

Michelle Curry
Silver Special Achievement
Award

1. WHAT SPECIFIC ACHIEVEMENTS DEMONSTRATE YOUR NOMINEE'S ABILITY TO SOLVE PROBLEMS UNIQUE TO SMALL SCHOOL DISTRICTS

In 2007, Michelle was looking for a new professional challenge. Like Dorothy Gale of *Wizard of Oz* fame, she found out that she didn't need to look past her own backyard to find fulfillment. That year she became the Director of the 4500 student South Pasadena Unified School. She grew up in the town and was raising her family there.

Michelle inherited the program from a management company. Upon their departure, the management company practiced what could only be called a scorched earth policy. The fund balance was zero. There was little in the way of modern equipment (they even took the telephone), no program records, and low participation, which in turn provided a measly sum of \$33,000 in entitlement dollars.

From what was a failure of a program, Michelle's biggest achievement is the "umbrella achievement" of creating a sustainable school meal program with minimal resources, a low needy base of 12%, and no economies of scale to leverage. Under the umbrella come the achievements of profitability, nutrition integrity, and student inclusivity.

Being a wealthy community, students could afford other dining options. Michelle had to entice the students to come to the cafeteria. Being an alumna, she understood the community. With the district being a healthy mix of Asian, Hispanic and Caucasian students, she worked to appeal to their culinary preferences by taking a "something for everyone" approach. Pre-HHFKA, she increased the choices of fruits and vegetables to a minimum of three per day. She opted for multiple entree choices with a minimum of 4 per day at the elementary level, and up to 10 at the secondary level. Whenever possible, these items were made in house. Purchased items were packaged in house under their own program's label. She also created a full-fledged a la carte program, believing that it is her responsibility to provide both full meals and components that students want and need to round out their meals. Lastly, she started a breakfast program at the nutrition break at the secondary schools to provide another source of revenue and ensure that meal eligible students had the opportunity to eat. Marketing the new and improved program was also essential to its success.

On the expense side, Michelle discontinued some practices that affected revenue. She paid close attention to purchasing and waste and worked with staff to ensure that production was not excessive. She chose protein commodities that would help her bottom line, and when she ran out she lobbied with fellow districts to share their excesses. She reworked several unprofitable serving lines at the secondary sites to maximize revenue, reducing labor and student theft. Expenses went down 15%.

As the kitchen became more efficient, she was able to add another contract site, providing additional revenue and 120 more meals a day without hiring additional staff. At the end of her first year, she continued the NSLP through summer school. Not only did this provide another revenue stream and provide employment for some staff, but ensured that students would have meals. Finally, near the end of her first year, she was able to debut their new POS system. The next school year would start with the staff and students familiar with the program and no more meal tickets, especially for the needy kids, who didn't like the connotation of tickets. Income levels in the lunch line were now anonymous.

Her results were impressive. In four short years program eligible meals served increased 113% and have continued to grow to 120% of her starting totals, despite the constraints of the new menu pattern. The participation rate has almost doubled in the meal program, and commodity entitlement dollars available to the program have tripled. Program size (in dollars) has soared to \$1.6 million from \$900,000, and the fund balance has grown to \$340,000. Furthermore, the growth in the program has allowed her to grow opportunities for her staff; the growth in program has allowed her to add seven staff positions, an increase of 40% from her start date.

2. DESCRIBE THE MOST SIGNIFICANT PROBLEM YOUR NOMINEE DEALT WITH AND HOW SHE OVERCAME THE OBSTACLES

After over ten years with a management company, the School Board started receiving complaints about the program from the parents. Due to the volume of concern voiced by the parents, the School Board elected to return to a self-operated program. Upon her hiring, Michelle knew that she could make all the changes in the world, but if she didn't change the issue (obstacle) that brought her to the District, the changes would be for naught. The obstacle she had to overcome was changing the perception of the program to the students, the Board, faculty, staff, parents, and the community.

Michelle went back to basics and concentrated on the traditional "4 P's of Marketing:" product, place, price, and promotion. Variety on the menu (the product) was key, with homemade pastas, Asian dishes, house-made deli sandwiches and gourmet salads. Current salad favorites include Asian Noodle and Chicken Caesar. Seasonal fresh fruit offerings vary from cantaloupe, pineapple, kiwi and apple pears. Other favorites include pot stickers with edamame, and breakfast for lunch. At the secondary level fresh fruit cups, yogurt parfaits, and house-made breakfast burritos with green sauce keep the students coming. Secondary sites also grill all beef hamburgers, hot dogs, and chicken breasts daily. The most popular serving line is a partial self-serve food bar at the high school that changes themes daily ranging from pasta to salads to tacos. Two years ago she worked with the elementary site principals to institute Recess before Lunch. The results from improvements are confirmed with the 50% decrease in plate waste. Of course, better quality food costs more. Being a parent in the community, Michelle knew that parents and students would pay for quality. By creating a more efficient department, she only needed to raise prices by 15% to get a 50% increase in quality.

Michelle then went to working on the eating environment (place). A better place is more than just facility and equipment makeovers; it includes maximizing the students' total experience in the cafeterias. With little budget for improvements she worked with what she had, buying table cloths and signs to liven up the serving areas, including a jumbo black board at the high school. Stanchions were placed at the secondary sites to help with flow. As profits came in, she invested in new serving carts, barbeques, and had new panels in school colors put on her serving lines. She hosted an art contest at the high school to repaint the interior of an express line, now decorated with a giant tiger. With an environmentally conscious community, she switched out black foam plates for plaid trays and other eco-friendly plates.

A critical part of the lunchtime experience revolved around service time. When Michelle arrived, everything was manual. She instituted an on-line payment system and a POS system. One benefit of the POS has been the increase in the speed of the service of the meals. Wait time for food has decreased by 40%. Labor time previously used to count tickets and cash is now used more efficiently. For students, going online meant less time in-line and more free time. They no longer had to choose between eating and socializing.

Lastly, Michelle knew that she had to promote the "new" program to get results. She speaks at PTA meetings, presents at Back to School Nights, and at middle and high school orientation meetings. She uses the district Parent Connect phone and email system to alert parents when changes occur. She has presented to her school board several times, touting the programs successes and future goals. She is now included in the 9th grade tour of the high school, reaching over 300 families. Last year she created a Twitter account to showcase menu items and post articles. She has partnered with teachers and ASB to provide snacks during testing, and AP exams breakfasts. They have also worked with the high school small business class, which operates the Student Store under the cafeteria umbrella. The department has catered the District's year end celebration and awards event every year since she arrived, as well as Staff Development Meetings. They have also assisted parents in putting on the Boosters Annual Spaghetti Dinner Fundraiser at the high school since 2008. She's also the lead person on the Wellness Committee. She also has a food service website.

Ultimately, these changes made a difference in the program. Participation by meal eligible students has more than doubled, and total participation by the student body is up over 50% from her arrival.

3. Specific Skills and Talents That Allow for the Nominee to Be Successful In a Small District.

Michelle has three distinct skill sets that allow her to be successful at her job in a small school district. They are the ability to multi-task, a forward thinking mindset, and a sense of community. For Michelle, the term multi-tasking is an understatement; she handles the menu, training, kitchen design and improvements, personnel, equipment issues, and purchasing.

Being a professionally trained chef, Michelle personally instructs the staff on the techniques needed to prepare all of the scratch dishes, the most recent one being a new rice and pineapple dish. Recently she worked the pasta station at the high school. She was able to develop a new procedure to save 20% off the cooking time for 800 servings and reduce the steps needed by staff by 40%, saving them wear and tear on their bodies. To keep a handle on expenses, Michelle still does the large frozen and staples purchasing. She also takes her turn taking inventory in the freezer. Knowing she does not have the purchasing power to get distributors to handle unique items like tomatillos and feta cheese, she finds ways to get neighboring districts to copy her menus to drive the necessary volume.

It is very easy for small district directors to get bogged down in the day to day regiment, but Michelle is successful because she has a forward thinking mindset. Areas where she exemplifies this quality are in menu development, staff development, promotion, and for a lack of a better description, making something out of nothing. Michelle consistently works to improve the vitality and integrity of her menu. Even though she has a five week cycle, she leaves open days to try new things. Her recent additions include antibiotic free chicken tenders and turkey chorizo chicken tenders. She feels that being available to vendors is important as they bring by the latest products. Even though she wears many hats, insulating herself from industry would eliminate innovation, so she makes time to meet with brokers and attend shows.

Michelle realizes that engaging the public for support of the program requires an ongoing effort. She volunteered to work on the state association marketing committee that produced a video promoting the benefits and quality of school meals, while at the same time gives the public an easy to understand explanation of all the new menu regulations. Michelle was heavily involved in script development, scene blocking, and even had a supporting actress role in the production. She has also produced a Facebook page to promote what's going on in her district program.

One of Michelle's greatest accomplishments was creating a walk-in freezer out of a closet. She explained the benefits of the freezer to her boss, and how efficiency would be increased if deliveries to the middle school were reduced. It took five years, but she got not only the freezer she wanted, but one significantly bigger.

While small district directors have a lot on their plates, no one person is an island. Michelle has been successful because she has been able to develop a sense of community within the department, and have the community consider food services part of itself. 25% of all employees are actually parents with students in the district. She promotes from within. One of her managers started at age 19 as a substitute worker. She also promotes openings to the local culinary academies and 25% of her staff have come from those schools. She also annually hires ten student workers at the High School.

One recent staff development day really helped build the sense of community in the department. She used a recommendation from the NSFMI, and created "buzz" groups to enhance the interaction of staff from different sites. They addressed two questions: What is the best part of their day at work, and what is the most challenging part of their day? They were then instructed to brainstorm solutions. The room was truly buzzing with conversation and laughter. The majority claimed that making the kids happy was the best part of their day. A notable topic of challenge was dishwashing and rinsing. Staff shared solutions and empathized. Since then, dishwashing time has been reduced by 12%.

She also helps on special event days at the sites, and works a register occasionally to connect with students. She also lets parent groups use the kitchens to prepare food for district fundraisers. Her favorite day of the year is Color Day at the high school, where she dons her original cheerleader uniform and participates in the staff dance. Taking pictures in uniform with her own cheerleader daughter has made this a memorable event!