

2017 FAME LEADERSHIP AWARD KEVIN PONCE

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

Kevin Ponce possesses many positive leadership skills developed during his service to our country as a member of the United States Air Force. A 20 year veteran, Kevin is a distinguished award winner of many military accolades including the Meritorious Service Medal, the Air Force Commendation Medal, the Air Force Achievement Medal, and the National Defense Service Ribbon, as well as several other military service distinctions earned around the world. Kevin brings this leadership and dedication into his current role as the Director of Oklahoma City Schools School Nutrition Services. Oklahoma City Public Schools is the state's largest school district in Oklahoma.

Kevin's leadership is evidenced by his having the foresight to unite child nutrition professionals and build team unity while in the midst of one the most challenging times of change in school foodservice. Kevin's cafeteria staff—the cooks, the managers, the servers—work as a TEAM to provide quality and nutritious food service to his students. Under Kevin's leadership, 15 Mid-Del Schools earned the distinction of "Certified Healthy Schools."

During his role as Director of Child Nutrition Services at Mid-Del Schools, Kevin recognized the need to help the staff grow professionally, so he initiated the Child Nutrition Credential Incentive Pay Plan. He proposed this plan to the Support Employees Union and won overwhelming approval. This program provided an hourly rate incentive of one to three levels of certification based on a program designed by the School Nutrition Association. Kevin used the precious dollars wisely and invested them in his most prized resource... his people. Today at Mid Del Schools, Child Nutrition employees can earn an additional \$411.75 per year or more. LEADERSHIP in the area of professional development for his staff will reap huge benefits as his TEAMS strive for excellence! At his current district, Kevin's input to the negotiation team of eliminating the 500+ kitchen staff's clothing allowances and replaces it with providing 5 each polo shirt and non-slip resistant shoes saved his department \$44,000 yearly and projected to decrease worker's compensation claims for slips and falls by 75% and decrease absenteeism by 33%. Kevin's leadership is not limited to his own school district as demonstrated by his organization of group round-table discussions with 12 neighboring school districts. Kevin facilitated discussion on various child nutrition programs, such as purchasing practices, equipment innovations, and professional development. Over the last four years, decisions made by his group positively affected over 120,000 students and addressed issues involving over 1000 child nutrition employees.

While working for Mid-Del School district, he was an active member of the Midwest City Kiwanis, a group dedicated to the leadership and development of children. The Kiwanis annual programs, such as the pancake breakfast and golf tournament, are the primary fund raising events supporting local students' scholarships, key clubs, and student leadership camps. This is a direct result of raising over \$10,000 for student needs.

As clear indication of Kevin's reputation of leadership excellence, he is often solicited to be on various task forces, committees, and advisory boards, including past and present positions: the Oklahoma State University Family and Consumer Sciences Advisory Committee, General Mills Gold Star Advisory Board, the SUMMA Purchasing Group Task Force and Rich's Products 2015 Roundtable Team. Kevin has been twice selected to attend Georgetown University for School Nutrition Executive Management Program. Kevin was elected by his peers to be the Southwest Regional Director of the National School Nutrition Association, representing Arkansas, Colorado, Kansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma and Texas. Kevin has appeared in several videos to promote SNA membership and the SNA Annual National Conference. He was also a key contributor as a member of SNA's Education Committee in developing the current Professional Standards for School Nutrition Professionals. Kevin's leadership skills have truly reflected his dedication to students and young adults who will become the leaders of tomorrow. Kevin leverages his leadership skills to help the advancement of not only the school district, to which he is directly related, but also to the local community and to the local, regional and national trade organizations to which he belongs.

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

Kevin has worked on many significant projects relating to school nutrition, all of which have translated into benefits for the organization or community in which they were targeted. Therefore, we feel compelled to share more than just one example. One such project involved a research team at the University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center who hoped to prove that a multifaceted approach to changing the school environment could lower childhood obesity in the school. Knowing that 12% of Oklahoma's children have Type II diabetes, Kevin led the training of his staff to change the environment in the lunchroom. These changes included: the implementation of a salad bar available to all students, an improvement in healthy options in a la carte lines and at school functions. Before Kevin's dedication to this initiative, the benefits of fresh fruit and vegetables for Oklahoma students had not even been discussed or readily available in Oklahoma. (In fact, motivated by the USDA's New Meal Pattern, Kevin co-authored a children's book titled: "Fruit, Veggies and Poi" to inspire children to eat more fruits and vegetables). The execution and implementation of these changes demonstrated his skillful leadership abilities to make this project a reality and also led to a 5% increase in lunch participation. According to Dr. Allen Knehans, Chair of Department of Nutritional Sciences for the University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center, "Kevin has given his creativity, work ethic, and commitment to his students and to excellence in his food service programs". In turn, future incidences of childhood Type II diabetes in Kevin's districts will likely decrease in time due to his commitment.

Kevin's commitment to nutrition reaches much farther than just the school cafeteria. He has also invested his child nutrition skills in his community. This is illustrated through his volunteering his time outside of his K-12 Director duties. He contributed

to the education of over 60 students training to become Registered Dietitians at the University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center. Former nutrition students commented that Kevin “is a wonderful preceptor”, and that he “is willing to go out of his way to help”. Kevin has also worked with the Regional Food Bank of Oklahoma Food for Kids Program, a program designed to provide emergency weekend nutrition to chronically hungry elementary school kids. According to Mr. Bill Hendrix, Resource Development Department at the Regional Food Bank of Oklahoma, “Kevin...has shown both excellent commitments to feeding children both through the School Cafeteria Feeding program and also has recognized the need to feed children over the weekend”. It is rare to find someone as eager and dedicated as Kevin to the education of future health care and nutrition workers.

Kevin is also passionate about his service to the K-12 trade associations. Kevin dedicated valuable time and resources during his term as President of the School Nutrition Association of Oklahoma and was subsequently awarded a Thelma Flanagan Gold Award of Service for his exemplary service and commitment. Over the years, Kevin held other state board positions for the Oklahoma Chapter of the SNA, including Nomination Chair, Regional Rep, Vice President and President-Elect. He served as a member of the SNA Education Committee until his recent election to the Regional SNA directorship and Board of Directors. Oklahoma’s SNA membership has increased steadily during Kevin’s tenure as membership chair, moving SNA upward to the 2nd membership tier division, where growth has exceeded 130% in recent years. Kevin was also a key contributor in Oklahoma’s Annual State Conferences as Exhibit Chair for the last 8 years driving attendance up year after year nearly doubling attendance from an average of 250 attendees to over 450! Kevin has started a closed group Facebook Page called School Nutrition Professionals with growing members to date of 988. Answers and solutions to school food concerns have helped hundreds through this media format. Members also share school food related pictures. Kevin’s passion for and commitment to children’s nutrition, his local community and the K-12 segment has been recognized by those who serve in the same industry. In 2012, Kevin was selected as the Oklahoma School Nutrition Association Director of the Year and was the recipient of the prestigious Norma Wilson Hero Award.

In September 2016, Oklahoma Senate Bill 1357 was signed into law to add a position for the School Nutrition Association of Oklahoma to the current Oklahoma Food Service Advisory Council. The Food Service Advisory Council advises on rules, regulations, and procedures that affect licensed food service establishments across Oklahoma including schools. School food authorities across Oklahoma feed up to 688,000 kids each day. Kevin was a key component of lobbying Legislatures of passing SB 1357 from start to finish!

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

Kevin was recently invited to join the Oklahoma City School District as the Child Nutrition Director because of his ability to sell and convince the district board to abandon their contract management agreement, re-establish independent self-

operated kitchens and service, and still deliver nutritious food to their children while also driving down cost and improving participation. While this sounds like an impossible task, he has already cut the annual operating costs by \$600,000 in contract management fees and increased their federal funding by an estimated annual \$1,750,000. While those costs will likely be diverted to other initiatives this year to help advance the school nutrition program, Kevin was able to secure additional funding by recommending to the board that Oklahoma City Public Schools implement the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP). The adoption of the CEP resulted in a total of 90% of meals provided free in 53 out of 76 school sites, encompassing over 27,000 students and resulting in a 15% increase in participation. The remaining 23 schools will be included for the 2017-18 CEP application for approval. The advantages of CEP are many, but most relevant to this discussion are those that will provide a reduction in administrative cost while improving perception, participation and revenue.

In the development of his prior school district Child Nutrition Program, Kevin found the program in desperate need of fiscal attention. Meal participation was steadily dropping due to meals that were unappealing to the children, to costs for prepackaged foods being exceedingly high, and to the reduction in revenues that created a low fund balance for operations. Upon starting his Directorship at Mid Del Schools, Kevin immediately cut expenditures through the return to traditional food service operations. He cut labor costs to meet budget and improved food appearance and taste which resulted in increased revenue and participation. This task was not easy in that Kevin had to convince the district to purchase kitchen equipment, to promote the cafeteria food to students and staff as “good food”, and to convince the Board of Education to terminate a contract that was in place for only one year. The result was a surplus of over \$1,601,000 in his first year, more than doubling 2007-08 end of the year fund balance of \$645,000, thereby meeting the goal of fiscal responsibility and achievement.

Accountability is certainly a key word in the child nutrition program. Free and reduced applications, menu planning, food orders, and financial accounting improved at Mid Del Schools with his implementation of a new food service system. Kevin instructed his team to analyze every invoice before making payment, an action that has saved his department over \$7,500 a year since its inception. Realizing his district could increase its Title Fund monies through the Free and Reduced-Price Application, Kevin led his team in performing over 8,000 mail-outs to every household in the district to capture applications not normally submitted. The result... an increase of 1 to 2 % of applications processed, representing nearly an additional 290 applications, generating an additional \$435,000 to the Mid Del school district. Kevin did not stop at his own district, as he has also led the way in developing and promoting a purchasing co-op group of 18 school districts, saving not only his department about \$10,000 a year in bid pricing and rebates, but also that of other smaller districts that otherwise would not have been able to secure competitive bids.

Kevin has also worked diligently to seek and receive federal grants for the child nutrition program to continue to provide great opportunities for his students. Since Kevin's arrival to Oklahoma City Public Schools 2 years ago, he led his department of

over \$2.5M in grants including the following: The Child Nutrition Fitness Initiative Breakfast Grant, Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Grant, The Fuel-Up Breakfast Grant and the School Foodservice Equipment Assistant Grant. This is another great example of Kevin's impressive fortitude and hard work toward obtaining these many valued grants.

Through Kevin's leadership, his department's 2015-16 year-end finance resulted in an unheard-of revenue balance of \$4,337,104.00 from a fund balance of only \$26,113.00 upon Kevin's arrival! This is an astounding turnaround since Kevin's arrival as Director 2 years ago. This was attributed in reorganizing his department and involving a team consisting of kitchen and office staff to formulate the department's vision and mission statements in becoming pro-active, providing empowerment to his staff and uphold the responsibility and accountability to the success of his department's Child Nutrition Program.

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

Over the last 12 years, Kevin has developed and administered child nutrition programs in 3 Oklahoma school districts. These combined districts employ over 700 staff members and encompass over \$36,000,000 in funding for over 120 schools. His accomplishments include saving over \$2,000,000 in procurement costs through a purchasing procedural change from line item bidding to prime vendor awards. This change also facilitated a reduction in delivery trucks to each school site and saved countless, intense labor hours in bid administration. His recent appointment to the CN Director of Oklahoma City Public Schools is a direct result of his vision to eliminate erroneous spending on a contract management company in place of self-operations. While this commitment increases the labor required to support the CN department, the elimination of \$600,000+ in contract fees enables him to reallocate funds in reorganizing his staff to support an Executive Chef, 3 Nutrition Specialists (Registered Dietitian) and 4 Operations Coordinator while also upgrading on-site foodservice equipment and improving safety procedures. Luring the Governor's Chef as part of his Nutrition Team, the menu was revamped where theme days such as "State Fair Day" has become one of the most popular and highest meal participation day.

It goes without saying that in order to achieve status and recognition in any industry; one must find creative and innovative ways in which to reach lofty and unprecedented goals. Several years ago while working at Western Heights Schools, Kevin implemented a bold and forward-thinking Farm- to- School Program to utilize the freshest produce for his students while increasing nutrition education. While now a readily accepted go to market platform, this was the first of its kind in Oklahoma schools and helped Kevin secure several USDA Fresh Fruit & Vegetable Grants for his elementary schools. He continued this program at Mid Del Schools and is currently implementing at OKC Public Schools, thereby ensuring fresh local fruits and vegetables from local farmers across Oklahoma who provide: cucumbers, tomatoes, peaches, watermelon, zucchini and squash, just to name a few.

Capitalizing on the success of the Farm-To-School program, last year Kevin united the program with the Made In Oklahoma Coalition to further assist schools

statewide to purchase locally grown produce and locally made products for economic benefits and marketing partnerships. Today, over 400 Oklahoma school districts have the opportunity to feature Made In Oklahoma products and menu the items with designation of "MIO Day". State Department of Education Child Nutrition Executive Director, Joanie Hildenbrand says, "Mr. Ponce leads by example... through great communication skills, great problem solving skills, and by being a team player. Mr. Ponce possesses outstanding leadership skills".

Kevin free breakfast for 14,500 students at his previous district during National School Breakfast Week in conjunction with their week of standardized testing. He chose this critical time of student testing as the most relevant based on his knowledge that a nutritious breakfast translates to his students' ability to perform at their optimum. The tabulation of scores compared the 7-month average daily participation (ADP) to the last 11 weeks of school starting the week of National School Breakfast Week. The result was a breakfast ADP increase of 35.98% overall for 25 sites. Events such as this increased participation steadily from an average participation of 53.96% to a high of 62.64% during his tenure. The above examples clearly showcase Kevin's fiscal responsibility and creativity, but he has also been instrumental in promoting the need for cafeteria renovations to support the menu modifications needed with new USDA guidelines. In spite of monetary challenges faced by an inner city school district, he enabled his district to fund his capital improvements through bond issues and cost cutting measures at the school district level. His innovative ideas for renovations at three of his Oklahoma high school cafeterias fashioned places where students "WANT" to be for lunch!

As of this nomination, Kevin has gathered information to specify and purchase a Food Truck to serve student and staff meals. Meal participation at high schools is projected to increase by 25%. The Food Truck will also provide meals as a community outreach for supper programs, summer meals and provide meals during emergency responses as needed.