

2016 FAME Silver Leadership Award

Ken Yant, MBA, FMP

1. Describe your nominee's most outstanding leadership skill.

Gwinnett County Public Schools is the 12th largest school district in the country with an enrollment of 176,000 students. Ken Yant has been the school nutrition program director at Gwinnett County for the past nine years, previously working in various capacities for the largest global food service management company. Ken is a visionary who sees the big picture. This is a talent not uncommon for someone leading a school nutrition program of Gwinnett's size. What makes Ken special is his ability to turn that vision into reality, making him a truly transformational leader. Ken operates one of the most progressive school nutrition programs in the country.

A few years ago, Ken took an in depth look at how the district approached procurement. He hired a new procurement manager who came from another state government agency and had years of inter-governmental experience in procuring goods and services. Like most public school districts, Gwinnett was using the formal bid process to procure food and supplies. While this process provided competitive pricing, it failed to give adequate consideration to other factors such as quality, service, and vendor performance. Also, annual bidding drained the school nutrition program of resources that could be deployed to improve the school nutrition program.

Ken determined that the bid process was myopic and too price driven. So he organized the new procurement model with four categories: vision, strategy, process, and people. Ken and his team established the vision that everyone's ultimate goal for procurement is to "procure the best products and/or services, at the right price, in the right quantities, from the right partner, at the best value.

His strategy is classic Foodservice 101; the menu drives everything. So, the menu drives the procurement strategy. That strategy includes writing kid driven menus and only purchasing items that are actually needed to support that specific menu. Ken and his team devised a cross-utilization scheme that is critical to controlling stock keeping unit (SKU) management and increasing buying power. A list of base items that can be utilized across several recipes was established. That helped to identify what items are needed in the pantry, and more importantly, what items are not needed in the pantry. Ken also achieved better efficiency by diverting all of his USDA PAL dollars to one single protein-based commodity resulting in full annual commodity utilization.

With his vision and strategy clearly defined, Ken re-engineered the procurement process. He changed the school nutrition procurement model to a formal request for proposal (RFP) that increased competition while giving flexibility to the district to allow for new food items to be added during the year as well as ease with menu changes. The RFP provided for a nimble system compared to the antiquated bid process. Now vendors are selected based not only on what they sell to the district, but how. Important components like service levels, product substitutions, and overall capabilities are now part of the selection criteria.

Gwinnett continues to use the formal bid process for goods that have very clear and exact specifications such as uniforms made with 100% cotton, work shoes with non-skid soles, or 2-ply textile towels. As long as the item meets the minimum specification, the bid is awarded on low price. But when it comes to food, not all peanut butter is created equal. The RFP is a more subjective process that allows for weighting areas of consideration like service levels and product availability. To ensure integrity, the RFP document clearly states all areas that will be evaluated and the associated percentage points assigned to that area. The proposals are judged by a Proposal Evaluation Team (PET). Each team member is required to attend PET training to ensure he/she understands the proposal, the responsibilities of the district purchasing department and the school nutrition program, and the proper steps for evaluating each proposal. The evaluation is done in a two step process. Price is submitted separately and held until the technical portion of the proposal is evaluated and scored. The cost is calculated through a weighted formula where lowest price is scored with the maximum number of evaluation points. The proposal award is made to the overall highest scoring vendor; this may or may not be the lowest cost vendor. The contract is a one year contract with up to three years for renewal.

The final component in the procurement model is people. Here, Ken has established the highest ethical standards for a good business partnership, not just for the vendor, but for the school nutrition program as well. Ken believes that SKU management and buying power are essential to the food manufacturer and foodservice distributor partnership. SKU management is driven by projected usage that is reliable. Ken believes that this responsibility falls squarely on the school nutrition program. He prides himself on being a reliable partner with a history of providing solid estimates. "That's the catch", says Ken, "You have to be good for it." If Gwinnett asks their distributor to bring in a product specifically for them, they use it. If, by chance, the product did not go over well with students resulting in dead floor stock, Ken takes the responsibility to work through it and not discontinue use of the product until the inventory is gone. This type of integrity provides Gwinnet with the best possible buying power. It also gives them the negotiating power to demand best practices from their business partners such as a 'no substitution' agreement.

2. Give an example of how your nominee demonstrated commitment to their school nutrition program or profession (include measurable results achieved).

One of Ken's greatest attributes is his ability to develop and nurture the talent in others. Ken believes it is his responsibility to provide the opportunity for success to every employee at every school. He enables that opportunity through a culture of continuous learning. The Gwinnett School Nutrition Program provides a minimum of 20 hours of training to every staff member each year. This far exceeds the training requirements of the new USDA Professional Standards. Core training and advanced training programs are provided.

Ken has designated five dedicated training kitchens throughout the district. These are school kitchens that have outstanding managers and a collaborative team of employees that have the time and capacity to train new hires. New employees spend five full days at the training kitchen to prepare them for deployment at a school. Ken also has eight dedicated training managers. Each training manager is assigned 16 schools to oversee. Having only 16 schools allows them to be in every school at least once a month. While at their assigned schools, they work side-by-side with the cafeteria workers providing on-the-job training. Ken believes that his front line workers are the future leaders for school nutrition by enabling them to acquire the skills needed to progress in their careers.

Ken believes that everything rises and falls on leadership. Leadership is the fundamental element that can drive a program to success; lack of leadership can anchor it solidly in mediocrity, or worse. Ken developed and implemented the Aspiring Manager Program to provide Effective Leaders to support the mission and vision of the Gwinnett County School Nutrition Program. The key objective of the Aspiring Manager Program is to identify, train, and equip emerging leaders. The candidates are current assistant managers who have completed the SNP Manager screening and have been recommended by both their manager and training manager. There are three primary components of the Aspiring Manager Program: 200 hours of classroom training, nine weeks of on-the-job training, and site support that consists of substituting for managers when absent. The Aspiring Manager Program aligns to the school district's Quality Plus Leader Academy Aspiring Principal Program.

Ken believes that good training is the key to delivering quality and consistency across the school district. After all, many parents have children in two or more schools. Ken wants each child to experience the same quality in taste and appearance regardless of the school attended. This "MacDonald's" style approach ensures proper execution district-wide. Ken says, "In reality, the idea is the easy part, it's the execution that will make or break it."

Keeping the school nutrition program fully staffed was a problem in a district of Gwinnett's size. Realizing that recruiting was not a core competency for foodservice, Ken turned to Kelly Educational Services to assist in producing an adequate supply of qualified applicants. They provide more than 50 new applicants every month resulting in a fully staffed program. And, Ken can use his internal human resources and expertise to train a highly qualified staff.

Karen Hallford says, "I have been a member of Ken's Senior Leadership Team for eight plus years and we have endured many changes, the most challenging certainly being the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010. As daunting as these new regulations seemed at the time, Ken created a clear vision and strategy that allowed us to transition our menus and standard operating procedures to not only be compliant but well ahead of the actual start date. That allowed us to benchmark against our past performance and to share with others. As a matter of fact, we have served as an example to other districts across the United

States. We were able to accomplish this as a direct result of Ken's leadership. He had us operating ahead of the curve, he had a clear plan, a strategy, provided inspiration and helped us to foster change and embrace it. It is truly an honor to be a part of his team and I am motivated to not only meet his expectations, but to exceed them.”

Ken has the talent to know how to bring out the brilliance in his people.

3. Give an example of a fiscal achievement accomplished by your nominee (include specific financial results such as end-of-year fund balance or other financial indicator).

Ken has a solid track record of increasing the school nutrition program revenue every year since joining Gwinnett County Public Schools. The projected revenue for school year 2015-16 is over \$92 million, up from \$90 million in the previous year. Each year, he receives a letter from the Georgia State Agency stating that his fund balance exceeds the legal limit and requiring a plan to spend the funds. This is a nice problem to have and Ken is happy to use his excess balance to reinvest in the school nutrition program. In fact, Ken has invested over \$28 million in large and small equipment since school year 2006-07. And, he has opened 34 new school building kitchens with completely outfitting the kitchens with school nutrition program funds.

Ken also uses his positive fund balance to invest in people. He provided a \$0.54 per hour pay raise for his hourly rate employees. He also implemented a universal school breakfast program in 26 schools that is self-funded and provides access to free breakfast to over 50,000 students.

But revenue is not the only component of good fiscal management. Ken's procurement move from a formal bid to an RFP produced significant cost savings. He was able to negotiate cost savings of \$27,252 in the first year of the distributor contract and \$585,368 and \$318,079 in each consecutive year of renewal.

4. Describe how your nominee delivers innovative menu solutions despite labor and equipment obstacles.

As mentioned earlier, Ken knows that the menu drives everything in foodservice. The menu philosophy at Gwinnett is to be customer focused by creating menus with built in excitement that kids crave. And Ken does all that while maximizing buying power by identifying base products and leveraging them through cross-utilization in multiple recipes and cross-utilization in methods of preparation. For example, a simple meatball is used to prepare Italian pasta, Asian stir fry, beef stroganoff, and a variety of sub sandwiches.

There are kid favorites that are the staple of every school menu and have the power of high participation to keep them on as menu basics. Ken and his staff add innovation by constantly monitoring the foodservice industry through organizations like the National Restaurant Association, culinary publications, and quick service and fast casual restaurant menus. Last school year, Ken armed his eight area trainers with smart phones and asked the trainers to gather input from 10-15 students each day they are in a school. This culminates into thousands of data points captured in real time to identify student wants and trends. New products and trends are added to the menu through promotions, limited time offers, and annual menu placements. Innovation doesn't stop with products and recipes. It also includes innovations to serving line appeal with packaging, garnishes, food positioning, color, and seasonal variety. Gwinnett is addressing food trends with more options, more global cuisines, and even drinkable meals.

Ken uses an annual menu that contains cycles. The annual menu starts in January and runs through December, exposing students to two different menus in the same school year to add more variety. This also eases school start-up in the fall as there is no change in pantry items and order guides. Managers return to school after the summer break to familiar ingredients and recipes. And, students haven't been exposed to the menu over the summer months so it appears fresh. Once the school year gets underway, there is plenty of time to test new products and recipes giving managers adequate time to prepare for a new menu in January.

Gwinnett participates in the Georgia Farm to School Program to provide wholesome locally grown produce to students. Last school year, Gwinnett provided eight million servings of local produce to students, comprising one third of their total produce purchases. Gwinnett has one of 10 Georgia Grown Test Kitchens as recognized by the Georgia Department of Agriculture. With the advent of the Healthy, Hunger Free Kids Act, Ken made all menu sides vegetables and fruits ensuring that students choose their mandatory vegetable or fruit, even if they select just on side item. Ken has also added 50 "Let's Move, Salad Bars to Schools."

With all of the concern about plate waste in schools, Ken's team conducted a scientifically-based plate consumption study that yielded some surprising results. The menu included a stuffed crust pizza that was served in grades K-12. The study revealed that while the stuffed crust was popular with secondary school students, the elementary students were eating the pizza up to the crust and then throwing the crust away. This along with many other insights led to cost saving measures to improve meal delivery.