

**2017 FAME RISING STAR WARD
MEREDITH POTTER, MBA, RDL**

1. Explain the marked changes in the district's school nutrition program due to contributions made by your nominee in the five or fewer years he/she has been the director (give exact number of years of experience).

Meredith Potter has been employed by the Houston County Board of Education for eight years. Beginning her school nutrition career in 2008 as the dietitian, she was soon promoted to coordinator and then to director by the end of 2011. Her years as dietitian and coordinator provide knowledge and experience that she uses as director to take Houston County School Nutrition to a new level. As the new leader, she acknowledged that morale appeared to be at an all-time low. She began to use our monthly manager meetings, which formerly had been inefficient and unfocused, to deliver inclusive, upbeat, and engaging trainings. In addition, she incorporated positive rewards and surprises into these meetings. Monthly meetings now include "Kudos" branded granola bars to recognize situations in which employees have gone above and beyond, an SNP rendition of the birthday song for monthly birthdays, and even a guest Santa Claus who gave out "gag" gifts based on funny experiences that our managers had dealt with throughout the year. Most recently, she hosted a graduation themed managers meeting celebration, soliciting yearbook photos, voting on class superlatives, and encouraging managers to dress up from the decade when they graduated high school. Our 40 year veteran employee was crowned "Miss SNP" and was brought to tears that her peers had selected her for this title. Meredith also travels to all 39 school sites at least four times each year to welcome staff back to school, deliver cupcakes as a "thank you" to staff, spread holiday cheer, and celebrate the arrival of summer. She also recognizes employees' accomplishments with an end-of-year banquet. Many of our employees are in their jobs because they love to serve children; however, the financial benefits of working in a school kitchen are small. In a world full of negativity, she strives to ensure her team feels appreciated and valued. To this end, she nominates an employee of the year and manager of the year annually at the Georgia School Nutrition Association conference to show support.

Meredith has also been very intentional about building relationships with colleagues in other departments. She hosted a system-wide Biggest Loser competition to encourage healthy living and provide competitive accountability. In fact, it was so popular that people requested it to be repeated, and we have hosted the Biggest Loser Competition four times. The competition even earned a USDA Best Practice Award!

One of the most rewarding achievements Meredith has received was a grant totaling over \$850,000 last school year from the Partners for Breakfast in the Classroom. Because of the grant, seven schools now boast new coolers and/or freezers appropriately sized and in excellent working condition to serve their student populations. We also used funds from this grant to purchase breakfast carts that are utilized throughout the schools. Because of these carts, and with Meredith's carefully garnered support of the administrations in these schools, we are serving

breakfast in alternate locations throughout the schools, and our breakfast participation has grown tremendously from 49.5% to over 85%. Currently, Meredith is in the middle of planning our third annual Food Show. Brokers are invited to participate each year with focused guidelines. School nutrition directors, state staff, and students attend from across the state to participate and score the products displayed. The response to the first Smart Snacks themed food show was so positive that both directors and brokers from around the state requested the event on an annual basis. Like the past two food shows, this year's show is expected to generate hundreds of participants. The success of this event resulted in Meredith winning a USDA Best Practice Award for leadership development and program management.

Under Meredith's leadership, the Houston County School Nutrition Program has won six USDA Best Practice Awards in the following categories: Leadership development and program management (3), increasing participation, fiscal management, and customer service. In addition to the aforementioned Biggest Loser Competition award and specialized food show award, she has also won Best Practice Awards for CEP Strategy Implementation, a revamped Orientation for Nutrition Employees (ONE) training course, a substitute employee orientation and training program, and a packing lunches program that increased participation in elementary schools.

Last year Meredith hired a chef, which has increased our food quality substantially. The chef's job is to develop new recipes to meet federal guidelines, adjust existing recipes to ensure they meet federal guidelines, and travel to schools to provide hands-on training with staff. The chef also serves as our ServSafe instructor. This has resulted in a financial savings for our county of \$3,500 each year because we are no longer paying someone from an outside organization to teach this mandatory class. She will also handle the TID 4 (Food Production) classes, saving an additional \$8,000 per class.

2. Describe the most significant program modification made by your nominee (include measurable results achieved).

Of the many beneficial changes Meredith introduced while director, the most significant program modification has been the implementation of the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) program. She volunteered Houston County to join a group that piloted this program four years ago prior to it becoming a permanent federal program. In the first year of implementation (school year 2013-2014), jumping in after only 18 months as director, ten schools were established as CEP schools and served breakfast, lunch, and snacks daily to students at no cost. Meredith led meetings with our system administrators to ensure they understood the details of this pilot and to secure their support and help communicate this change with the nearly 5,700 students at those schools. During that first year, lunch participation increased in these schools an average of 4.97% and breakfast participation increased an average of 4.04%. Two years later, we added 6 schools to the CEP group. From SY2015 to SY2016, breakfast participation in these 16 schools increased over 35%, while lunch participation increased an additional 6% and has now reached over 95%. Our administration actively supports

this program and believes in the benefits of school meals, particularly breakfast. Principals have reported a decrease in morning behavior referrals because students who were not eating breakfast are now being provided a healthy, balanced breakfast each day. In addition, in the past when students arrived late to school, they were not allowed to get breakfast. Now, the principals send them to the cafeteria to pick up a breakfast on the way to class when they are tardy. In addition to benefiting students and administration, implementing CEP in our schools has benefited our community. As the number of student meals have increased, we have needed to add more staff. We have added 32 jobs in the 16 CEP schools over the past four years. Families in our community have expressed sincere appreciation for the availability of healthy meals for their children at no cost.

3. Describe your nominee's professional background and how he/she entered the school nutrition profession.

Meredith has always had a passion for nutrition and a desire to help others. She earned her Bachelor of Science degree in Dietetics, completed her dietetic internship at the prestigious Emory University Hospital, and passed her registration exam to become a registered dietitian. She worked for three years as a University of Georgia Family and Consumer Sciences (FACS) Extension Agent teaching ServSafe courses and providing researched-based education to the citizens of Morgan County depending on their individual needs. While employed with the University of Georgia Cooperative Extension, she received the GA Extension Association of Family and Consumer Sciences Financial Management award for implementing a statewide program which provided training in budgeting, saving, investing, and financial services. During this time, she also completed a Master of Business Administration degree to further her professional successes.

Meredith began her career in school nutrition in 2008 and soon climbed the ladder from dietitian, to coordinator, and to director. She currently oversees 39 school kitchens that employ over 400 staff. Putting her business degree to good use, she manages an 18 million dollar budget. When she began as director, our program's financial status was poor and indicated a financial loss for the upcoming year. She studied financial reports, read economic forecasts, and communicated with system and state level administrative staff to estimate revenues and expenditures. At the close of that fiscal year, her forecasting resulted in the budget being positive and within 1% of the estimated revenue and expenses!

Throughout her professional career, Meredith has held numerous committee positions including Executive Officer, Secretary, Scholarship Chair, and Historian for the Georgia Nutrition Council; Secretary and FDN Representative for the UGA College of FACS Alumni Board; and Sr. District Director and Member Resources Committee for the GA Extensions Association of Family and Consumer Sciences.

While working with the Houston County Board of Education, she has received many prestigious honors and awards including an Outstanding Achievement Award for Healthier School Meal Certification, National Alliance for a Healthier Generation Bronze Award for six schools, and six USDA Best Practices Awards.

In April, she became SNS Certified with the School Nutrition Association. She is regularly asked to speak to groups of people around the state due to her expertise,

success, and experience in school nutrition. She has recently been asked to participate in a panel regarding Partners for Breakfast in the Classroom grants and initiatives at the School Nutrition Association National Conference next summer. Meredith is a respected professional amongst leaders in our community, state, and nation, and her dedication to her profession has made a tremendous difference in our school nutrition program.