

Heather D'Ambrosi, MS, RD

2016 FAME Silver Spirit Award

1. Describe how your nominee demonstrates a high level of professional commitment to school nutrition programs.

Heather D'Ambrosi was hired by the Hillsborough County Public Schools (HCPS) Student Nutrition Department in 2005 as their Nutrition Specialist and today serves as their Team Leader for the Production Team. Prior to joining HCPS, Heather attended Michigan State University with an athletic scholarship for the Women's Swim Team. She graduated with a Bachelor of Science with a major in Dietetics. From there she attended Case Western Reserve University in the Master of Public Health Nutrition program. This coordinated program allowed her to earn a Master's degree while completing a dietetic internship.

Her interest in dietetics and nutrition, along with her Division I collegiate athletic career, gave Heather a deep conviction to dedicate her life's work to preventing childhood obesity. During her internship she completed a rotation working for the Solon School District Child Nutrition Program in Cleveland, Ohio. This experience ignited her passion for child nutrition and cemented her resolve to become a school nutrition professional and make a difference in the lives of children. After graduating from Case Western, she set her sights on joining one of the largest and most progressive child nutrition programs in the country at Hillsborough County in Florida.

As Team Leader for the Production Team at HCPS, Heather oversees the team responsible for menu development, procurement, inventory, and production records. She is also responsible for ensuring that all 216 sites are adhering to the USDA guidelines. Each week her team processes over 1,900 orders for 216 school sites. She manages seven vendor contracts and procures over \$33 million in food each year.

Heather's team of five includes a nutrition manager, production manager and chef that oversee all of the food production as well as nutrition analysis. Under Heather's leadership, the team overhauled the menu system converting to seasonal menus with a three week cycle. This allowed them to add creative new recipes that used base items with seasonal flare. Vegetable Lasagna in the fall is transformed to Chicken Alfredo Lasagna in the winter and Mexican Lasagna in the spring. Comfort foods are added in the winter including a variety of homemade soups such as Pasta Pizzol Soup and Spanish Chick Pea Stew. A variety of ethnic foods were also added to the menu with Asian favorites like Thai Chili Pork Bowls and Mexican favorites like enchiladas, tacos, and taco salad.

Heather's concern with childhood obesity was the driving force in creating the *Cooking It Up* contest at HCPS. This innovative student competition is held annually and sponsored by Publix, the largest retail grocery store chain in Florida. Students compete by writing an essay on healthy eating and creating an original recipe. Finalists are selected to compete in a cooking competition. They prepare their recipes that are judged by a panel of local chefs. The coveted grand prizes have included Justin Bieber concert tickets and an IKEA room makeover complete with flat screen television and furnishings.

Heather has been a member of the School Nutrition Association since 2006 and is active in her local and state chapters. She served as the Professional Development Chair in 2010 and in 2013 through 2015 served as the Region 5 Director for the state of Florida. She was President of her local association from 2010 through 2012, and also held other positions such as Treasurer and the Nutrition Chair. She attends the annual conferences at both the state and national level since becoming a member in 2006. Heather was an education session presenter at SNA's ANC in 2014 and 2015 showcasing HCPS Student Nutrition Program and sharing innovative ideas with other school nutrition professionals across the United States.

2. Give an example of how your nominee has made a difference for people in their school community (Include measurable results achieved).

Heather has kept the Student Nutrition Program on the forefront of school nutrition during her tenure at HCPS. As a Registered Dietitian, she serves as the nutrition expert for the district. She works closely with the school nurses to ensure that nutrition and allergen information is proactively communicated to parents and staff. She works with parents to develop special menus for students with allergies and other special nutritional and feeding needs.

Last year, she improved the nutrition education program by implementing a nutrition communication program that includes nutrition cards and a matching lunch tray to encourage students to select a healthy meal. The nutrition cards are on all serving lines and provide students the opportunity to read the nutrition facts before selecting their menu choices. Nutrition information on the cards includes the basics such as calories, carbohydrates and fiber, fat, and sodium. The cards are color coded to match the USDA My Plate colors e.g. red for fruit, purple for protein. This may not sound so revolutionary, but what makes this program so unique is that Heather took it one step further and developed a color-coded disposable lunch tray that also matches the My Plate colors. The environmentally friendly color-coded lunch tray teaches students to build their healthy school meal based upon the color-coding of the nutrition cards that corresponds with the color-coded tray. The feedback from students and parents has been tremendous with students actively choosing food items based on their contribution to the meal pattern and nutrition provided. Heather is doing her part to teach children, and their parents, the concept of balance, variety, and moderation at mealtime. And the school district was awarded the 2011 Excellence Award from the Paperboard Packaging Council for their innovative, copyrighted tray. The program is used at both the elementary and secondary school level.

Another one of Heather's creative ideas to encourage healthy eating is the *Made-to-Order* salad bar that was initiated in the high schools and quickly expanded to the middle schools and even the elementary schools. Students are presented with a variety of fresh salad ingredients including vegetables and fruits, a choice of two different proteins, and healthy toppings to build their own custom salads. Even at the elementary level, students complete a salad order form that is handed to the server who creates the customized salad in front of their customers. The introduction of the salad bars at the elementary level resulted in a three percent increase in lunch participation. The salad bars have been so popular that *Made-to-Order* sandwich bars were added using the same concept. The addition of salad and sandwich bars has added not only more fresh foods to the menu, but also a new freshness to the student cafeteria experience.

3. Give an example of an innovative program (e.g. marketing, training, customer service) implemented by your nominee (Include measurable results achieved).

Many school districts across the country struggled when the Healthy, Hunger Free Kid's Act promulgated regulations requiring increased servings of fruits and vegetables, and required servings of legumes, red/orange, and deep green vegetables. Many school nutrition advocates were concerned about the increase in plate waste of fruits and especially vegetables in many school cafeterias. HCPS experienced the same challenges. Heather jumped into action by creating the *Try It Tuesday* program. Heather believes it is imperative for students to be involved in the district's menu planning process to ensure that new foods are 'kid approved.'

Try It Tuesday is a food sampling program that encourages students to try new fruit and vegetable recipes like Fresh Roasted Butternut Squash and Cheesy Spinach Bake. The goal is to increase fruit and vegetable consumption by exposing students to new fruits and vegetables, creatively prepared in a variety of recipes. Each month, all elementary and secondary schools are provided a menu sampling calendar, corresponding recipes, and nutrition education materials. On Tuesdays, the staff prepares a new recipe and places sample size portions in soufflé cups along with a spoon. A staff member takes the samples on a tray to the dining room where students are eating lunch. Any student, whether they are eating a school lunch or a lunch brought from home, can try a sample and provide feedback. Participating students are given a *Super Food Taster* sticker for trying the sample and providing feedback.

Student feedback is summarized and evaluated to determine student acceptance. If the new item is well received it is added to the menu. In many cases, common school meal vegetables such as carrots, is better accepted by students when transformed into a chef-inspired Carrot Soufflé. The Pineapple Salsa sample is now featured with the Sweet Potato Fish Bites. Fresh Roasted Italian Cauliflower, Roasted Broccoli Parmesan, and Spanish Chick Pea Stew were samples and are now featured menu items. The school manager uses nutrition educational materials to teach student about *Try it Tuesday* foods and to promote them on the line and in school communications. *Try It Tuesday* has become a huge hit with students!

Another innovative program created by Heather to engage students is the annual *Fresh Flavors* event. Each year, Heather invites over 250 students from grades 3 through 11 and their parents to test approximately 25 chef-inspired menu concepts. The new menu concepts are reviewed, tasted and judged for potential menu placement in the upcoming school year. Students rate each item based on appearance, taste, and aroma using an iPad. Last year's winning menu items included Tropical Fruit Smoothie, Cuban Flatbread Sandwich, and Apple Monkey Minis, a healthy fruit-based dessert.

Heather holds the event at an off-site event center complete with music, a photo booth, and prizes. Students are transported to the event on district school busses. This interactive event includes nutrition education materials for students and parents.

4. Describe how your nominee contributes to high morale of work associates and/or professional colleagues.

When Heather joined the team at HCPS 10 years ago, she was a young, enthusiastic dietitian ready to set the world of child nutrition on fire. She quickly realized that she was responsible for leading changes in the menu system as well as changes in operations that were in place for many years. In fact, many of the seasoned managers at HCPS had worked at the district since before Heather was even born.

Heather took a step back and realized that while she was a Registered Dietitian with a Master of Public Health Nutrition degree, she still had a lot to learn about school foodservice. And, she realized that she needed to gain the respect of the school managers before she could successfully lead change. So she decided to take a hands-on approach and spend her early days at HCPS working side-by-side in the school kitchens under the tutelage of the managers. This helped Heather gain their trust and in return build her own confidence as a supervisor. She has created an atmosphere of mutual listening and learning from each other.

Heather's management style paid-off when the Healthy, Hunger Free Kids Act catapulted schools into a new era for school nutrition programs. HCPS made the transition smoothly with Heather's leadership in implementing many of the required changes, such as implementing 51 percent whole grains and sodium reductions ahead of schedule. Mary Kate Harrison, General Manager of the Student Nutrition Program, says, "Heather has been a wonderful addition to our Nutrition team and has been a leader in implementing creative nutrition programs that serve as a model for other school districts."