunch Bunch principles have to do with connecting kids with each other, connecting teachers to kids, and connecting kids to their school. We also focus on having kids take 'safe risks, and we use games and activities as ways to help kids get to know each other. There are a lot of other 'Lunch Bunch' concepts throughout this starter kit. Once you get started creating your own 'Lunch Bunch Experience' you will see that these concepts reveal themselves.

Analyze Your Situation

If your school has a high level of violence, students throwing food, yelling, 'acting out behavior', and drama, then you really need a Lunch Bunch atmosphere! You also have a lot to overcome. We had a lot of drama at AHS, but we didn't really have a violence problem. (It might seem different if we went back in time.) **One of the first things we did was figure out a way to deal with the drama.**

When students displayed 'drama', we did not respond by meeting 'fire with fire'. **We realized that this only produced more fire.** Instead, we decided we would listen to both sides, separately. Then, we would moderate the discussions between them. Sometimes we were very harsh (compared to today's standard of our lunchroom) when the students didn't follow our guidelines. But, we made it work. Our main focus was to get the students to at least 'get along'. We also made sure that we rewarded their 'willingness' to discuss the issues, even if we couldn't solve them. The same day (or at least the next day) we would revisit the students with candy bars. (We liked '100 Grand' candy bars so we could tell kids that we believed they were worthy of 'one hundred

grand'!) We would give them the candy bars and thank them (sincerely) for agreeing to at least talk to each other. This did a few things:

1. **It told the kids we cared because we came back to check on them.** It showed them that they mattered to us.
2. **Food speaks to kids**-and the kids recognized what we were up to, but were accepting of the candy anyway.
3. **It brought 'humor' into the situation** when the kids would inevitably joke about getting into more fights in order to get candy bars.
4. We were able to continue our discussion with kids under less pressure, and **create more meaningful connections.**
5. We were able to **learn the students' names** which allowed us to keep in touch with them throughout the year.

We dealt with many problems with our students the same way. Obviously, we would **use our professional judgment in each situation.** If a student really needed to speak to an administrator, or if there was a behavior that demanded more than we could handle, we followed a different path. We really strived to **do away with the 'sit with the administrators' type of mentality** that had been a part of the lunchroom for years. The existing idea was that other students would see the students in trouble at the 'administrators table', and then say to themselves, "I better stay out of trouble so I don't have to sit there." **We wanted kids to understand that we didn't want them at that table. We wanted them to work problems through us.** More importantly, we wanted them to know how to behave. So, each time there was a problem, we sat down and talked with them.

One of our responses to the fights we did have was to talk to both parties involved. We realized that even if they were really tough kids, they were scared. Being in a fight is scary. **We also made sure that we talked to all of the kids near the fight to ask them if they could have intervened to stop the fight.** We asked them if they had any knowledge of the fight possibly happening beforehand. There were times when we sent a clear message to an entire room of 300 kids that cheering on a fight was not acceptable. Once, when two girls got into a very big fight, nearly all of the kids in the lunchroom stood up to watch. As soon as the fight nearly over, one of us, (seemingly possessed!) turned to the crowd and yelled, "SIT DOWN NOW! This is wrong!" or something to that affect. Later on, students told us that they were actually impressed by how we handled the situation. We were pretty consistent throughout the day to tell the students how upset we were. We especially confronted students who thought the fight was 'neat' or 'cool'. They were very clear about where we stood. **Over time, our reputations helped us in the effort to show kids that fighting was completely unacceptable.**

There are lots of other ways to deal with problems in the lunchroom. The point is this:

The sooner the kids realize that you are on their side trying to solve problems instead of simply punishing them, the better.

Mapping out the Problems

Like many teachers who watch the lunchroom, we had our strategies to help us deal with the problems that show up on a regular basis. When we first started working in the lunchroom, we would stand in 'strategic locations' to keep an eye on kids. The idea was that our presence would serve as a possible deterrent to bad behavior and/or as a reminder to kids to pick up their messes before they left the lunchroom. We also found some great places to be so we could watch lots and lots of kids all at once. Since nobody told us what to do, we figured we had something good going.

Another strategy we would use was to stand near key problem areas right before the bell rang. Our thinking was such that when the students got up to leave, we could catch them leaving a mess, and then call or whistle to get them back to their tables to clean up their messes. I can whistle loudly without having to put my fingers in my mouth, which is a great skill to have in a high school! It works well during assemblies when you are cheering your kids, it helps stop the action and get attention in my chemistry lab, and it has even been known to stop a fight or two!

Even with our best efforts, however, we still found that we lacked what we were looking for: **accountability from the kids**. In other words, unless we had our eyes on the kids it seemed like they would not necessarily clean up after themselves. Cleaning up after themselves might have depended on their mood that day, the level of excitement in the lunchroom, or whether or not there was a full moon! So, while our kids did a fairly good job at cleaning up, we were seeking more accountability.

We sketched a 'map' of the lunchroom on the back of a sheet of paper. It was rudimentary, but it seemed to do the job. And, instead of spending so much time watching the kids at the end of the period, we let them leave the lunchroom without us bothering them too much. Obviously we didn't turn our backs on the kids, but we weren't frantically walking between the tables at the end of the period looking for trouble.

We started to make notes on each of the three cafeteria maps (for periods A, B, and C) to indicate where the messes were being left behind. All we did was write something that described what was left behind, and the date.

EXAMPLE			
9/17 TRAY			9/16 MILK

For example, we would write, '9/15-Tray', or '9/17 puddle on floor'. What emerged from this method was that we found patterns- the messes tended to be generated by the same kids. (Um, like, we didn't see that coming?!) Once we saw that a lot of the messes were generated by the same kids, we could figure out which kids were leaving the messes. Our kids don't have assigned seats, but they tend to sit in the same seats every day.

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After a few days we would approach the offending group of kids and show them the ‘cafeteria map’. We would tell them that they have had a record of leaving messes, and it needed to stop. A lot of kids will say things like, “I wasn’t here yesterday”, or “I don’t eat lunch”, etc. But, if you have data collected over a few days, it makes them look silly to make these arguments. So, we don’t yell at the kids, and we don’t really ever talk about punishment either. We simply tell them that it’s time to stop leaving messes and that we will be watching them for a while. It works about 80% or more of the time.

We find that the map will sometimes show that somebody left a mess about two weeks ago, but there is no repeating pattern of doing so. We simply let it go! Why? **Because there’s a lot going on in a lunchroom, and kids are easily distracted.** They get up to go to the Snack Shack, find their buddy, and go to play the Wii! Sometimes they go to talk to another group of kids and simply forget. Sometimes things fall off of their trays, etc, etc, etc. The point is that we are willing to give them the benefit of the doubt, and it has worked well.

There are some times when we have to train kids about personal responsibilities in the lunch room. Some kids don’t understand that even if you accidentally dumped your entire bottle of Powerade on the floor, you still need to do something to help get the mess cleaned up! Either they don’t understand, they haven’t been trained at home, they are too lazy, or they are really that rude- but there are some kids who simply will leave a huge mess for others to clean up. We don’t let them see us get mad- we simply treat it as doing business. **We make sure they have a clear understanding that this cannot happen again.** Ben and I will ‘tag team’ them and keep talking and training until they are ‘worn down’. We don’t get any repeat offenders when we use this approach. But, we still make sure we do this with some form of dignity. What usually happens is that the kids around the offender know that he or she is in the wrong, and they won’t jump to his or her defense. **They actually want the offender to change his or her behavior too.**

A select few groups of kids need continued reminders throughout the year. It drives us crazy! Even after repeated reminders, compliments, rewards, threats of punishment, they still leave messes. We even have cameras that we can use to capture them in the act of leaving messes. Ben and I have used this only once or twice in the three years that we’ve had the cameras. **We want the kids to learn how to act responsible whether there is a camera watching, or not.**

For those kids who simply ‘do not get it’, we have come up with other strategies. Check out the list below:

1. Before the students arrive for that lunch period, we have put their chairs on top of the table and told them they need to find another place to sit. (They end up looking like bees trying to find their nest after it has been removed!)
2. We have put ‘caution tape’ around the area before the kids get there. The students that arrive before the ‘offenders’ can see what is going on and **often thank us for taking care of this problem.** The ‘offenders’ are still welcome to sit at the table if they wish. We eventually remove the tape after we have talked to them.

3. We sit at their table before they show up. We grade papers, read a book, etc. We sit right in the middle of their location. The kids always sit down right next to us, but they seem confused. We will stay there for about 10-15 minutes and then leave. That tends to leave a message.
4. We inspect the area before the kids get there to make sure there isn't any mess. If there is, we pick it up. This way they can't tell us that the previous kids left a mess. Then, we tell them, very directly, there is not to be one little teeny tiny wrapper, crumb, bottle, etc. when they leave. We then stand there most of the period. We also tell them that they must ask permission to leave. Even when we know a kid is getting up to go to the bathroom or the Snack Shack, we rush over and ask them what they are doing. When they tell us that they are going to snack we simply use it as an opportunity to remind them about cleaning up after themselves. We also inspect the table and floor and make them pick up any mess left behind. Eventually they get tired of us bothering them, and they change their behavior.

When the kids start showing progress we will reward them. We want them to know them to know that we appreciate the change in their behavior and that we want them to show responsibility. The way we reward them is to approach their table with a big bag of candy and start giving them generous handfuls of candy. We also make sure (somewhat loudly for all to hear) that we are thanking them for doing such a good job. It's hard to believe how receptive even high school students are to a handful of candy! While some kids take as long as two or more months to train, it's worth it. There are times later in the year that they need to be 'retrained', but it goes much quicker than the first time.

Start Making Connections

We started making connections with our kids by doing something we called 'Birthday Bunch'. It came from our idea to mimic 'Friday's' restaurants where they would tie a balloon to the back of a guest's chair to celebrate their birthday. They would also gather the servers and sing a song to the guest.

We decided to provide candy in lunch bags to students every Friday. We simply walked around and asked who had a birthday in the previous week. Kids were usually honest, and we generally would catch a kid when they were lying about their birthday. Sometimes we couldn't tell, so we would give them the benefit of the doubt. **A handful of candy in a bag is a start to making connections with kids.**

We eventually reached a point where we could decorate the bags with 'smart alecky' type sayings. For example, we would write, 'Way to be born! You had nothing to do with it, but we're giving you candy anyway!', or, 'Happy Birthday. You should have one at least once a year!' The sayings weren't mean, but they weren't lame either. **Our target audience is teenagers, so we needed to reach them at their level.**

The birthday songs came along, and we 'stole' some from restaurants we had been to. We simply asked the restaurant servers about their birthday songs, and they were happy to oblige. We also found the birthday song in seven different languages. We printed these on a sheet of paper, made several copies, and handed them out during lunch. Now, kids could sing to their buddies in Korean, Hebrew, German, or some other language. Ben and I usually made the most racket, but the kids enjoyed it. Ben eventually convinced the kids to stand on their chairs while they sang 'Happy Birthday'.

We had developed a pretty good reputation by this point, so our administrators were fine with what we were trying to do. The kids were more hesitant to sing and stand on chairs than we were, which is exactly where we wanted them!

We eventually had to take care of kids with summer birthdays. The way we did that was to celebrate ‘half birthdays’. So, starting in December we started celebrating June birthdays. In January we celebrated July birthdays, and February was for August birthdays. We somehow managed to fit in birthdays that took place during Christmas and Spring breaks. You will probably need a lot of support to do this with your kids, especially if you have 1100 kids like we do! (Let’s just say we went through a lot of candy, brownies, cakes, and cookies out of our own pocket- which was totally worth it).

The Birthday Bunch story is just an example of one of the things we do. **We believe if you follow this format of building up a way to connect with the kids, it will eventually grow, and almost require you to try new and exciting things.** With this in mind, let us give you some examples of ways you can start making little connections with your kids. Remember, try one or two things at first. Let them build up. Learn about your kids and how to make connections. Then, when you think things are ready, introduce something new. Eventually you will build up a repertoire with the kids. **Failure to follow this method of building up slow, making solid connections, and reflecting on your progress will result in the students backing away from what you are doing.** The moment they believe that you are ‘forcing’ a connection they will be less willing to engage. Listen to the kids, they will help you gauge if you need to move more quickly or slowly.

‘Low Risk Ways’ of Connecting with Kids

Writing in Calligraphy. Not a lot of people can write in calligraphy. But, if you have that skill, put it to use! Students love to see how people write their name in calligraphy. Find a kid you know, and write their name in calligraphy right there at the lunch table. Write it on an index card or even nice card stock. Students around them will want you to write their name too! If you have a student who wants to learn how to write calligraphy, show them how, right in front of everybody else. **The idea is that all of the other kids will see you make an effort to help their friend.** In their mind, you would be just as likely to help them too. Of course, writing calligraphy at a lunch table could be tough, but it’s a start! Wouldn’t it be great if a kid learned this new skill from you?

Bubble Texting. You know that ‘bubble wrap’ that is used in packaging? Who can resist popping the bubbles? Popping bubbles can drive people crazy, but it’s fun.

Find some bubble wrap (don’t buy it- it’s kind of expensive!), and cut rectangles about the size of an opened cell phone, about 2 by 6 inches or so. Try to make several samples almost the exact same size. You’ll need a lot of these, so be prepared.

Have a bag of candy (**which you always keep in your possession!**) and let the kids know you’re ready to share. Ask the kids if they want to compete in ‘Bubble Texting’. The rules are that the two players can only use their thumbs to pop the bubbles on the wrap. They may not punch, twist, pull, or find other



ways to cheat! They are not allowed to rest the bubble wrap on the table, their leg, etc. The idea is to act like they are using a cell phone.

Have a stopwatch (not really needed), and time them. The stopwatch simply adds to the tension. Tell them that when they believe they have popped all of the bubbles, they can hand it to you. Remind them that if any bubble is unpopped, they lose. Some kids are very thorough, some kids are not. Most kids will leave 2-3 bubbles unpopped. Don't let anybody know if there are unpopped bubbles until both players are done. Of course, you'll have to tease the kids who don't get all of the bubbles popped!

Provide candy for both players, but give more to the winner. Be ready- those kids around the players will want to try 'Bubble Texting' too. You can have more fun by showing them how 'old people' like teachers can do it too. (But, keep an eye on your candy!).

Jenga. This is a great game to give the kids. Some kids will play for a long time, others will only play for about 10 minutes or so. **We don't expect all kids to like it, but we do encourage them to try.**

We hardly play by the rules printed on the instruction sheet. The kids usually know the rules better than we do. Sometimes we play, but generally we watch. We like to 'talk it up' while the kids are playing and try to build excitement along the way. We generally have a digital camera ready, and give it to one of the students who is watching. **Doing this helps 'connect' them to all of the action. And, when you hand a camera to a kid, it shows you trust them.**

One of the things we like to do is place a handful of candy in the top of the box before we give it to a group of kids. When they open it up they are almost compelled to play. After all, how can you not be persuaded to play Jenga or some other game when someone gives you candy?

Playing Jenga with special education students can work well too. You don't need to use all of the pieces. Start small with them if you think it would work better.

Another reason this is a good game is because the kids work together to put the game away. They have to stack the pieces together correctly in order to get it back into the container.

Chess, checkers, and cards. These are low-risk games that we have on hand at all times. Believe it or not, some kids don't know how to play checkers. **Sit down with them, and play.** You can watch the rest of the lunchroom while you play a game of checkers. And, if you need to leave, have someone else finish for you. In fact, we do that on purpose so it gets the kids playing together. One of the ways we use our oversize checker board game (a small rug with a checker board and oversized pieces) is to set up a table right next to the lunch line. Ben and I sit at the table with the checker board rug and wait for the kids to ask us what we're up to. We simply say, "It's your move." Most kids get a kick out of this and make a move or two. Since they are in a line that is moving, they can only make so many moves. You then look for the next competitor. **Not all kids are willing to try, but nearly all of them look!** They tend to think you're a little crazy, which is what you want. If you don't do something crazy once in a while, they will think you are a shark with no teeth or a bird that can't fly!

Checkers can also be a good connection to make with your special education students. Our kids love playing with us, even if we don't quite follow the rules. **You can be silly with them, and they love it.**

There are likely some kids who are good at chess. We have a few kids that seek out the board on a regular basis. We thought that kids would need a long time to play, but apparently they can get in a game within a lunch period. We don't really need to know much about chess- we just needed to provide the game.

A lot of high school kids know how to play cards, especially euchre. All they need is a deck or two of cards. We don't even really know. You can find playing cards cheap!

Marble Tracks. Ben brought in some marble tracks he found at Target. He bought about four sets since they were on sale and he figured we could use them in a lunch room with 1100 kids spread out over three lunch periods. (Are we geniuses, or what?) We started out by just having the kids make marble tracks at their tables. (We would caution against having marble tracks with elementary school students. Having marbles around them while they are eating is not a good idea.) Ben was eventually able to persuade the kids to build marble tracks that reached from one table to another using several marble kits. **The idea was for kids from different tables to connect with each other.** The fact that some students were inconvenienced by having to 'walk around' the marble track added to the excitement of the event. They realized that we regarded having fun more important than the need to walk conveniently.

Kids do well with the marble track and we tend to get a very diverse group of kids to play. They take their marble tracks very seriously, and have fun doing it too. Of course, having a digital camera to capture the activity is part of the fun. Once these pictures get developed, share them with the kids. **The pictures will remind kids that they had fun working in a group.**

Candy Scooping, Candy scooping can be crazy, so it's not the first thing you want to start with in your Lunch Bunch.

You will need a cup, a bowl, a few spoons, an oven mitt, and stopwatch. Of course, you'll need a bag of candy with small pieces such as 'Now and Later's', suckers, gum, etc. The students need to scoop the candy from the bowl of candy into the cup, which is about one foot away. They may not knock the cup or the bowl over, and any candy that is spilled can be given to onlookers or can be put back in your candy bag. They can only use one hand to scoop the candy with the spoon. This also means they aren't allowed to hold the cup with their other hand! Practice this game with kids a few times- they are very clever at cheating! Sometimes they will grab the candy with the oven mitt. The way to get around this is to get them a really long handled spoon.

See how 15 seconds on the clock works. We usually give them a few extra seconds if they are struggling! Nobody is really watching the clock except you anyway. And, of course, have a camera ready. Show them the excitement when all is done. As always, keep your eye on the candy bag.

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Pictures. Having a digital camera available makes a big difference in the atmosphere of the lunchroom. Here's why:

1. Kids are able to see the action captured on a camera immediately. They really appreciate that. Some kids will ask you to delete pictures, which you can also do.
2. You make a connection with a kid when you have to show them how to use the camera. Plus, like we mentioned before, you show them trust when you hand them the camera and when you ask them to take the picture. The fact that you trust them will cause them to take good pictures.
3. Once the pictures have been developed you can share them with the kids. Doing this shows them you care enough to come back to see them.
4. Once you have gathered enough pictures from all of the activities in the lunchroom, you can have kids make posters out of poster board or even consider starting a small scrapbooking club.
5. Pictures create a sense of 'heritage' at a school. They give kids a sense of belonging, and give them something tangible to indicate they belonged.

Birthday Bag Decorating. We mentioned how we started the 'Birthday Bunch' by handing candy out to kids for their birthdays. As the students become more accustomed to the Birthday Bunch, we started decorating lunch bags using markers, crayons, and stickers.

When we felt the kids would respond well (meaning they wouldn't think it was lame!), if we asked a table of kids to color white lunch bags for us. We would sometimes give them examples of what we had in mind, and sometimes we would stick around and color with them. At other times we wanted to give them complete ownership (and our trust), so we would leave them with one or two sets of markers and a bunch of candy, brownies, cookies, or some other treat. There were a few occasions when the candy went untouched-the kids were happy to help out without reward.

The opportunity to thank your kids and compliment them for their hard work is something you don't often get in a high school setting. A lot of the kids can show their creativity, which they don't get to do much outside of art class. Kids begin to realize that they are decorating the bags for their classmates too, which is another way to make a connection. The kids who receive the bags also recognize that their classmates did this for them, without knowing exactly who made the effort.

You can involve special education students by having them decorate the bags as a project. One of our special education teachers is always looking for this kind of project, and was thankful we asked. Her kids also were now able to have ownership in the school, which they don't always get. The students who would receive the bags decorated by the special education students would sometimes giggle or seem confused when they looked at the artwork on the bags. But, once we told them that the kids in the special education classes made the bags, they were very grateful.

What about the Next Level?



There is certainly more to Lunch Bunch than what we've already shown you. But, this is our Lunch Bunch Starter Kit! We truly believe that you need to do activities like these before you progress to others. We will share more with you later on, once we have something written up!

Don't try all of these activities at once. Remember, you are building a relationship with a lot of kids, and that takes time. Instant relationships don't often last long, and that can be especially true with teenagers. Your time investment will be well worth it.

Let us know!

We would love to know more about how the Lunch Bunch Starter Kit is working for you! Drop us a note sometime to ask questions or to let us know how things are going. If you have new ideas, by all means, let us know. We would love to pass them on to others. Right now, we have about 30 people on our newsletter email list from all over the country. We even have Canada in on this!

As things progress we would hope to have a website that would allow us to post your reflections, ideas, and stories with others. You will be amazed at how a Lunch Bunch can begin to alter the culture of your school.

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