

Leah Schmidt
Golden School Foodservice Director of the Year Award

Leah Schmidt: Dedication to School Nutrition

Leah began her school food service career at an elementary school site. After only a one year she was promoted to Field Supervisor, a position she served in for five years. At that point, the current director was asked to retire. The District looked at all options and seriously looked at contracting with a food service management company. Believing that remaining self-op was the best for the district and the students, Leah developed her own in-house proposal.

In order to remain self-operating, she had to convince a committee that included the administration, the school board, and the food service department employees that self-op was the best option and that she was the best choice to be the director. Even though revenue exceeded expenses, it was very apparent that there was a perception that food services operated in a vacuum and was not necessarily working in harmony with the rest of the district. The proposal restructured the food service department to include the following: (1) a Nutrition Education Coordinator (NEC) that would be available for classroom instruction, employee counseling, and the development of both worksite and student wellness initiatives; (2) a dedicated employee to manage the free and reduced application process to improve the processing time so that the growing population of at-risk students in the district could gain quicker access to school meals; (3) a catering coordinator to better serve the needs of the administration, school board, and schools.

The Nutrition Education Coordinator accomplishments include: 1600 hours of classroom nutrition instruction previously not held, successful grant writing proposals annually with the largest grant being a \$100,000 cafeteria makeover grant, an allergy management tool kit that was developed in conjunction with St Louis University. The allergy management program is available to all schools and has been taught in sessions at the SNA National Conference. Since Leah's plan was approved and implemented, the department has become recognized as true partner in education within the district. Success came very quickly as the department was recognized as support service of the year the very next school year.

Leah has worked very diligently to make dedication to child nutrition a self-sustaining process within the department by cultivating new leaders and recognizing the talents of her staff. During her tenure as director, the department has generated five Louise Sublette Award winners, two Heart of the Program winners, three President's Award of Excellence winners, two FAME winners, and three Schwan's First Timer Scholarship recipients. She has also promoted leadership by encouraging her staff to participate in the Missouri SNA. Offices held by staff include: State President, Regional Director, Legislative Chair, Nutrition Chair, Professional development chair, and various conference committee assignments.

While in a leadership role on the SNA Executive Team, Leah used that opportunity to identify future state and national leaders in the states she visited. Starting as SNA Vice President, she was able to develop a desire within others to volunteer for committees, task forces, and offices. The new faces on the national level include people from Delaware, South Carolina, Montana, Kansas, California, and Texas, all states that Leah visited while in office.

Leah has also sponsored wellness initiatives for years and Hickman Mills has sponsored wellness initiatives within the department as well as district wide. One year, four hundred people participated and logged over 55,000 miles in the challenge. Since SNA started the STEPS program, Hickman Mills has been a regular participant and has had several individual winners and contributed to Missouri's win in their membership category in 2013-14.

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Leah Schmidt: Bettering the Lives of Children

When Leah first became the director at Hickman Mills, the food service program was profitable, but it was underutilized and seemed to be caught in the past. Chipped beef on toast was still a staple on the menu. Leah worked with her staff to look at menus and focus on what students wanted to eat. She believes in Brian Wasnick's philosophy; "It's not nutrition unless it is eaten." She and the staff developed nutritionally compliant menus palatable to the students. After surveying the students, selections included wrap sandwiches, chicken tetrazzini, pork lo mein, and a daily chef salad option. Gone were the days of salmon patties and carrot raisin salad.

The district has a needy (free and reduced) population of 86%, but a significant portion of students were not participating in the program. Before Leah could run the marketing program to get the kids into the cafeteria, she had to first ensure that they would get access to the meals at the proper price when they came through the door. Nutrition Services accessed modern technology and has gone to an almost exclusive on-line free and reduced meal application. Nutrition Services became a real part of the enrollment process. When the 86% figure was realized, Leah began the process of utilizing the new Community Eligibility Program, and now all students are eligible for free meals. The initial increase in participation was 10% at lunch and 7% at breakfast.

Leah started a marketing program to further increase participation. She concentrated on the unofficial 5th P of marketing - perception. She budgeted money, called the "face lift budget" so each school could make some cosmetic improvements to make the cafeterias more welcoming and attractive. To get site level buy-in, the managers were allowed to customize the improvements to the needs of their individual sites. Overall, lunch numbers increased by 25%. She also focused on increasing student participation at breakfast by implementing a universal free breakfast district wide. Breakfast participation increased by 300%. Lastly, she expanded the reach of her program to include the four hundred four and five year olds at the Early Childhood Learning Centers.

Said Hickman Mills Superintendent, Dr. Dennis Carpenter, "The efforts of Leah and the entire Nutrition Services team have been both critical and integral as it relates to our community wide school improvements. Coupled with a family focus on good nutrition, Leah's efforts to promote healthy nutritional [sic] will provide out students with the foundation necessary to live healthier and more productive lives."

Leah realized that students could benefit from the efforts of other organizations and has worked tirelessly to build effective partnerships with other organizations in her community that have the same goals. She has partnered with the Culinary Center of Kansas City to offer culinary skills training and healthy cooking technique classes to both students and staff. The department also volunteers with Share Our Strength American Bake Sales to raise money for alternative food assistance programs.

Working with the KC Kids Farm to School Academy, local growers have become partners with the district providing the students with seasonal produce at a lower cost. The farmers also do educational talks and farm visits to increase student acceptance and consumption of the produce. Leah also partnered with a local foundation called, Nutra Net to provide nutrition education through what they call Teen Health Mentors. The teens are trained by the Nutrition Services department through various grants. They are then paired with students in nearby elementary schools and read books on wellness, and assist with healthy cooking classes for the younger students.

Lastly, Leah has nurtured a program that assists students at risk of not graduating to receive their diploma through non-traditional means. Part of the program requirement is that the students must be employed half time during their participation in the program. Leah's department has successfully employed several of these at-risk students assisting them in completing the program to graduate with their class. The successful mentoring by the staff has recently allowed the department to hire two of the students to full-time positions, receive benefits, and also work on college classes.

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Leah Schmidt: Innovations in Management / Systems

When the authorization and funding came about for supper programs, Leah jumped at the opportunity. With her district's high needy student population, she found that she would be able to offer suppers at all her schools. But because her district was so needy, Leah refused to offer shelf stable suppers or refrigerated suppers that could be handed out by an after school aide for as little expense as possible. She wanted to offer wholesome hot suppers that were prepared by school nutrition employees so that they could earn extra income and work enough hours to receive full time benefits, while at the same time, creating an easy to manage self sustainable program that benefited the students.

Working in partnership with her after school provider, LINC (Local Investment Community - a local philanthropic organization), the whole program was able to come together with minimal labor to Food Services. LINC staff helps with the service of the meal, and their payment is being able to partake in the meal at no charge. Leah initiated this because she felt that this could add an educational piece to the meal as the LINC staff is certified and could share nutrition, etiquette, and initiate thoughtful conversation with the meal. This partnership with LINC initiated a second program called BackSnacks. The Food Service warehouse acts as receiving agent shelf stable foods that go home with students to help them through the weekend. This program is not based on free/reduced criteria, but on observed need. Leah maintains that some of the most food insecure students are those that are just above the eligibility guidelines. SNAP (Food Stamps) eligible students and their families have dollars for food, but these students do not. By the end of the current year, this program will have grown to 1000 back packs since its initial roll-out.

While serving as the president of the Missouri SNA in 2002, Leah facilitated a strategic plan that identified commodity processing as a major concern. At that time, selections on what could be processed was very limited and MSNA members were hearing from other states about what wonderful offerings they could get. All of the stakeholders felt that if program could be changed, everyone would benefit. Communication was the key. By bringing the issue to the table and talking about the need it became a priority of the new state agency director. She convened a Commodity Advisory Committee of which Leah was a member. Directors, state staff and industry all talked about what was needed for us to provide the best for students. Today Missouri's commodity program is progressive and provides schools with incredible options, tools and customer service. The assistant director in charge of commodities even serves as the ACDA president!

Before the Community Eligibility Program was established, Hickman Mills used almost exclusively an on-line meal application to expedite processing of eligible students. When she was denied being a part of the district's first centralized registration in 2009 because "doing meal applications at the District office would take too long," Leah refused to take no for an answer. She put together a bona fide case explaining why it was paramount that Food Services must be included as part of overall annual registration process and why the on-line meal application became a component of the required list of items needed to complete a student's school registration. The district changed its opinion and even moved the registration office to the space across the hall from the Food Service office to make the process more accessible to parents. This helped not only families, but also the district because some of their funding is based upon the number of registered needy (free and reduced price) students in the district.

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LEAH SCHMIDT: INDUSTRY INVOLVEMENT AND CAREER AWARDS

NATIONAL PARTICIPATION AND AWARDS

National President
Secretary Treasurer
Member Services Chair
Nominations Chair
Education Committee
Resolution and By-Laws Committee
Public Policy and Legislation Committee advisor
Founding Member of Latin American School Feeding Network
Delegate to international feeding conferences / programs in Chile, Mexico, and China
Presenter at ACDA (American Commodity Distribution Association Conference)
Presenter at State Agency Conference
Presenter at SNA National Conference, Leadership Conference and Legislation Conference on:
Marketing Your Program and Yourself, Resolutions and By-Laws, SNA Membership Services, Supper Programs, Implementing Community Eligibility Provision, Time Management
Member Basic American Culinary Management Connection
Food Service Director Magazine Advisory Board
NFSMI National Advisory Board
SNA School District Owned Membership Task Force
SNA Competitive Foods Task Force

USDA Best Practice Award (2 x)
District of Excellence in Child Nutrition
Healthier US Challenge Recipient
FAME Rising Star Award
Thelma Flanagan Gold Award (2x)
President's Award of Excellence
2015 SNA National Food Service Director of the Year

STATE PARTICIPATION AND AWARDS

State President (2 terms)
Legislative Chair
Regional Director
State Conference Presenter on:
Value of SNA Membership, Trends in School Nutrition, Certification and Credentialing, Navigating schoolnutrition.org, Advocacy
Founding Member of Missouri Council for Activity and Nutrition
Missouri Commodity Advisory Board

State NAC of the Year

LOCAL PARTICIPATION AND AWARDS

Jackson County SNA President and Secretary
Board of Directors of Hickman Mills Community Assistance Council
Junior Chef Instructor for Culinary Center of Kansas City
Greater Kansas City Food Policy Coalition
"Weighing In" Kansas City

Kansas City Healthy Kids Shining Star Award