



SCHOOL NUTRITION BUYERS GUIDE

# How to Choose the Right K-12 Nutrition Software Solution

Your Guide to Finding the Right Fit to Meet Your School Nutrition Goals



## INTRODUCTION

# School nutrition fuels student success

School nutrition professionals play an essential role in keeping students learning, growing, and thriving. Research has shown that school meals are the healthiest meals children eat, which directly fuels classroom learning. Especially for children living with food insecurity, the nutritious meals students get at school can significantly impact behavior, emotions, and mental health in addition to better academic performance.

Nationwide discussions about education often center around challenges related to student learning and school funding, but nutrition deserves its share of the spotlight. It's a crucial aspect of school operations, and maximizing nutrition program efficiency is pivotal in supporting students' well-being.



## The profound, lasting impact of highly effective school nutrition programs

A [National Institute of Health \(NIH\)](#) study connects school-aged hunger to cognitive capacity, increased risk of mental health issues, childhood obesity, and chronic disease. Well-fed students gain a distinct advantage to learn, grow, and achieve, which is why school nutrition teams play an essential role in student success.

[USDA data](#) reveals that 17.3% of U.S. households with children under 18 years old now face food insecurity. That's 6.4 million households nationwide, and over half of them indicate that children in the home feel the effects. The school cafeteria can provide these students with a reliable source of healthy meals. In 2021, when universal free lunch policies were widely adopted, the

[USDA reports](#) that food insecurity for households with children suddenly declined by 2.3%, even as it increased for households without children by 3.2%.

For many, developing healthy eating habits also begins at school. School meals are the healthiest meals most students consume in a day, according to [NIH research](#). That's because students who eat school-prepared meals consume more whole grains, milk, fruits, and vegetables than those eating meals prepared elsewhere.

## But spinning too many plates can overheat nutrition teams

While nutrition professionals play a vital role in students' success, too many feel overwhelmed and stressed. Delivering on their commitment to students requires staff and managers alike to wear multiple hats. Complex, manual processes make it difficult to keep the plates spinning.

Over 70% of districts still use manual nutrition program processes, according to LINQ's [2023 K-12 Nutrition Survey Report](#). That means teams must track inventory, complete production records, plan meals and/or create menus, along with countless other tasks, on their own—and it's not just the spreadsheets and paper forms that

### DID YOU KNOW?



**6.4**  
MILLION

households face  
food insecurity

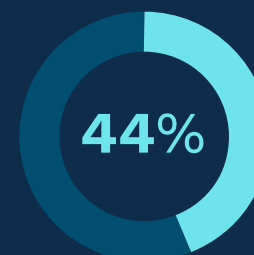
complicate processes. Using disparate software for specific tasks, like inventory or menu production, only adds to the burden. Teams must manually export or re-enter the same data multiple times. Then, they must carefully review their work for errors.

## Rising prices, meal debt, and staffing challenges bring additional pressure

Nutrition managers also see operational costs increasing while recruiting and hiring has become more difficult. Food [prices rose almost three-fold annually](#) as of April 2023. Student meal debt adds up to \$262 million per year, according to researchers at the Education Data Initiative. Additionally, LINQ's research reveals that more than half of nutrition teams struggle to operate effectively due to staff shortages.

Nutrition teams deserve all the help they can get. The inherent complexity of juggling back of house (BOH) and front of house (FOH) duties is hard enough. With the addition of economic and labor market challenges, it's clear that K-12 nutrition professionals need room to breathe. The right technology can help. Simplifying program management saves time and money while relieving stress on dedicated yet overburdened employees.

### DID YOU KNOW?



of nutrition directors have a “serious concern” about their programs’ financial sustainability within the next 3 years.\*

**87.2%** report having challenges with menu item shortages.\*

**90.5%** of school meal programs struggle with staff shortages.\*

\*Source: SNA 2024 School Nutrition Trends Report



## The right technology simplifies K-12 nutrition operations

LINQ's 2023 survey shows that nearly twice as many districts rate their nutrition operations as “excellent” when using all or mostly automated processes instead of manual processes. Software designed for K-12 nutrition teams can sync data in real time, automate workflows and reporting, and eliminate redundant tasks. In short, it makes life much easier for those who'd rather focus on planning, preparing, and serving more meals to more students.

Beyond the back-office tasks and external challenges, nutrition teams still need to prepare food, ensure lunch lines move quickly, handle cleaning and preparation, and serve healthy, delicious meals to students. They need technology to act as a team player, helping operations run smoothly and efficiently so they can focus on what matters most: delivering for the students who depend on them.

### Nutrition teams can save time and reduce costs using an integrated solution that:

- Automates FOH and BOH tasks like production records and reports
- Accurately predicts inventory and purchasing to inform decisions and minimize waste
- Simplifies access to menu item nutrition data for staff and families
- Flags menu planning that doesn't meet compliance requirements

This guide is designed to help you know what to look for in a quality K-12 nutrition solution and ways to manage your program in the smartest, fastest, and most effective way possible.

### Use this guide to:

- Identify your top challenges and priorities
- Ask the right questions when looking for a K-12 nutrition solution
- Visualize success with a fully integrated FOH and BOH solution

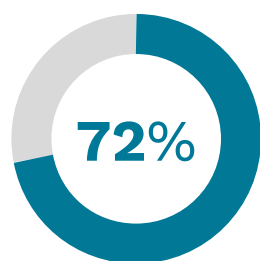
## PART 1

# Top Challenges Today's K-12 Nutrition Teams Face

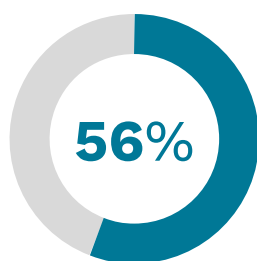
LINQ's 2023 K-12 Nutrition Survey Report revealed rising costs and staff shortages as the two biggest challenges for K-12 nutrition leaders. In fact, 72% of district food service leaders listed increasing costs as a concern, with 40% indicating "extreme" concern. 56% cited worries about staff shortages.

### BIGGEST CHALLENGES

(Food Service Director responses)



Overall increasing costs



Food service staff shortages

Additionally, 52% of respondents said staffing challenges affect their nutrition program's ability to operate effectively.

Around the same number reported retention is a problem, especially for larger districts. Just 32% felt confident in their program's ability to hire. That leaves many teams feeling squeezed between tight budgets and a constricted labor market.

Limited resources and increasing workload take a toll on staff members. Manual processes lead to errors. That's where technology can help—by simplifying processes, increasing efficiency, and informing decisions with accurate, real-time information. LINQ's survey uncovered areas where nutrition teams need the most help cutting operating costs and improving efficiency.

## Pain Points for K-12 Nutrition Programs

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### Reduced Reimbursement Rates



The days of emergency funding and higher meal reimbursement rates, particularly through the Keep Kids Fed Act (KKFA), are quickly coming to an end. That leaves many schools and districts wondering how they'll fill the gap.

### Rising Food Prices

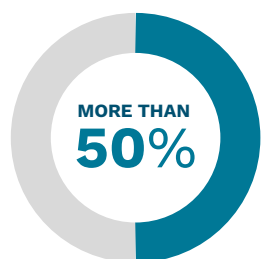


While inflation and rising costs affect nearly every economic sector, school food service faces an extreme situation. Costs for many essential foods skyrocketed in the years following the global pandemic, and the Bureau of Labor and Statistics shows a troubling continuation of that trend. According to their data, school food prices increased three-fold between 2022 and 2023.

## Pain Points for K-12 Nutrition Programs

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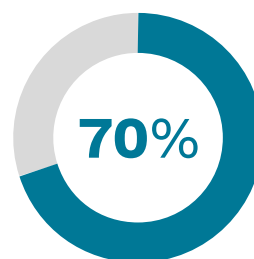
### Too Much Strain on Too Few Employees



of nutrition leaders lack confidence in retention.

Having enough employees on staff to plan, prepare, and serve meals is critical. With ongoing staff shortages across the education ecosystem and difficulty retaining current employees, nutrition leaders need a way to reduce workload and ease the burden on their team members.

### Time-Consuming Manual Processes



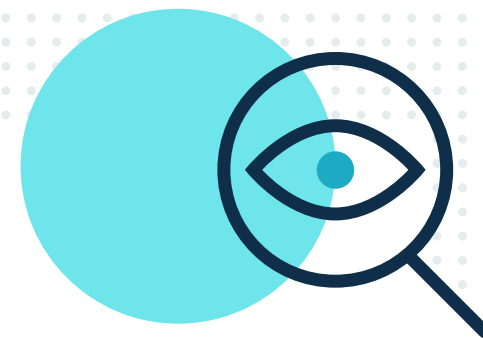
of nutrition teams still rely on at least partially manual operational processes.

Automated processes are lightning fast, with data accurately auto-populating across the system in production records, inventory reports, and purchase orders. Yet, most districts still depend on manual processes to complete tasks. That slows teams down, creates more opportunities for mistakes, and increases workload.



## PART 2

# What to Look for in a School Nutrition Solution




Every K-12 district is unique, including the operational requirements of its school nutrition program.

It's important to evaluate your unique needs when looking for a solution that will provide the best fit for your district. Take time to consider the following as you assess your options:

- District size and student enrollment
- Biggest pain points and efficiency gaps
- Reporting requirements
- Online and offline operational capabilities
- System interoperability or connections needed
- Future expansion possibilities

To get the highest ROI from your nutrition technology investment, it's also important to identify the biggest gaps that are currently costing you valuable time and money. You may start with questions like:

- How many of my current nutrition processes are manual?
- Do I have to pay extra for system updates?
- Does my staff have to re-enter the same information into multiple systems?
- How much time is spent reconciling data inaccuracies?
- Can my front of house continue to operate in the event of an internet outage?
- How often have we over- or under-ordered inventory?



A modern, fully integrated nutrition solution designed for K-12 can have a measurable impact on cost and time efficiencies, staffing requirements, reporting accuracy, risk reduction, and team effectiveness.

## Front to Back of House Integration

An integrated FOH and BOH system provides real-time data for better visibility and a single source of truth. Leaders and staff members can quickly see accurate inventory, POS transactions, and menu plans from anywhere. Because data syncs across the system, it's always up to date.

Connected FOH and BOH systems also enable teams to automate processes. Production records, for instance, can be completed in just a few clicks when the POS system automatically updates every other module as transactions are processed.

### **An integrated FOH and BOH system provides:**

- Real-time data across all FOH and BOH modules
- Inventory syncing and accurate purchasing forecasts
- Automated production records and processes

Tasks that once took hours each week no longer tie staff members down when an integrated system helps shoulder the load.

### **QUESTION NO. 1**

Can teams access real-time data and automate manual reporting tasks like production records across FOH and BOH operations?

# Food Waste Adds Up

**\$9.7** MILLION  
per day

U.S. schools' food  
waste costs

**530,000**  
TONS of food

go into the garbage  
each year<sup>1</sup>



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Accurate forecasting, inventory, and purchasing  
could help schools save significant amounts  
of money while reducing landfill waste.

<sup>1</sup>World Wildlife Fund. "Plate Waste in US Cafeterias Could Total 530,000 Tons Per year." WorldWildlife.org. 5 Dec 2019

## Efficiency-Boosting Features

A modern K-12 nutrition solution can simplify tasks to help teams get more done in less time. For instance, digitally connected temperature probes mean staff members don't need to physically enter refrigerators and freezers to complete their logs. An integrated POS system and payments solution makes it easy for students to pay with their digital meal accounts, helping lines move faster. Online free and reduced-price meal applications let families complete forms from anywhere, then submit them online to eliminate visits to the school, postage costs, and errors due to misread handwriting.

### **Look for a modern nutrition solution that boosts efficiency with features like:**

- Digital freezer temperature probes
- Integrated POS system for fast, easy meal service
- Online free and reduced-price meal applications

Features like these enable a nutrition program to operate faster while reducing workload on already-busy staff members. That equates to time, money, and stress savings.

### **QUESTION NO. 2**

Does the system simplify FOH and BOH tasks using connected data, or does my staff still spend time manually processing data, reconciling reports, and reviewing inventory?



## Security

Cyberattacks can cost a district dearly. With data breach recovery costing as much as \$1 million, prioritizing cybersecurity matters more than ever. It's vital to have both industry-leading security features and the support and training to fully utilize them. An experienced provider can help to ensure a district fully implements security features and offers necessary training to staff members.

### **An experienced K-12 nutrition solution provider helps districts:**

- Implement a solution with industry-leading cybersecurity features
- Effectively train staff members to fully utilize security features
- Reduce potential for costly cyberattacks that endanger personal information

With a historically high cybersecurity threat and tight budgets, prioritizing system security directly supports operational continuity and success.

### **QUESTION NO. 3**

Does the provider offer a solution with industry-leading cybersecurity and training to help staff members fully utilize those features?

# Cybersecurity Threats Historically High for K-12 Districts

319

Ransomware attacks on K-12 schools from 2018-23

\$1.7M

Ransom demand average<sup>2</sup>

The U.S. Government Accountability Office reports<sup>3</sup>:

3 DAYS TO 3 WEEKS

of lost learning due to cyberattacks

NO. 1

concern for edtech leaders from 2018-23 is **cybersecurity**<sup>4</sup>

YET

UP TO

\$1M

in cost when ransom is not paid

2 TO 9 MONTHS

for districts to recover from cyberattacks

2/3

of districts don't have a full-time employee dedicated to network security.

A modern, integrated system can give a district a layer of protection for their data. A single system within which data flows between applications and tools limits external entry points that can leave a district exposed to risk of a cyberattack.

<sup>2</sup> Moody, Rebecca. "Since 2018, ransomware attacks on the education sector have cost the world economy over \$53 billion in downtime alone." Comparitech. 21 Sep 2023

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Government Accountability Office. "As Cyberattacks Increase on K-12 Schools, Here is What's Being Done." GAO.gov. 1 Dec 2022

<sup>4</sup> Consortium for School Networking. 2023 State of EdTech Leadership. CoSN. 2023



## Compliance

Maintaining compliance with USDA guidelines and other federal and state requirements is a top priority for school nutrition programs. From USDA meal pattern and nutrition standards to regulations around procurement, food safety, and other operational processes, schools can't afford penalties or withheld funds due to noncompliance findings in an Administrative Review.

A robust K-12 nutrition solution can significantly reduce the time needed to ensure standards are met by flagging non-compliant menus, simplifying record-keeping, and streamlining reporting. Relying on a dependable school nutrition system can drastically reduce the stress of meeting guidelines, tracking compliance, and maximizing reimbursement for your program.

### **Look for a school nutrition solution that can:**

- Automate production records for time savings and improved accuracy
- Flag non-compliant menu planning for daily and weekly requirements
- Generate complete, accurate Administrative Review reports quickly

With technology that helps school nutrition teams to stay in compliance and generate required reports quickly and easily, much of the stress of Administrative Reviews can be eliminated.

### **QUESTION NO. 4**

**Does the solution automate critical compliance data reporting, flag non-compliant menu planning, and simplify Administrative Reviews?**

## Ongoing Training and Support

Success never stops at implementation. Maximizing the benefits from your nutrition solution depends on knowledgeable team members to help you get the most out of the software. Your technology partner plays a crucial role here. In addition to multi-channel support options, including phone, email, and online chat, an always-on resource library enables leaders and team members to learn and build their skills. Group implementation sessions can also help teams learn together and network with other districts.

### **A supportive K-12 nutrition solution provider delivers:**

- Attentive and responsive support via multiple channels
- A free resource library packed with learning materials
- Team-based implementation training and coaching

Attentive support and training help everyone get the most out of their technology solution.

### **QUESTION NO. 5**

Does the software provider offer ongoing product training and support, along with access to a library of on-demand learning content?

# How LINQ Can Help

[LINQ Nutrition](#) provides a complete and integrated solution for managing your front- to back-of-house operations. From saving time and money through streamlined processes and automated workflows to real-time data synchronization and reporting, LINQ enables you to manage your end-to-end school nutrition operations at peak efficiency.

## LINQ Takes a Fully Integrated Approach to School Nutrition Software

While schools and districts each have unique needs and challenges, an integrated solution provides time and cost savings that always make a difference. From eliminating countless hours of redundant tasks to driving informed budget and hiring decisions, the benefits impact every aspect of operations.

A comprehensive solution delivers a seamless FOH and BOH experience. Plus, it can help you get up and running faster without unnecessary concerns about third-party interoperability and juggling communications between multiple software providers.



## A fully integrated FOH and BOH nutrition solution offers:

- **Time-saving automation.** FOH and BOH tools that work together eliminate tedious data re-entry, spreadsheet reconciliations, and manual verification because information syncs across the system.
- **Accurate, real-time information.** Perpetual inventory, up-to-date sales records, and current purchasing forecasts give staff and leaders the information they need to drive critical decisions.
- **Improved accuracy.** Integrated systems reduce the potential for human error by syncing instantly across FOH and BOH systems.
- **Access when and where it's needed.**  
A cloud-based integrated system enables access on the go and in buildings across the district via a secure, unique login for each user.

The following provides a look into the features and benefits of the LINQ Nutrition platform.

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## BACK OF HOUSE SOLUTIONS

### Menu Planning

Plan, track, and report the nutritional value of every meal quickly and easily.

- **Fully integrated** menu planning means plans populate directly to production records, online menus, and digital menu boards
- **An intuitive interface clearly** flags issues with item or nutrient standards for easy identification and remedy
- **One-screen menu planning** lets you manage meal patterns, nutritional analysis, and reimbursable meals all in one place
- **Item management** ensures accuracy and saves time by eliminating the need to enter nutritional information multiple times across modules
- **Administrative Review reports** can be compiled in minutes, inclusive of data from across the system

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## BACK OF HOUSE SOLUTIONS

### Production Records

Complete production records in just a few clicks and get real-time, on-demand documentation for menu planning, inventory, and compliance.

- **Automated forecasting** tracks what was prepared, served, discarded, or left over
- **Simplified and intuitive records** automatically calculate reimbursable meals served and plate costs
- **POS integration** enables a side-by-side view of meals prepared and meals transacted
- **Real-time integration** populates inventory directly to production records, with changes syncing across the entire platform
- **Temperature capture** uses **bluetooth temperature probes to record** data wirelessly, immediately uploading to production records
- **Monthly calendar view of production records** makes planning easier

### Inventory Management

Configure your inventory for tracking and managing valuation, order approvals, and workflows. Maintain a perpetual inventory model with automatically updated FOH and BOH systems that ensure accuracy.

- **Automatic updates** to inventory from POS, production records, and purchasing—full integration eliminates tedious manual updates and data reconciliation
- **Real-time tracking** of USDA foods, current vs. future costs, and “as of” reporting
- **Configurable** for central warehouse, central kitchen, quarterly, monthly, and perpetual inventory options
- **Data accuracy** is maintained through automatic updates of inventory based on daily production and actual plate costs
- **Perpetual inventory** continuously updates in real time as employees complete tasks across the system

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## BACK OF HOUSE SOLUTIONS

### Purchasing

Equip your nutrition teams with accurate ordering guidelines and smart, simple ordering capabilities that make every dollar count.

- **Automated data updates** as staff completes daily tasks like production records and menu planning
- **Sharable databases** with Menu Planning and Production Records
- **Daily and weekly plate costs** stay accurate
- **Smart ordering** automatically guided by available inventory
- **Digital ordering** from both internal and external vendors within a single screen
- **Customizable purchasing**, including delivery dates, lead times, minimum order quantities, and par levels
- **Fully integrated purchasing** equips teams with accurate, data-driven ordering guidelines

### Central Kitchen

Consolidate orders from all sites into a single production record to accurately calculate amounts, reduce waste, and manage delivery logistics all in one place.

- **Automatic measurement conversion** between metric and standard
- **Recipe-scaling** based on an entered recipe yield
- **Needs-based ordering** for each school
- **Order consolidation** into a production record for the central kitchen
- **Inventory updates** automatically to meet production needs
- **Pick lists generated** for sorting, shipping, and routing to schools
- **Inventory flow tracking** from the central kitchen back to the schools



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## FRONT OF HOUSE SOLUTIONS

### POS

Serve students in every building, every day with a flexible, fast POS system that integrates seamlessly with other LINQ District Nutrition modules. No software installation required.

- **Cloud-based operations** enable automated data updates throughout the system with every transaction
- **Saved transactions** during a network outage automatically update when connection is restored
- **Real-time payment syncing** with the LINQ Connect mobile app means students can make purchases immediately when their account is funded
- **Cashier-focused** interface makes it easy for staff to enter items and find a student's digital meal account for fast-moving lines
- **Flexible serving** with mobile devices make special events and curbside transactions easy for staff and students

### Digital Menu Suite

Improve family engagement and participation with a modern, fully integrated digital menu suite built to make your nutrition program look its best.

- **Fully integrated** with menu planning to save time and reduce errors when updating online menus
- **Better engagement tools** with an easy-to-update nutrition website, well-designed online menus, and engaging digital menu boards to help you market your program
- **Modern lunchroom look and feel** with digital signage to feature menu items, announcements, and engaging visual content
- **Designed for K-12** to meet the unique needs and requirements of school nutrition programs
- **Student meal ratings** provide valuable feedback to inform meal planning—post surveys on your website or in the LINQ Connect mobile app
- **ADA compliant** websites and menus can be translated into over 100 languages to improve accessibility for everyone

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## FRONT OF HOUSE SOLUTIONS

### Application Processing

Access and manage student meal program applications, eligibility letters, and student meal accounts all in one place.

- **Unlimited online applications and forms** submitted digitally through the system are provided at no additional cost
- **Eligibility letters** can easily be sent to families, or they can generate their own
- **Real-time updates** to meal application eligibility status enable students to use their benefits immediately upon approval
- **Saved report templates** save time for staff members who need to run reports on a recurring basis
- **Direct certification** identifies students who qualify and extends benefits to them automatically, as well as to other students from the same household

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## MEAL PAYMENTS SOLUTION

### LINQ Connect

Consolidate school fees and meal payments into one centralized location for easy reporting, collection, and tracking. Speed up lunch lines and provide families with the ability to view school menus, meal accounts, submit meal applications, and pay all school fees from their computer, phone, or tablet.

- **24/7 access allows families to make secure payments** using any major credit card or e-check
- **Centralized portal** enables acceptance and tracking of payments and school fees, including automated notifications and reminders
- **Single login** makes it easy for families to access school menus, submit applications, and manage funds, all within a convenient mobile app
- **Real-time updates** immediately reflect changes based on transaction data, POS payments, menus, and meal application eligibility status
- **Eligibility status and letters** empower families to generate and track within LINQ Connect

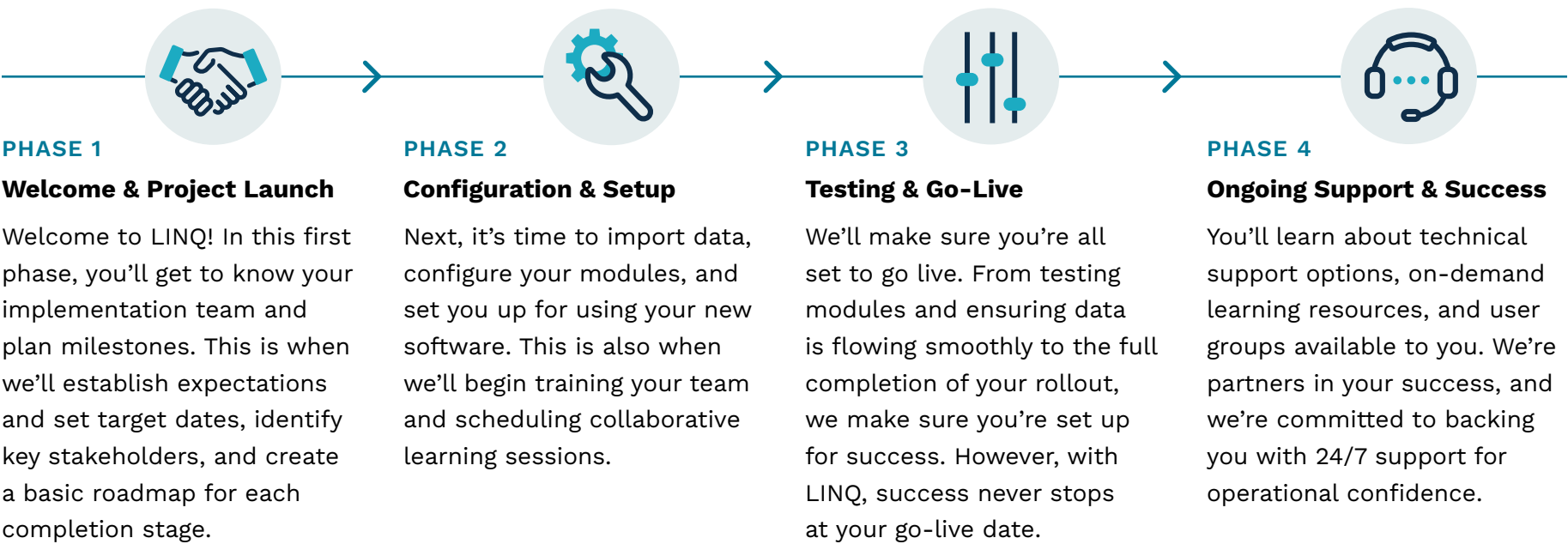
# Implementation with LINQ

The implementation process is often the deciding factor in the success of a new platform and making the most out of your investment. From the first kickoff with your implementation team to ongoing training, support, and updates, we're with you every step of the way. With decades of experience working with K-12 districts of all sizes, our team of experts will lead you through the implementation process to set you up for success.

Every district is unique, so your implementation and onboarding will be specific to your needs. You'll also have the opportunity to learn alongside other districts in collaborative learning sessions.

Your LINQ implementation journey is a structured, phased approach that ensures a seamless transition from initiation to post-implementation success. Here's a look at what to expect throughout the process:

## YOUR IMPLEMENTATION JOURNEY



## Next Steps

With this guide, you can evaluate your current nutrition program's technology. Calculate the potential time and cost savings of transitioning to a K-12 nutrition solution that meets the needs of your program. Consider how a single solution can relieve workload on teams, improve data accuracy, and help your program operate more efficiently.

Staff shortages, rising prices, and tightening budgets will likely challenge nutrition teams into the future. Acting now can help set your program up for success. Give teams the tools they need to eliminate redundant tasks and put more of their time and energy into nutrition program excellence.

Experience what a fully integrated FOH and BOH nutrition solution can do for your district with a custom demo of [LINQ District Nutrition](#). It's the most complete solution available, and it's designed specifically to simplify K-12 nutrition management across all operations—including inventory and purchasing, meal and menu planning, and student meal accounts for digital payments.

**Take the next step now  
with a custom demo:**

Contact our sales team now to schedule a custom demo of our complete nutrition solution for your whole team.

**GET A CUSTOM DEMO**