

# THE CAFETERIA CHRONICLES

for partners in New York and New England  
Volume 1 Issue 1

## THE NUTRITION AND LEARNING LINK

Meet leaders in the healthy school movement. Some experienced and some new faces, but each share the goal of creating healthy environments and believe in the link between nutrition and education



The front lines...  
where change happens

Changing the conversation  
about school meals

It's not nutritious if  
they don't eat it

## **EDITOR'S NOTE**

An Introduction—to The Cafeteria Chronicles

Welcome to the inaugural issue of The Cafeteria Chronicles, a new publication from the Northeast Regional Office of the USDA Food and Nutrition Service.

School lunch is not what it once was. Today's food service directors need to run their programs like a small business. To be successful they need to simultaneously maximize student participation; serve healthy foods that kids want to eat and buy; follow evolving federal, state and local nutrition standards and policies; and deal with tight budgets. Not an easy job. And one that deserves to be recognized.

The Cafeteria Chronicles aims to highlight school food directors and school personnel throughout the Northeast Region who are leading the lunch line. The individuals profiled in this issue share a commitment to serving the healthiest school meals possible; a commitment to their staff; a commitment to their students and a commitment to their community.

You will read how they have taken their programs to new levels by building teams to tackle challenges and work toward successes.

They share FNS' mission to end hunger and obesity and are uniquely positioned to have a lifelong impact on students. By creating an environment and providing services, they lay the foundation for children to develop habits that effect their futures academically and health wise and ultimately impact the future of our nation.

Here are their stories.

## **The Cafeteria Chronicles**

Volume 1 / Issue 1

The Cafeteria Chronicles is produced for our partners throughout the Northeast Region. If someone you know has an interest in our programs, we would be happy to add them to our distribution list.

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**Mission**  
FNS works to end hunger and obesity through the administration of 15 federal nutrition assistance programs including WIC, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and school meals. In partnership with State and Tribal governments, our programs serve one in four Americans during the course of a year. Working with our public, private and non-profit partners, our mission is to increase food security and reduce hunger by providing children and low-income people access to food, a healthful diet and nutrition education in a way that supports American agriculture and inspires public confidence.



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## In Connecticut...Meet Lonnie Burt

Senior Director, Food & Child Nutrition Services, Hartford Public Schools, Hartford, CT

by Jane Francis

### It's not nutritious unless they actually eat it

In 2004, Lonnie Burt left a job she loved in Manchester to come to Hartford. Feeling strongly that menus needed to be revamped and students be given choices, she set her sights on the challenge ahead of her.

As the food & child nutrition services senior director for Hartford Public Schools, Burt oversees the school meal program; serving approximately 8,000 breakfasts, 20,000 lunches, 4,000 after school snacks and 800 at-risk suppers on a daily basis.

Burt is passionate about the supper and summer meal programs. She expanded to 45 sites last summer, by picking up the city's libraries to her established summer school programs.

"If a child is willing to go to the library to read or as in the case of the supper program, stay until 6:30," said Burt, "I'm going to make sure they get a meal."

Serving 15 supper sites, Burt likes the community aspect of the program. With a smaller group of students in a more relaxed atmosphere, she's able to conduct taste testings and get good feedback on the students' likes and dislikes.

"When I heard the students' favorite meal was popcorn chicken," said Burt, "I needed to find a way to offer a healthy version of it making it low fat, whole grain and low sodium. The students are our customers. If they are happy and the food fits the nutritional guidelines and our budget, we are on the right course."

Burt inherited a great staff, but needed to get them on board to share her vision of giving students as many choices as possible. "It's not nutritious unless they actually eat it," said Burt, a registered dietitian. "We must understand, it's not cool to eat school food."

"If we expand children's palettes and eat food out of the rainbow, they will be getting nutritious foods," said Burt. "Exposure has been limited. Some kids only eat corn or don't know what a green pepper is. How do you do this? By getting students involved and providing educational opportunities for students to try new foods."

Long before USDA updated its standards, Burt's staff was busy preparing and putting out five to seven different choices a day. Offerings ranged from chef salad, to fruit trays, sandwich choices, bagels and yogurt. During her tenure, she has implemented many nutritional improvements to the meal program such as increased daily offerings of whole grains, legumes, fresh fruits and vegetables, and low-fat dairy choices.

Hartford's Sanchez Elementary School recently won the HealthierUS School Challenge Silver Award, one of the highest nutrition awards bestowed by USDA.

One of the early adopters of the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), a federal program allowing schools in high-poverty areas to serve all students free breakfast and lunch, she is helping other districts considering CEP maneuver through the process. "A healthy child can learn far better," said Burt. "We are on the right course and it's the right thing to do."

Burt credits her college professor who, upon hearing Burt was having reservations about a clinical dietitian career, told her "you'll go into school lunch where you have an impact on both food and nutrition." Burt heeded the advice. "Feeding kids nutritious foods is what motivates me," said Burt. "It's my passion."

While most Hartford schools have full service production kitchens, some only have a warming oven and a few have nothing at all. Her biggest challenge is at mixed grade

schools. "With 1,400 kids coming through the line each day, my cashiers have to ensure the students have the right size burger and roll," said Burt. "Implementation can be a challenge from what the rules look like on paper."

Looking ahead at the school nutrition environment, Burt says, "We have to stay on course. If there are challenges, let's get together and figure out how to make it work. Let's not lose sight that we are talking about the national safety of our country. The program started in WWII when recruits were malnourished. Today, they are obese. Both are nutrition related. We are the fattest country on earth and it shows; it's tasking our medical system."

Burt says she doesn't subscribe to "hidden, trickery nutrition." She strives to get students to understand ice cream is ice cream and fruit is fruit. "A frozen ice is a treat,"

said Burt, "don't count it as a fruit."

At 55, Burt has a few more initiatives she'd like to take on. Before she leaves, Burt would like to get the ball rolling toward establishing a central commissary kitchen to serve as a training site, establishing standard operating procedures and expanding menus even more. For the person who follows her, she would like him or her to take the program to the next level.

As for her legacy, "The school meals we serve in Hartford offer good choices and great food," said Burt. "I've been successful doing what I love."



## In Connecticut...Meet Susan Maffe

Director of Food and Nutrition Services, Meriden Public Schools, Meriden, CT

by Jane Francis

### Changing the conversation about school meals

Susan Maffe has bragging rights being one of the first directors in the nation to have a school receive the HealthierUS School Challenge Gold Award of Distinction. It's the highest award given by USDA, recognizing efforts in promoting nutritious food choices and physical activity.

In her charge are 13 schools with 9,000 students, serving 6,000 lunches and 3,000 breakfasts each day. With 68% free and reduced participation, she is looking at the Community Eligibility Provision.

Maffe also runs two school supper programs and a summer school meal program. She also supports a local Community Action Program with menu planning and food procurement for summer sites.

Maffe honed her management skills working at college, healthcare, eldercare and Headstart food services. Working in Meriden public schools for the past 11 years, Maffe taps into her clinical dietitian skills as she interacts with kids, encouraging them to make healthy choices. "While I didn't work clinically," said Maffe, "working in schools with kids couples both my clinical and food management skills."

When she took the position at Meriden, she quickly learned she had a great staff and relied on their expertise. "On average, staff has 10 years of experience and we just had a retirement after 43 years," said Maffe. "These are not trained culinary staff, but moms who are dedicated to what they do and always want to do more."

Maffe saw her staff had tremendous potential and made it her mission to give them the support they needed. At first Maffe concentrated her efforts on improving the day-to-day operations. She made a point of getting into schools more to meet the teachers, parents, students and staff. She formed a committee to develop a wellness policy for the district, and stepped up marketing efforts.

Thanks to grant money from the State, she developed a school nutrition rating system called Go, Slow, Whoa! "Nutrition is so complex and changing, it's hard to get messages across," said Maffe. "The system allows students to easily identify healthy foods and make better nutritional choices. Green foods are a go. Yellow signifies slow, meaning occasionally eat. Red is for whoa, eat rarely."



"My aha moment came when I received a Christmas card from a student who drew a lunch tray identifying the food groups on the envelope," Maffe said. "I knew we were really getting through."

Her schools were well positioned when USDA issued new standards because of all the work done to improve menus and educate students to make healthier choices. Maffe points to the success of the fruit and vegetable program in the middle schools doubling the amount of produce students select.

Maffe works with Action for Healthy Kids and Fuel Up to Play 60. Events emceed by principals take place in the lunch rooms, such as the Fruit and Veggie Fear Factor; a nutrition education activity to get kids to try Brussels sprouts, baby sweet peppers and other foods that may be foreign to them.

"We've worked hard to educate kids and families about nutrition and to make better choices when not in school," said Maffe. "The first year of the fresh fruit and veggie program, I received a letter of thanks from a parent relaying a story of her child asking for raw broccoli and light ranch dip at the supermarket and those foods had never been served at home."

Going forward, thanks to a grant from the Department of Health, Meriden has a Bee Mascot that travels around to schools promoting monthly Bee Healthy Themes, and she has more schools taking the HealthierUS School Challenge.

"We've changed the perception of the food service department within the district," said Maffe. "Now administrators, principals and teachers look at us not as a service, but as an integral part of the education process."

Maffe formed a food service alliance committee that sends forth ideas on how the department can change or expand services, providing more visibility in the community. One outcome is a backpack program that sends students home with food on weekends, thanks to the community food bank.

Acknowledging there are challenges, with rising food, health and labor costs, Maffe explains what looks good on paper can be challenging to implement. "It's the most regulated program I ever worked in," said Maffe. "Cashiers responsible for looking at trays and making sure each component is correct; with the volume of kids coming through, that can be difficult."

Crediting her ninth grade social studies teacher with encouraging her to run for class president, Maffe said it changed her life. "I was a shy girl, but he must have seen a leader in me. I went off to college and decided this is who I want to be." *continued on page 18*

## In Maine...Meet David Leighton

Food Service Director, Regional School Unit 19, Newport, ME

by Cynthia Tackett

### For some, it's the best meal they get

You don't always know where life's road will take you but you do know when you've reached your destination. For food service director David Leighton it is feeding the healthiest, most nutritional meals he can to students. "I do not hide the fact that I believe in God and that is what fuels my compassion for this job. I know this is what I am supposed to be doing; I am supposed to be here feeding and taking care of our kids," said Leighton.

The road for Leighton has always been in the food service industry, starting at age 16 at a summer camp in Maine where kids came from all over the world. He's been a dishwasher, a cook, a head chef at a country club as well as the head chef in a couple of restaurants. He spent 20 years in the restaurant business. He was working for the Department of Labor at a Job Corp Center as the food service manager running the dining commons and working with and teaching culinary arts students when the opportunity at RSU 19 in Newport, Maine came. That was 14 years ago.

As he works his 40th year in food service he notes, "This is one of the hardest jobs that I have ever loved and without my Faith, I do not think I would be able to do it."

### The Beginning

"When I first got here they told me school meals were going to be the biggest and best meals a lot of kids are going to see. I had a hard time believing that at first but as I got into that first year or two I saw they were right," said Leighton.

Unpaid lunch balances were one of the biggest challenges he faced when he began. "How do you say no to a hungry child in the line? You don't," said Leighton. "We were always fighting and trying to find ways to help the families and get notification to them so they knew the lunch bills were due and they were expected to pay. It is hard when

you realize that if we don't feed them, they may not see another meal that day."

"When I first started here the program was in the red," said Leighton. He and his staff, who he considers a blessing, worked hard to reduce food costs, unnecessary spending and menu items. "I got away from a la carte items and made them part of the reimbursable meal; the high school went from five or six different daily lunches down to three and it worked."

### The HealthierUS Awards

In April 2013 all eight of his schools earned the Bronze HealthierUS School Challenge Awards (HUSCC); the first, if not one of the first districts, in Maine to have all of its schools qualify at once. "When I first saw the HUSCC it didn't take long to realize this might be a challenge but this was what school meal requirements were going to be down the road," said Leighton. "We embraced it. Ultimately, the thought of offering the healthiest meals was a great stimulus for us to do it. It has really helped the students. There is education in the classrooms, more physical activity and the meals themselves forced us to get away from the convenience foods and into more creative and doable scratch cooking. The kids love it!"

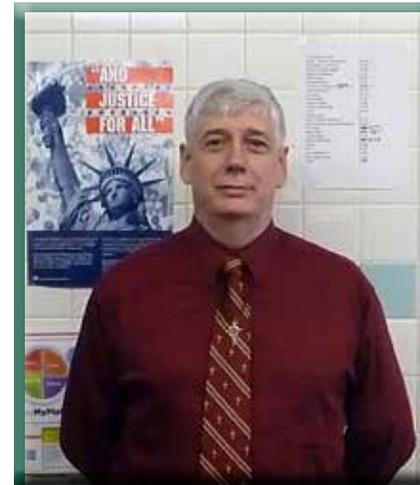
"There is no doubt that chicken nugget day is still the number one participation meal and from the finance end we need to stick with some convenience foods," said Leighton. "But we are making homemade roast beef, ham and turkey dinners. The kids are enjoying them and that leads to better things in the classroom. We all know the benefits of kids not being hungry."

### Local Foods

Leighton is a strong believer in using local foods as much as financially possible. It's hard for local farmers

to compete with the big food purveyors but he buys local as much as he can. The kids like seeing stuff their neighbors are growing and that helps them buy into trying new and different foods, according to Leighton. Seven of his schools also participate in the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program.

Nine years ago he had an idea to invite food purveyors to put together a small food show for three or four school districts. The idea was the brokers could show us new items, explained Leighton. It went over well with both the brokers and the schools. It has grown; today 40-45 school districts participate along with about 125 food service directors, kitchen managers and cooks. Attendees include superintendents, school nurses, and business managers. Even kids attend to offer their opinions.



### Outside School Hours

"I go back to my first year here when I was told school lunch was going to be the best meal some of these kids get. It is true," said Leighton. "When we come back from school vacations, snow days or really any length of time out of school the kids come back hungry."

"When I write menus I always try to make sure Fridays and Mondays are going to be the biggest lunch count days – that way going into the weekend and coming out of it, we are feeding as many kids as possible. There are a lot of families who are just plain struggling and we factor that into the menus," said Leighton.

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## In Maine...Meet Jeanne Reilly

Food Service Director, Windham Raymond School District, Windham, ME

by Cynthia Tackett

### Stay Positive Stay Focused

What is going on at the Windham Raymond School District in Windham, Maine? The kids are excited to come through the lunch line; the school meals program has seen a 65% growth district wide over the last five years while other schools have struggled with participation; and parents are connecting with the school meals program via social media. The answer is a lot of things and at the center of it all is Jeanne Reilly, food service director for the Windham Raymond School District.

Reilly took over the district about five years ago, a time of declining meal participation, low staff morale and financial instability. She turned the program around. Since then the district has seen a 65% growth in both the school lunch and breakfast programs. “The bottom line for us is in our middle and high schools where other districts are seeing flat or decreasing numbers we are seeing growth. Our high school numbers are up 20% over last year,” said Reilly.

“The key is to stay positive; stay focused; and just plow ahead to get the job done,” said Reilly. A former nursing home dietetic technician, Reilly made the switch to school nutrition “because I wanted to focus on feeding at the beginning of lives; both are important but it felt more positive to me.”

Her success is not limited to the Windham Raymond schools. In 2013 she was named Outstanding Director of the Year for the Northeast United States by the School Nutrition Association. And she will be the first to tell you that it is her hardworking team that made the award possible and allowed the district to stand out as a leader



in the region.

Reilly is joined in her efforts by Chef Samantha Cowens-Gasbarro and Health Education Teacher Eliza Adams. The trio ensure that not only do the students receive nutrition education in the classroom but they enter the cafeteria ready to make healthier choices.

The trio is often asked how they achieve their success. Reilly says it comes down to six steps.

“First is connecting with the kids,” said Reilly. “We do in class taste testings; the kids just love Chef Samantha. At the middle school level I think it makes the kids feel more validated when they can voice their opinion and then we can explain to them why they have to take fruits and vegetables or why it is a whole grain pizza crust. In the elementary schools we have a grants funded after school cooking club.”

“We host a lot of theme events,” said Reilly, “The kids get enthused. What we’ve seen is by doing it on a

monthly basis the kids not only come on those days but they keep coming on other days.” At the elementary level the monthly Fun Friday Breakfast offers kids the chance to pick the breakfast. For example, the “Frozen” movie theme resulted in hot chocolate muffins and little string cheese sticks made to look like snowmen. “The kids enjoy it, they eat it,” said Reilly. In fact, Reilly credits Fun Friday Breakfasts with helping increase breakfast participation in elementary schools overall by 25 percent.

Next is connecting with parents, gaining their trust. “We keep our messages positive and focused,” said Reilly. “If we are going to have a themed meal or the Chef is going into a classroom we market that through a letter home and in that letter we are giving the message school meals

are healthy. In our after-school cooking club the parents are meeting the staff, the Chef, one of my managers; making that connection and learning to trust us. And they are learning this is what my child is getting for school lunch; this is great value.”

Making those connections is intertwined with marketing and social media. Reilly is expert at using social media to promote school lunch. “Facebook has been one of our keys to success,” said Reilly. “Facebook is our main visual connection with parents, allowing them a window into what we are doing and serving. We feel parents often have a misconception about school lunch, either from media coverage or memories of what school lunch was ‘back in the day.’ By featuring photos and commentary, parents get to see what is really going on. I do know I never get calls or emails complaining about food quality anymore, nor do I get complaints about not enough food or complaints regarding the impact of the new regulations.” She also uses Twitter, Pinterest and recently started a blog, “Make Lunch, Not War.”

Of course none of this would be possible without a dedicated staff who support your vision. “The key is to have a staff that really want to do this work; we want positive people on board,” said Reilly. “Some of the changes have been hard for the staff and we really want them to be open-minded and positive when offering to the students. We do culinary training, training on the guidelines, monthly meetings and one-on-one with either me or Chef Samantha supporting them. Some of the things we ask them they could roll their eyes and say no way but I think they are actually empowered by it when the kids come through the line so excited.”

Lastly having a shared vision with the administrative team/school governing body is paramount. “Our superintendent really supports the things we do and that has been really key for us,” said Reilly. “It allows us to think outside the box, for example having Chef Samantha as part of our team or the cooking club or any number of the other activities we do.” *continued on page 19*

## In Massachusetts...Meet Kirsten Nelson

Food Service Director, Acton & Boxborough Schools, Acton, MA

by Mark Abueg

### Acton up for the challenge when it comes to school meals

For Kirsten Nelson, no day in the cafeteria is ever slow. While she glides effortlessly through the kitchen in her black dress and white tennis shoes, Nelson is prepared today to do what she's been doing for the past 10 years in a town about 20 miles outside of Boston. And that's taking care of her students that shuffle through the lines to receive their school meals.

As the food service director for Acton Public Schools & Acton-Boxborough Regional Schools in Massachusetts, Nelson says she feels fortunate to be a part of a very dynamic school district.

She oversees eight on-site kitchens at six elementary schools, one junior-high school and one high school.

"We serve about 6,000 students a day," she said. "As kids get older, it becomes more enticing each year meaning there are more options available compared from elementary to middle school to high school. For high school, there's a grill station, a grab-n-go station, soups, salads, wraps, a sandwich line, and a fresh fruit and vegetable bar. I think all in all, school breakfast and lunch are certainly not what they used to be, at least compared to when I was growing up, and it's kind of neat."

What's also neat is the fact that Nelson grew up in Acton.

"I love the fact that I'm back home," Nelson said. "It's great knowing that I can share hometowns with my kids." When asked if her kids enjoyed the school meals in her district, she laughs before humbly responding. "Yes, they do," she said.

After graduating from Johnson & Wales University and completing her degree in Hotel Restaurant Management,

she worked in the hotel and business industry for a few years.

Nelson said she then worked for Chartwells, a food management company, and worked on business accounts.

"After a while, I was asked if I'd be interested in going to schools," she said. "And that's what got me started. They started me in Westborough for five years; then to Whelan Elementary for eight years; and now I've been at Acton for about 10 years."

Nelson will be the first to tell you that she's very passionate about what she and her team do together.

"I'm very proud of the work the food service team accomplishes to put on a very successful school breakfast and lunch program, and I'm even more proud of all the great tasting and nutritious meals we are able to provide to the students," she said.

In 2010, Congress passed the bipartisan Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act (HHFKA) to help reduce America's obesity epidemic and ensure that every child has access to the nutrition they need to grow into healthy adults.

For Nelson and her team at Acton, she said they were already implementing the Massachusetts nutritional standards for healthy eating.

"We've used the John Stalker A-List as a bible, constantly looking at that and referring back to it on what we should be feeding our students," she said.

According to the John C. Stalker Institute of Food and Nutrition, its organizational mission is to support healthy

students and schools in Massachusetts with The A-List, an up-to-date and ever-expanding list of vending and snack products that meet the Massachusetts Nutrition Standards for Competitive Foods and Beverages in Public Schools and the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Smart Snacks nutritional standards.

"As with any type of change, there were some challenges with HHFKA," Nelson explained. "Whole grain pasta and brown rice were two of the hardest things we were struggling for kids to accept. They preferred white rice and pasta. But thanks to a great food service team I work with at each of the schools, we were able to overcome those challenges and find tasty and creative ways to implement the new standards."

She says it comes down to serving high quality, nutritious meals in a comfortable and welcoming environment.

"I feel the students' level awareness of school meals and nutrition has really developed over the years," Nelson said. "My team and I have helped with that process by going in the classroom and meeting the kids, asking them what they want, and even letting them plan the menu. They get to a different level that's not just the service line interaction."

The Acton district students also are exposed to different taste tests, learning about the bidding procedures and even pricing a menu to provide them an overview of what it takes to receive school meals.

"It's great seeing the kids getting their meal and enjoying it each and every day," Nelson said. "I remember growing up and getting lunch at school. It always mattered who was serving you and making sure they're smiling because it can really make your day. I just hope we're making everyone's day and bringing a smile to their lives."

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## In Massachusetts...Meet Donna Lombardi

Food Service Director, Worcester Public Schools, Worcester, MA

by Eddie Ortega

### A farm to school leader

Donna Lombardi is the food service director for the Worcester Public Schools. The district has an enrollment of more than 23,000 students among 60 meal sites, serving 5.2 million meals a year, with a \$12 million budget.

When Lombardi first came onboard, she immediately implemented various changes to improve food services. She began by getting to know the staff, the locations and facilities, as well as reviewing the production systems. According to Lombardi, the district's most valuable assets in delivering quality nutritious meals to students are its staff members.

Recently Lombardi hired a professional training chef to create and test recipes using USDA commodities and seasonal produce; while working with the school based staff on preparation methods and techniques.

"Although many challenges were presented, we are fortunate to have wonderful staff," said Lombardi. "We worked together to build relationships within the school sites to effectively implement various child nutrition programs such as breakfast after the bell, lunch with a preference for locally grown foods and yearly expansion of the summer meals program."

The district's introduction to universal free breakfast was implemented with the collaboration of the Worcester Hunger Free and Healthy in schools that had 80 percent free or reduced eligible students. After four years of

success, the EO Foundation got involved to further expand to all schools that had 60 percent free or reduced eligible students. Currently, breakfast is offered in the classrooms of 22 schools in more than 400 classrooms serving approximately 10,000 breakfasts daily.

"The success of any breakfast in the classroom programs requires support at all different levels within the community," said Lombardi. "We are grateful our activities are accomplished with relationships and support of the community, city and school departments; it is truly a team effort."



Lombardi has been a leader in the farm to school program since 2004. In this program, students have the opportunity to eat fresh fruits on a daily basis.

Farm to school was started as a pilot with the Massachusetts' farm to school program. Since then, it has evolved every year as continued relationships are developed with farmers and the various suppliers.

Farm to school has been implemented in the district's wellness policy where locally grown seasonal fresh fruits and vegetables are given preference.

"We are fortunate that Worcester is a city that is surrounded by agriculture," said Lombardi. "Implementing farm to school programs, acquiring produce and applying it to the meal pattern have been relatively easy."

Food waste is an issue most districts throughout the nation are experiencing. To combat food waste, the district offers its meal as an offer versus serve. Lombardi also suggested that the proper implementation of

regulation minimizes waste. In fact, they are not finding an increase in food waste, largely because students were already accustomed to fresh foods and vegetables in the different colors as a result of the district's pilot and initiative with Massachusetts' farm to school.

"Every day presents new challenges," said Lombardi. "Fortunately, district's stakeholders work to keep a positive and motivated attitude, which trickles down to our students."



## In New Hampshire...Meet Tim Goossens

Food Service Director, Laconia School District, Laconia, NH

by Cynthia Tackett

### Untapping the potential

A critical part of a school food service director's job is building relationships – with school officials, staff, peers, parents, and the children they feed. Tim Goossens, food service director for the Laconia, New Hampshire School District has done it well. Those relationships are at the core of what brings Laconia to the head of the school lunch line.

A pragmatic fellow, Goossens knows that nothing happens overnight and real change takes time. A former training supervisor for Wendy's restaurant in New Hampshire, Goossens arrived on the scene in the late 1990s – “a whole different world then,” he said. “There was a lot more cash coming into the system from paid students. The high school had an enrollment that was probably 40% higher than it is now. There was a lot of untapped potential in terms of volume and sales.”

He spent the next six years trying to build sales. He added staff, a deli bar, coolers, beverages, salads and expanded the meal options. As he added, sales went up. A similar approach at the middle school netted the same results, which in turn drove the revenue higher in the elementary schools.

Along the way a behavioral eating change happened at the elementary schools. “We had redesigned the elementary schools and the kids were getting a lot of choices that they really weren't aware of until they got to the middle school. And then they were asking questions like why don't we have a salad bar here?” said Goossens.

None of the changes would have been possible without the support of his staff and the support of the school administration. “A number of staff who are with me now

were with me then and had been here for years,” he said. Ensuring that his staff had benefits and retirement options was another priority he took on when he began, saying “They have given their lives to this program and they deserve to be compensated and recognized for what they do.”

Goossens' relationship with the school administration served the program well through the years; both are committed to serving the healthiest meals possible. “The administration recognizes the link between nutrition and classroom performance,” said Goossens. “In the face of declining school enrollment, increasing costs, and increasing regulations the administration has been willing to back its commitment financially through the years.” The results have been creative menus and healthier meals that keep the kids coming back.

The support also allowed Goossens to expand the scope of his work. In 2012 Laconia began offering an afterschool supper program, the first in New Hampshire. “The need was there and it offers meals to kids at a time of day when they need it,” he said. It began small and now all the schools participate.

Goossens organizes and coordinates a purchasing cooperative, which has grown exponentially through the years in terms of purchasing power, teamwork and networking. His costs for food and paper have dropped 30 to 40 percent.

He has become something of an unintended mentor to other food service directors. “Someone asked me for help with the 6 cents certification and the next thing I knew I spent a summer helping 16 districts with it,” said Goossens.

“None of that would have been possible without my staff.”

“I know what I am good at; I'm an operations kind of guy. I try to be forward thinking and know nothing happens without the support team(s) you have around you,” said Goossens.

“We do a lot of good things in school food,” said Goossens, “and I always appreciate the opportunity to talk about what we do.”



## In New Hampshire...Meet Donna Reynolds

Food Service Director, Contoocook Valley Regional School District (ConVal), Peterborough, NH

by Cynthia Tackett

### When opportunities arise; seize them

The job of food service director is a tough one; far more challenging than anyone who isn't a food service director might imagine. For your operation to grow and be financially successful you must maximize meal participation, which means serving healthy foods that kids want to eat; you must follow evolving regulations that impact your meal planning; and you must simultaneously meet the requirements of your local school district, the state and the federal government.

How do you begin to do it?

One way is to rely on the expertise and help of your staff, according to Donna Reynolds, food service director for the ConVal School District in Peterborough, New Hampshire. In 1998, Reynolds was a stay-at-home mom looking for something part time to do. A friend who was working in the lunch program recommended it – she said it was “fun.”

Through the years Reynolds worked her way up from part time to full time to administrative assistant to assistant food service director and in 2006 she became the food service director – learning all facets of the operation along the way. “My background was in business administration; I do not have a nutrition background and was hesitant to accept but the previous director who was a chef told me that I'd have a fantastic staff,” she said. “And he was right. My staff is dedicated and go above and beyond. I learn from them. They bring many talents to the program.”

“I immersed myself in learning as much as I could from trainings and workshops from the School Nutrition

Association and New Hampshire Department of Education,” said Reynolds. “It paid off. The connections you make really provide opportunities to better your program.”

One example is the Cornucopia Project, a non-profit educational farm for children whose goal is to increase children's access to healthy food while providing the education necessary for them to make solid choices about healthy eating. The Cornucopia Project is in all eight elementary schools. “We incorporate anything they have available that we can into our program. The cooks and staff work together to promote that to the students,” said Reynolds. “We offer as much local foods as we can and really promote fruits and vegetables. The students are really receptive to it. When the new regulations for fruits and vegetables went into effect we didn't have a problem with it because the students were already used to it.”

Last year they also started participating in a small local food distribution system, which allows farmers to post their available crops on a website which schools can then order from. “So far it is working out really well,” said Reynolds.

Another opportunity presented itself in the form of the HealthierUS School Challenge (HUSSC). “I attended a workshop in 2011 and as I was listening I thought wow we already do quite a bit of this already and it would help us get ready for the new meal regulations,” said Reynolds. “We received bronze awards in 10 schools (8 elementary, 2 middle). It was a fun process reaching out to school staff for the nutrition education and physical education pieces. It was fun to see it all come together.”

“The HUSSC awards brought good attention to our program and what the district was doing for the betterment of the students,” said Reynolds. “I would recommend it to anybody.”

Reynolds brings far more to the school meals program of the ConVal School District than this brief article reflects. When told she was recommended by the New Hampshire Department of Education for this publication, Reynolds expressed her surprise – “there are a lot of great food service directors in New Hampshire and they all should be recognized.”



## In New York...Meet Jim Liebow

Food Service Director, Brockport Central School District, Brockport, NY

by Eddie Ortega

### On a quest to improve food quality

Jim Liebow began his career in the restaurant field when he completed his bachelor's degree at a local college in New York State. For about 10 years he worked at a local college for a contract management company providing cafeteria service. Thereafter, his career took a path into the K-12 food service field.

Recently Liebow received the title of School Nutrition Specialist through the National School Nutrition Association (SNA) credentialing by passing an exam, which helps demonstrate an individual's proficiency in school nutrition. Throughout the country, SNA has approximately 1,300 individuals with similar credentials. There are 60 in New York State.

Since September 2009, Liebow has been the food service director at Brockport Central School District. At the beginning of his tenure, the district was in need of leadership as no interim director was appointed for a year.

Some of the challenges included: inconsistency in recipe, low staff morale, limited menu offerings, menu repetition and the district operated using the Nutrient Standard Menu Planning. The staff consisted of 32 members across five schools--three cook managers, three cooks, three assistant cooks, 23 food service helpers--boasting an average of 11.75 years of cafeteria experience. Liebow described his staff as hard working and dedicated.

The introduction of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act (HHFKA) of 2010 was a turning point for Brockport's district. Understanding these changes would take time, Liebow began reshaping his district by training staff, redefining the school menus and improving access to fruits and vegetables.

Liebow mentioned one of the challenges with HHFKA was meeting the sodium level requirements. For example,

using a can of green beans versus fresh green beans as the canned product has a higher level of sodium than the fresh product. By understanding this basic requirement, Liebow opted to serve fresher and healthier items, while using other seasonings to meet the regulation.

A misconception about HHFKA is that it is responsible for food waste. Liebow mentioned that food waste was happening before the HHFKA was implemented. Under the Food Based Program System students still had to take a certain number of components of the meal. For example, "If they took a chicken patty sandwich, we encouraged but didn't require students to take a fruit or a vegetable," said Liebow. "Because of HHFKA we are now requiring students to take a fruit and vegetable, thus we see increases in food waste. We can't force children or adults to eat any food we serve. It hurts to see great fresh items thrown out."

Liebow mentioned a few strategies in combating food waste. For example, at the elementary level he cuts fruits and vegetables into smaller pieces, things like apples, oranges, carrots, celery and cucumber. This encourages students to sample the fruits and vegetables. "The intention of the HHFKA is well founded," said Liebow. "The implementation has caused challenges, and the unintended consequences are what we deal with on the local level. The impact for my district has been a challenge financially to remain viable, while keeping the quality of our meals."

Liebow's involvement in the farm to school programs consists of national, state and local level activities. Brockport Central is 20 miles west of Rochester, in the heart of a diverse agricultural community. Liebow is able

to work with local farmers to bring product directly to the school district or use a small aggregator at the local public market to make contact with vendors. Liebow said, "I am a believer that fresh is best."

Liebow has a farm-to-school competitive contract with local farmers for the delivery of five varieties of apples and tomatoes grown hydroponically. He uses local baby white potatoes at least twice a month for herb roasted potatoes, which he says is more labor intensive than frozen fries and tots, but worth the tradeoff.

In his work with the high school horticulture club, students grow fresh herbs from seeds in a greenhouse. These are used in school meals to introduce students to the flavors. Brockport recently expanded the high school salad bar to include more fresh, local fruits and vegetables.

In his quest to improve the quality of foods for his district, implementing HHFKA and supporting the local farmers, Liebow has proven to be a champion for his district.



## In New York...Meet Ken Warner

Director of Food Services, Syracuse City School District, Syracuse, NY

by Eddie Ortega

### Eliminating the stigma of school meals

Ken Warner became the director of the Syracuse City School District in 2011-12. This was also the beginning of the district's implementation of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act (HHFKA) of 2010. Warner mentioned he was particularly excited to lead the HHFKA efforts due to the opportunities for bringing change to the district.

One of the challenges Warner mentioned was starting to do the menus and figuring out the items to serve. During the past few years the staff worked tirelessly to implement the HHFKA. "I don't think we had the worst transition into the HHFKA simply because we used nutrient standard menu planning, as this is the model the district followed for years," said Warner.

Implementation of the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) began districtwide in 2012-13. Participation in CEP has increased the district's breakfast participation at the elementary and secondary levels.

These increases are the result of full implementation of breakfast in the classroom in all elementary buildings, enhanced access to breakfast in the middle and high schools using grab and go and increased offerings in the cafeterias.

Other contributing factors include the installation of breakfast vending machines in the high school. As a result, the district is considering installing vending machines that have the capacity to vend quality lunch meals in these locations during the next year or so.



The district has increased breakfast participation by 16 percent and lunch participation by seven percent during the past two years of CEP participation.

While others across the nation, and even elsewhere in New York State are saying they are losing participation in the school meal programs because of changes to the HHFKA, Syracuse City has increased access and participation. Part of this increase is due to the elimination of the stigma associated with meal participation.

Warner explained food waste is an issue that many districts throughout the country are experiencing. The Syracuse City School District's problem with waste became most prevalent when it began offering meals at no charge through CEP.

For example, if a student came through the line and they wanted a milk, a juice or a partial meal that they normally would have purchased a la carte, they didn't want to pay for it, said Warner.

So the students would take a complete meal but eat only the items they wanted. "Needless to say with CEP our a la carte sales tanked. This was a challenge we faced," said Warner.

Overall the district has improved, as there is better use of food and understanding of the regulations. In the past, staff were trying to get kids to eat a fruit, a vegetable and milk in the entrée; similar to the old meal patterns. For example, if a student now chooses not to eat a hamburger they can now have a fruit, a vegetable, and milk and that's fine.

The district also works with many partners to come up

with money to fund farmers markets. Due to these efforts, they are able to increase access to fruits and vegetables for the students to see, touch and taste, "The media has made food waste worse than it really is," said Warner.

"I am very much in support of the HHFKA," said Warner. "I also can see where my counterparts are having a difficult time. We have a metropolitan area, urban, high free and reduced district. These factors all make HHFKA implementation more successful."



## In Rhode Island...Meet Mary Anne Roll

Lincoln School Committee, Lincoln Public School Department, Lincoln, RI

by Jane Francis

### A champion for those on the frontlines of wellness

A founding member of the Lincoln, RI wellness committee, Mary Anne Roll has spent the past decade immersed in health and wellness. She was a powerful voice in Rhode Island's Smart Snacks Work Group and is credited with helping ensure the successful rollout of competitive foods.

With six schools under her purview in Lincoln, Roll helped shepherd new State nutrition standards through a district that relies heavily on students purchasing meals from the cafeteria.

It took a year to develop a policy to encompass the new meal standards, health and physical education, and staff wellness. It resulted in the creation of a wellness committee to support the implementation.

Believing wellness allows a broader conversation, Roll says, "We are not just the cupcake police. We want a school environment where everyone has the opportunity to be well...to flourish."

The wellness committee is comprised of school administration, food service directors, teachers, students, parents and community members. Roll explains each member brings a unique perspective as they work together to achieve shared goals.

"We all believe when kids are healthy, they do better," said Roll. "That is the business we are in."

Among the goals met is the HealthierUS Bronze Awards, earned by the districts' four elementary schools. It's one of the top awards given by USDA, recognizing a school's efforts in promoting nutritious food choices and physical activity.

Another success Roll points to is the food service

director's effort to make the more nutritious offerings more appealing. One of the biggest success stories at the elementary level are Table Hostings. "We bring parents in to share lunch at the table with a group of kids and sample and discuss new menu offerings or things that we are considering adding to the menu," said Roll. "Table Hostings make it fun for kids to try something and provide valuable feedback to food services."

Speaking to the power of parents, Roll credits the PTA as the driving force for adding time to lunch and recess at the elementary level, recalling "As a mom, I was very active in my children's school through PTA, serving as State President and on the National Board. I learned about the importance of the link between health and academic success; healthy kids simply learn better," said Roll. "I don't think I'd be involved in what I'm doing now if not for what I learned from volunteering with the PTA."

Through the wellness committee, which meets four to five times a year, issues can be brought to the table for discussion. Each school has its own school improvement team and wellness is part of that discussion. "We rely on principals, teachers and food service staff to make something happen at the school level," said Roll. "I'm super passionate about the folks in each school. They are committed beyond compliance to encourage kids to make better choices. We keep in mind the whole child. Wellness involves more than nutrition and physical activity. We are looking at areas of diversity, stress and mental health. We do a yearly evaluation to determine focus areas."

Lincoln public schools are currently focused on consistent messaging around the requirements of the District's wellness policy, including nutrition standards and the quality and variety of menu options.

Roll sees school as an island. "This may be the last time kids receive information in a structured way," said Roll. "When students leave the island, they should be equipped to make better decisions. The marketing of message in both what the message is and who delivers it can be key to success."

"When developing messaging around nutrition standards, emphasizing food safety or allergies was an easier sell," said Roll. "And having the school nurse deliver the message was key as most parents personally interact with her throughout the school year."



"I consider myself a cheerleader/champion," said Roll. "The people on the front lines are those that make things happen. Our food service director and staff, superintendent, principals, nurses and teachers provide

leadership on the ground and from the top."

Roll says today's school lunch is not what it was 20 years ago, explaining "Today we no longer separate students by how they pay. There is choice, and even at the elementary schools fresh is common."

In Lincoln, farm to school has grown as the capacity of the vendors to provide locally grown fruits and veggies, and more recently fish, has increased. Year round students find squash, apples and root vegetables being served. An afterschool program run by the school nurse at one elementary school utilizes a school garden as a teaching tool. In the high school, herbs cultivated in the greenhouse are used in the cafeteria. *Continued on page 18*

## In Rhode Island...Meet Tricia Wright

K-12 Education General Manager, Aramark, Central Falls, RI

by Jane Francis

### A passion for teaching kids to eat healthier

With nearly 20 years in the food service industry, the majority in managed services at colleges, Tricia Wright always wondered what it was like to be in K-12 education. She pursued opportunities to be part of what she saw as great things happening in the State of Rhode Island and to fulfill her desire to teach students to eat healthier before going to college.

Wright served six years as Burrillville foods service director. Under her leadership the Callahan Elementary School won the State's first Silver award in USDA's HealthierUS School Challenge, recognizing its outstanding nutrition, health and wellness programs. She oversaw the achievement of four Bronze level awards as well, between Burrillville and Scituate school districts.

Wright recently became general manager for Aramark overseeing 12 schools. She manages 53 employees who serve 7,400 meals per day to 4,950 students. Breakfast, lunch, after school meals and snacks, summer meals and the fresh fruit and vegetable program are all prepared in the schools' kitchens. Additionally, Aramark provides meals to an adult care facility and Head Start under the Child and Adult Care Food Program.

Wright walks in the footsteps of her mentor, who recently retired. She aspires to be as good a general manager, with a passion for increasing awareness in K-12 nutrition. "A person only knows what they have been taught," said Wright, "and if they need a little extra help understanding, then I will guide them."

Wright says managers reach out to her often because they know she is there to help. "I never make anyone feel like they are bothering me and always answer everyone's questions."

Wright says she tries to be the best at what she does every day. A competitive person, she sets goals and once achieved, sets new ones. She leads by example. "I wear the safety shoes I require my staff to wear, I remove my jewelry if I am in the kitchen, and I wear the proper equipment to do the job," said Wright. "If you require someone to do something and you don't follow the requirements yourself, you will lose the respect of your staff."



Wright lays claim as having the first district in Rhode Island to have an onsite review completed and approved for the new meal pattern certification process. A key component of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act, it provides an additional 6-cents per lunch reimbursement to school districts that certified to be in compliance with the new meal patterns. The increased reimbursement, a significant investment in improving the quality of school meals, provides districts with an important financial resource.

Wright worked with a key group of Rhode Island school food authorities to develop menus to comply with the new school food regulations and the submission of 6-cents certification documents to the Rhode Island Department of Education. She shared her expertise and is credited with hastening the State's ability to successfully certify numerous districts.

With 82% of students qualifying for free and reduced school meals, Wright is focused on expanding after school meals in her district. "Because students in this community don't consume the proper nutrients required for this fragile age group," said Wright.

Currently there are four locations serving 275 meals each day. "We adjust the menu to each school's preferences and needs," said Wright. "At the middle school, we adjusted the menu to have heartier meals such as chicken teriyaki with brown rice. At the learning community, they prefer cold meals. Even though it is more work for us to have different menus for each location, we feel it is important to serve the students what they like so they go home satisfied."

Wright says the biggest challenge is having key people encouraging students to try new items, explaining, "Students are easily influenced. If they hear a negative comment from an adult, parent or peer they tend not to want to try a new item." Wright believes parents and lunch aids are key to encouraging students to try new foods. "We involve the parents as much as we can," said Wright, "and send home information about programs we are running."

In high schools, a program called Fuel gives out samples of new menu items coming that month. At the elementary level, farmers come into the schools to talk about ingredients. Try It Tuesday features a new entrée and students that try it get a sticker. Lucky Tray Days encourage students to pick an item they may not normally choose.

Other key events include Eat the Rainbow Week, which focuses on what each color food does for the body. Farm to School events teach students the importance of eating a variety of fruits and vegetables. A Power of Green event shines the light on salads and the benefits of eating green vegetables.

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## In Vermont...Meet Doug Davis

Food Service Director, Burlington School District, Burlington, VT

by Mark Abueg

### Fighting to end food insecurity

For Doug Davis, he will be the first one to tell you that he's never experienced a food insecure day or moment. In fact, he never had any idea that food insecurity existed when he moved to Vermont when he was about 11 years old.

"I certainly didn't think it was a thing here in the Burlington area," he said.

Davis, a graduate of the Culinary Institute of America, was in the restaurant business for a while, and then started his child nutrition programs career in a community just north of Burlington.

"Even though that district was affluent, about 10 to 15 percent of the kids, 70 to 80 of them, were living in a food insecure home," he said. "I don't even think the term was even coined yet. This was back in the early 90s."

One of the early jobs Davis had was processing meal applications, which was quite an eye-opener for him.

"Here I am, a 20-something, building a house, working, doing the best I can," he said. "I'm seeing the applications, income, the number of kids, and I'm thinking, 'Oh my gosh! How is this even possible?' Then around that time I had a really interesting conversation with my friend, who I've known forever."

"You're kidding me! I was hungry growing up," Davis' friend said.

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Davis said he was blown away by what his friend just told him at the time.

"I mean here he is, a family person, a dairy farmer, right down the street from where I lived and I was just a stone throw from this family that was struggling and I didn't know it," Davis said. "If I didn't know it, there's no way anyone else knew it."

It was devastating for Davis to hear, and he knew he had to do something about it.



"We need to bring this issue forward," Davis said. "We need to shine a light on this. How do we as a community address what's happening in our community, in our state, and even in our country in a socially acceptable and responsible way?"

Davis feels that he is in a position working for a district that allows him to really spread the wings of what a child nutrition program can be and can do.

"It has kept me energized and excited," he said. "From a philosophical place, maybe it's not a responsibility, but an opportunity to do so, and I work in a community that accepts that opportunity and enables me to continue to do

what I do."

In Burlington, Vermont, Davis feels he's been part of something very special in addressing the issue of food hunger.

"We've really created a community partnership," he said. "We work with the hospital, the local co-ops, some of the biggest farms, and I think that having kids in our kitchens, in the food truck, helps them recognize the hard work of everyone involved. They see the value of the child nutrition programs community. We're trying to be a part of the education process, which includes food literacy and

nutritional education."

Davis, the food service director for the Burlington School District in Vermont, oversees 10 schools, including six elementary schools, two middle schools, and two high schools. Five of the schools currently participate in the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP). Those five schools have an average free and reduced direct certification rate of about 80 percent. The other five schools range from about 33 to 45 percent.

For Davis and his district, the percentage to actually qualify for CEP is merely a formality.

"For us it's more of a food access issue," Davis said. "All of our schools not on CEP are doing Provision 2 breakfast and all of our schools districtwide are doing supper. One of the things we did here with our previous superintendent was write a wellness policy. One is because it's the law. Two is because we used it as a mechanism to better food access."

Davis explains there's a sentence in the wellness policy that allows the Burlington School District to take advantage of all U.S. Department of Agriculture programs that they're eligible to participate in.

"It really changed the dynamic for us because no one was really able to say it wasn't going to work in their building because there was a policy on it," he said. "There were some road blocks, but overall it seemed to unroll pretty well and it's a great program for us."

Supper may seem to be an ordinary meal, but according to the USDA, when school is out and parents are still at work, children need a safe place to be with their friends, with structured activities, supportive adults and good nutrition. Afterschool programs that participate in these types of meals give children and teenagers the nutrition they need, and draw them into constructive

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## In Vermont...Meet Erika Dolan

Food Service Director, Duxbury/Waterbury School District, Waterbury, VT

by Mark Abueg

### Passion shows, flows to eradicating hunger in Vermont

Look up Erika Dolan from Vermont and you'll find she's the current President of the Vermont School Nutrition Association. Look up Erika Dolan from Vermont and you'll find a success story of how breakfast in the classroom works well. Look up Erika Dolan from Vermont and actually speak with her and you'll find an amazing woman, who's very passionate about eradicating hunger.

Speaking to Dolan, you get the sense she's not from Vermont. Not even from neighboring Canada. With a beautiful, flowing South American accent, you feel her passion transcending over the phone when she speaks about feeding children.

"My dream is to have free meals for every child," she said. "Meals should be like textbooks, labs, etc. at school. We shouldn't have to worry about free and reduced lunch. My dream and future goal is to have free school meals for everyone and make sure all our kids are fed."

As the food service director of the Waterbury-Duxbury School District, Dolan is the first to tell you how proud she is of her district's school food programs, especially its farm to school program.

"We are able to provide daily, a lot of fresh produce, even in the winter time," she said. "We're very proud to have local, organic food such as lettuce the whole year. Our program also receives fresh vegetables from our school gardens. That's something I'm very involved in as I'm

writing grants to help the gardens. It's technically not part of my job, but I feel it's very important to be a part of the process to help the school."

According to her district's food service website, produce also comes from Ilyasov Family Farm and Graves Family Farm, chicken and turkey from Misty Knoll Farms, beef from Vermont Highland Cattle Company, eggs from Maple Meadow Farm, bread from Red Hen Bakery, applesauce from Owl's Head Farm, dairy from Cabot Creamery, and many other partners.



Dolan says that over the years, her district has built a very strong school meals program that extends inside and outside the classroom. Both schools in her district, the Thatcher Brook Primary School and the Crossett Brook Middle School, allow students to experience nutrition education by developing recipes and cooking in the school cafeteria.

"I help with both the Wellness Committee and Farm to School Committees," she said. "We do great work in the committees, but sometimes it's hard to

connect everyone with the cafeteria, so we can all be talking the same language, featuring the same items in the classroom and in the cafeteria."

Dolan says the teachers have great material in the classroom, and are trying to coordinate more to feature when it comes to food nutrition and education.

"Participation would increase more if we were more connected," she said. "Maybe kids would try more fruits and vegetables, or be exposed to a cultural meal. They

have a chance to choose the menu of the day, so they go through a process where they learn all our regulations and what's categorized as a reimbursable meal. They learn why they have to take a fruit, vegetable, and size among many other things."

"It's a learning process involving quantity and quality. The final lunch is featured for the school to try. The whole school is talking about it, and the kids are all proud. They have a chance to learn early on why school lunches look the way they look and give the kids a voice so they give ideas and suggestions. If we don't hear students' voices, participation will go down."

What's up are the many favorite choices kids are encountering thanks to everyone's input.

"Believe it or not, they love our soups and chowders," she said. "Anything chowder sells. Bean chowder sells better than bean soup. Also, Caesar salads are very popular as we can sell them any day at any moment. I have a great team of chefs, and they do a great job of cooking everything from scratch."

In the end, Dolan explains her passion is all for the kids and ensuring they are fed great and healthy meals.

"I love feeding kids," she said. "I love giving them the chance to have a better choice. I love giving them choices and I love they are being good stewards of their body and health. If they aren't well fed, they won't do well in the classroom. I'm just an instrument to feed their dreams. What we do here is a part for them to achieve their goals in life. If students aren't healthy, they're never going to be able to reach their best."

She remains realistic about getting free meals for kids and continues to fight for it to happen.

"I'm not sure how we can make this happen, but maybe one day we can make it a reality," Nolan said.

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**continued from page 5 Meet Susan Maffe**

Maffe ran for School Nutrition Association (SNA) of Connecticut office, serving as both Vice President and President. “It was the best experience in my career. I spoke in front of 900 people at a Legislative Action Conference,” said Maffe, who encourages food service directors to get actively involved in SNA. “It’s worth the time and the connections you make are invaluable. School nutrition is unique; people are so willing to share work, ideas and responsibility. All want others to succeed; it’s not like that in other aspects of the industry.”



“My biggest passion is my staff in the schools that work so hard,” said Maffe. “Food service is not an easy job. My staff love their kids and go above and beyond consistently. When I get a little burned out, I look at them for motivation.”

Looking to the future, Maffe hopes the progress made in improving the nutrition of school meals holds and gains acceptance. For her schools, she’d like to see individual kitchens and culinary training for staff. Personally, she is not sure what the future holds, but Maffe says, “I’m sure when I retire I’ll be working in school meals. I love my job, and I love where I work.”



**continued from page 6 Meet David Leighton**

Another one of the ways they tackle it is a Back Pack Program. It is not a food service program but rather a volunteer program financed by a local medical office, which solicits for money and food donations. It started in one elementary school three years ago and has expanded to all five K-4 schools representing 150 students this past year. They target the K class, based on what they can finance.

The back packs are intended for the whole family and food items include cereal, oatmeal, peanut butter and jelly, canned vegetables, macaroni and cheese, tuna, crackers, bread, apples and potatoes. “The packs are distributed for the February and April school vacations because multiple organizations target the holiday vacations but no one addresses the school vacations,” said Leighton.

“This has been a Godsend to a lot of families,” said Leighton. “These families depend on school meals. We’re just trying to do anything and everything we can to help.”

**A Message**

Like his fellow food service directors Leighton faces budget challenges and changing meal pattern requirements that have to please a whole host of audiences. “It is our compassion, our strength, Faith that gets us all through the hardships to continue to fight for the well-being of our students,” said Leighton.

He has a message for parents.

“Let us help you feed your children,” said Leighton. “We offer great breakfasts and lunches that meet all the nutritional requirements. My staff at all our schools really care about your kids. We provide fruits, vegetables, milk, protein and whole grains in every meal we serve, yet we don’t see all the kids coming to the lunchroom for whatever reason. Give us the chance to prove what a great program we have to offer your children.”



**continued from page 8 Meet Kirsten Nelson**

It’s their time to have a nutritious and healthy meal. It’s really rewarding to see them enjoy their day and meal.”



**continued from page 14 Meet Mary Anne Roll**

“Behavior change takes time,” said Roll. “It’s best to focus on incremental steps.” Roll recalls being at a middle school drama presentation, and seeing the biggest line at intermission was to the air popped popcorn. “I feel good seeing kids beginning to make better choices,” said Roll.

Looking ahead, Roll said she continues to learn new things every day. “It’s ongoing work,” Roll said. “I’m focused on sustaining what we’ve accomplished and looking at what’s next. I’m motivated by the kids and the professionals who interact with them daily.”

**continued from page 15 Meet Tricia Wright**

Aramark sources locally grown fruits and vegetables, and locally caught fish. Seven schools run the fresh fruit and vegetable program and during RI Roots week, lunch trays featured braised turnips, parsnips, carrots and roasted potatoes---all grown in Rhode Island.

Wright has witnessed many changes in school meals during her tenure. Wright believes school meals are heading in the right direction, but there is always more work to do on that front. She said the new regs tested their abilities to come up with innovative ways of keeping favorite menu items available, while keeping participation up and costs acceptable. "During the last few years, I've seen students more open to having whole grains," said Wright. "And bread companies have worked with us to make the bread look more like white bread, while having all the nutrition of whole grain."

Looking to the future, "I love my job and see myself in K-12 for a very long time," said Wright. "I find it to be rewarding and very competitive."



**continued from page 16 Meet Doug Davis**

activities that are safe, fun, and filled with opportunities for learning.

"Supper participation goes by season and weather," Davis said. "During basketball season it's big. During the winter we get higher participation. When we have good weather, kids tend to head out, so our counts

drop. I would say we're doing on average about 1,000 suppers a day. The kids that are getting in line for supper, they really appreciate the meal being available."

As the day may end with supper, the most important meal of the day, as the old saying goes, is breakfast. This is where Davis explains he is proud to regard his district as a champion.

"We started Provision 2 breakfast in the late 90s early 2000s," he said. "We were the first school district in Vermont to do that, and it has really enabled us to eliminate any level of stigma. CEP does a better job, but the fact that all students ate breakfast for free, now going on for almost 15 years, it's really kind of changed the way that students, administrators and teachers have looked at the school breakfast meal. It really has become an integral part of the educational day. That's every food service director's dream to get their program to be a part of the education day. That's been really great."

As Davis continues to end food insecurity and find better ways to do his job, he appreciates every opportunity to make them happen.

"Being a food service director and having worked for amazing administrators over the years, has given me the opportunity to not only better serve my own community, but allowed me to meet some amazing people around the country and learn so much from what they're offering in their programs," he said.



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"In the meantime, we need to continue feeding our kids and abide by the regulations. If a kid is hungry, we need to feed them. Sometimes my dreams are far to reach. But maybe that's what makes them so satisfying when we reach them."



**continued from page 7 Meet Jeanne Reilly**

"Our customers are loving school lunch," said Reilly, "even the high school students will come back and say that was the best. Parents are emailing us for recipes. Participation for middle and high school students is up 20 percent. The elementary kids get excited coming through the line. It tells us we are doing something right."



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