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Reflections on a Brilliant History of Serving Kids

Pioneering Trailblazers, Current Champions and Rising Stars Share Their Thoughts
on the Past, Present and Future of School Meals, the School Nutrition Profession
and the School Nutrition Association

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CELEBRATING 75 YEARS OF DEDICATION SCHOOL NUTRITION ASSOCIATION



Sandra Ford, SNS

SNA President 2012-13

When you look back at the history of this profession, is there a singular turning point or defining moment? What about for SNA?

The Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act brought both good and bad attention to our profession. We had an opportunity to either take the high road or react negatively, and fortunately, we were able to tell our own story alongside challenging media coverage. First Lady Michelle Obama brought positive messages to the importance of healthy eating—and we took advantage of the opportunity to make much-needed changes at the local level.

In recognition of the 75th year of school meal programs and the School Nutrition Association (SNA), *School Nutrition* asked three leaders—a **pioneering trailblazer**, a **current champion** and a **rising star**—to reflect on the historic legacy and future promise of the School nutrition profession.

SNA went through several governance changes that enabled the organization to be more responsive—and it helped having leadership teams that were not afraid of change and rocking the boat.

The current pandemic has upended our lives. How has it changed the nature of the challenges ahead for SNA and its members?

Before COVID, I believe it would have been a challenge to prevent others from controlling the message about school meals and we would have struggled to maintain momentum and realistic expectations, as well as membership levels. Now, in some regards, we've gone back to being "feeding" programs. And the financial challenges brought on by COVID will last for years. Directors have the tools to be good financial stewards, but they must reach out to form partnerships with administrators and develop creative solutions to providing meals in a manner that is safe for all.

But I am so proud of how quickly SNA responded to the crisis—changing how they work and what they are working on. Getting so many tools into members' hands so quickly? Wow! Leadership and staff deserve a standing ovation.

What gives you the most optimism about the future of school nutrition programs?

It is an exhausting time for everyone across the board. We just have to take things one day at a time—and school nutrition professionals will come out the other side stronger than ever. When I look back on 75 years of school nutrition and think of my own 32 years' involvement? Just... wow. We are a group that continually changes based on the current needs of our students. I hope and pray we come out of this ready and able to continue that mission.



Patricia Montague, FASAE, CAE

SNA Chief Executive Officer

When you look back at the history of this profession, is there a singular turning point or defining moment? What about for SNA?

Passage of the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act is the most defining moment for school nutrition

programs in my tenure. While the rollout and implementation was challenging, it did result in more nutritious meal patterns for school lunch, breakfast and Smart Snacks. But 10 years later, the sodium and whole-grain requirements remain unresolved. SNA will continue its advocacy efforts to maintain the Level One sodium and 50% whole grains standards.

School Nutrition Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow

The current pandemic has upended our lives. How has it changed the nature of the challenges for school nutrition professionals and for SNA? In some ways, it hasn't. I believe that pre-COVID, the greatest challenge to the programs and profession was financial sustainability due to increased costs in labor, food and overhead, paired with the increases in unpaid school meal debt. The pandemic has only enhanced my concerns, especially with the uncertainty around school openings and their unknown impact on school nutrition programs, as well

as on the companies that serve this market.

I fear that the negative impact of COVID-19 will take years to erase—not just for school nutrition programs but for our nation. If there's a "bright" side to this grim outlook, it's that participation in school meals always rises during economic downturns. School meal programs may be able to recover a little faster, and then be in a position to continue their investment in local economies through employment, sourcing foods from area growers and suppliers and so on.

What gives you the most optimism about the future of school nutrition programs?

SNA members give me the most hope about their future and that of school nutrition programs. They remain unbelievably committed to ensuring that the students in their communities have access to healthy school meals no matter what barriers are in the way. I am continually amazed at how resourceful they are when it comes to problem-solving and their dedication to their profession is unmatched.



Shannon Ebron, MS, RDN, LD

Director of Child Nutrition
Riverview Gardens School District
St. Louis, MO

What is it about the history of school nutrition that inspires you for the future?

At school registration events, open houses and back-to-school fairs, parents always ask if we still serve that "rectangular pizza." They will rave about their favorite a la carte sweet treat that they had to purchase on the sly and they clearly still have great affection for their favorite lunch lady. I hope this fond nostalgia for school nutrition will continue, but be shaped by a new generation of healthy eaters.

Where can and should the profession—and SNA—grow? What will keep it relevant for you and those who will come after you?

I want to see this profession grow in diversity on the leadership level. I want to see it get more publicity as a career opportunity among both K-12 students and those in college. School nutrition is a wonderful profession that many do not understand—or they just don't know about the available opportunities.

To stay relevant, SNA should prioritize amplifying the contributions of school nutrition professionals at all levels, showing the diversity of our members, our work and our geographic locations. Focusing on these areas helps us all to understand each other better—and the communities we serve.

What are the greatest opportunities and challenges for the school nutrition profession—and have these been affected by COVID-19?

The greatest challenges are student meal debt, short meal periods, keeping up with meal preferences and trends and accommodating

production needs with efficient equipment. These are chronic issues and continue to be even more paralyzing than dealing with the pandemic. We remain hopeful that COVID-19 will be short-lived, whereas those other issues have been with us since before the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act.

But our greatest opportunities also remain unchanged: To involve the students we serve, gaining their buy-in and helping them to feel invested in school meals.

The camaraderie and desire to collaborate among school nutrition professionals gives me optimism, because everyone makes the nutritional health of children their top priority and wants to see their colleagues succeed. We love to exchange ideas! **SN**

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Dora Rivas, SNS

SNA President 2009-10

Looking back on the history of this profession and our organization, is there a singular turning point or defining moment?

As a school dietitian in the late '70s, I had always worked to ensure school meals met dietary recommendations, even when the meal patterns defined by USDA had not lowered fat or sugar or increased fiber. So, a defining moment for me was 1993, when Ellen Haas, a consumer advocate who'd long been a vocal critic of the nutritional quality of school meals, was appointed to USDA as assistant secretary for Food and Consumer Services and given oversight of the child nutrition programs and USDA commodities.

In recognition of the 75th year of school meal programs and the School Nutrition Association (SNA), *School Nutrition* asked three leaders—a **pioneering trailblazer**, a **current champion** and a **rising star**—to reflect on the historic legacy and future promise of the School nutrition profession.

This was a time of “reinventing government,” and it meant our programs were now getting much-needed attention, as Haas focused on improving the nutritional integrity of school meals. Dorothy Caldwell, then-Association president, worked closely with USDA to increase access to more fruits and vegetables, reducing fat in USDA commodities and promoting nutrition education opportunities in cafeterias and classrooms.

As for our organization? For me, it's when our leaders changed its name from the American School Food Service Association to the School Nutrition Association in 2004. It was a significant change to our image that clearly indicated our membership's intent to be a leader in setting both nutrition and professional standards for child nutrition programs.

What are the most significant challenges facing SNA and its members?

Developing school nutrition leaders in a more complex environment—made worse by COVID—is a serious concern, especially as directors re-

tire. Succession plans are often nonexistent, and many districts find it a challenge to recruit qualified and experienced directors who are ready to hit the ground running.

Current directors need training on developing systems intended to make the transition easier for their successors. This includes establishing a clear organizational structure, job descriptions, policies/procedures and strategic plans. These are critical to keep the program moving forward until a new director can put their own ideas and initiatives in place.

What gives you the most optimism about the future of school nutrition programs?

Throughout the challenge of COVID-19, school nutrition professionals have demonstrated their creativity, perseverance and self-sacrifice to get the job done. They are true heroes, and they give me much hope that *whatever* comes our way, there are committed men and women who love their jobs and who will continue to serve meals with enthusiasm and caring.



Mark Bordeau, SNS

Senior Food Service Director,
Broome-Tioga BOCES,
Binghamton, New York

When you look back at the history of this profession, is there a singular turning point or defining moment?

I think it is yet to come, although it's

already been 25 years in the making. The farm-to-school movement has come a long way since it began in 1996 in California and Florida. And if there's anything the last five months have taught us, it's the importance of supporting local agriculture to our kids, farmers, economy and environment.

School Nutrition Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow

What are some of the greatest challenges facing this profession?

It continues to be changing America's view of school meals. We've done amazing work—there are so many fantastic district programs out there serving restaurant-quality food. But media stories that don't have the facts that and are full of negative undertones keep creeping up.

We need to continually toot our own horn and sing our praises from the highest mountains. We are doing great things in child nutrition—we just need to make sure everyone else knows that, as well!

Are there unique challenges facing SNA?

Technology is both the greatest challenge and the best opportunity for many associations to sustain and grow their membership. Organizations need to be able to continually reinvent themselves to stay relevant and valued by members. SNA has done yeoman's work this summer using technology to offer professional development programs. It has stepped up to the challenge and is seizing the opportunity.

What gives you the most optimism about the future of school nutrition programs?

I have hope and optimism for our profession, because of the people who work on both sides of the tray, so to speak: operators *and* industry partners. Together, we do some of the most important work in this country, focused on the betterment of kids and our nation. When you have such amazing people working in this profession, from coast to coast, there is a lot to be optimistic about.



Jason Carter

Director of Nutrition Services,
Siloam Springs School District,
Arkansas

What is it about the history of school nutrition that inspires you for the future?

The National School Lunch Program was created, in large part, because U.S. soldiers were under-nourished. Over the last 75 years, it ebbed and flowed in importance and reputation. Our country is again "at war"—with the coronavirus, fear and uncertainty as our foes. And again, we are seen as a staple of security. Everyone is so attuned to the importance of nutrition for our kids and the essential role that school meals play daily.

It has been the most frustrating, rewarding, stressful, self-assuring, uncertain, clarifying year *ever*. But I believe we will look back at this pandemic as a positive defining moment in the history of child nutrition and SNA. I think we're inspiring younger professionals, inciting in them a passion so great, they will be incapable of abandoning this mission!

Where can and should the profession grow? What will keep it relevant for you and those who will come after you?

We've been on an upward trend for the last five to seven years. Breakfast in the classroom had a lot to do with that, as our staff were finally being seen in halls and classrooms. Our folks now feel like members of the school community, and this is where we need to continue to focus.

My mission, before I hand this baton off to someone else, is to see universal free school meals. Food is the only thing kids are made to pay for at school. I say this to everyone who asks me about what I do for a living. The school meal program is the last thing in schools that groups

kids together by economic means—and kids certainly pick up on that. Universal free meals fills every spot on my Top 10 priority list.

What are the greatest opportunities ahead for the school nutrition profession?

We are more respected in our communities today than I've witnessed in 11 years in this profession. We need to strike while the iron is hot and advocate for ourselves. Our directors need to be visible in their districts, telling their stories about what they overcame to serve meals this past spring and summer. We need to use this wave of support to engage the community in our mission. I've shared this message with more people in the last few months than I would normally have the opportunity to do so in an entire year. Today, there are a lot more people who are actually listening. **SN**

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Shirley Watkins Bowden
SNA President 1988-89

Looking back on the history of this profession and of SNA what do you see as their defining moments?

I think it goes all the way back to the very beginning, to the National School Lunch Act and President Harry Truman signing it into law. Schools were feeding students before 1946, but we needed the structure of the law and the program that followed to get us where we are today.

I agree with Dora Rivas, who commented last month, about the importance of our name change to

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the School Nutrition Association in 2004. The “American School Food Service Association” had a legacy, but we needed to convey more than the “foodservice” aspect of our work. Focusing on nutrition was very significant.

You’ve played many roles in shaping school nutrition, as a district director, an Association president and USDA undersecretary. Which achievements give you the most pride?

When I was a director in Memphis, I began focusing on the importance of providing training to employees. Some will remember Helen Smith, a cafeteria manager whose love for children inspired me, and who went on to serve as Employee/Manager Representative on the Association’s Executive Board. The Helen Smiths of our profession have always been its heart, but they needed the skills and the know-how to match their commitment. That included an understanding of nutrition, food

safety and culinary skills, plus business skills. I believed that if we could get employees trained in all aspects, then we wouldn’t get criticisms from parents and the general public.

What makes you most optimistic about the future of school nutrition?

One of the good things about the pandemic is that people are finally recognizing that all children need school meals, and I think we’ll continue to see that appreciation for the meals and for the staff when kids are back in school again. You never miss your water until your well is dry—people didn’t miss the school cafeteria until they didn’t have it anymore. When our nation recovers from this crisis, I believe there will be a new mindset about what’s *really* important. Then our challenges ahead will include protecting the integrity of the Health, Hunger-Free Kids Act (HHFKA).



Kevin Sauer, PhD, RDN, LD

President-Elect, Academy of Nutrition & Dietetics, Professor, Kansas State University Co-Director, Center for Food Safety Research in Child Nutrition Programs

Looking back at the history of this profession, what strikes you as a singular turning point?

HHFKA was a major defining moment for school nutrition. It created updated nutrition standards for school meals and snacks that aligned with the latest nutrition science, and since their implementation, there has been a notable decrease in obesity risk for children living in poverty.

HHFKA also elevated the status of school nutrition professionals, many of whom are registered dietitian nutritionists, by requiring minimum qualifications and con-

tinuing education. It also provided grant money to strengthen farm-to-school initiatives; improved transparency, oversight and technical assistance to schools for wellness policy development specifically related to nutrition education and promotion plus food and beverage marketing to children; and expanded after-school meals programs to all states.

What are some of the greatest challenges facing SNA and the profession today?

As with all professional organizations, we are stronger together. At a

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time when so much is changing, it's more important than ever to remain clear on the historical value, impact and strength we have as a national organization. Building on 75 years of successes and strategic support to its members will guide us through current and future challenges.

As the pandemic continues, we must do everything we can to provide access to healthful school meals. Beyond reducing food insecurity, school meal participation is associated with a healthier overall eating pattern and higher fruit and whole-grain intake than

lunch brought from home. Given that COVID-19 has disproportionately impacted individuals with underlying health conditions, it is essential to provide children with healthful foods and beverages that reduce their risk of obesity.

What gives you the most optimism about the future of school nutrition programs?

Child nutrition professionals exhibit a resilient and heroic work ethic like few others; this inspires everyone in the school environment, including children. I am energized by the out-

standing innovation being demonstrated by school nutrition teams that rise up and do what is right for children. They put food on the cafeteria table, in the classrooms, on the buses, in homes and more. Their innovations are truly impacting the well-being of their communities.

SNA and the Academy have a wonderful history of working together. When our voices are combined, we are well-positioned to ensure that children have access to healthful foods and are ready to learn. I look forward to our continued partnership.



Christine Clarahan, RD, SNS

Director of
Food & Nutrition Services
School City of Hammond, Indiana

What inspires you about the history of school nutrition, and who has served as a mentor to you?

Anything that can survive—let alone thrive, as SNA has done—for 75 years is inspiring! But my main personal and professional inspiration is my mom, Sue Clarahan, a registered dietitian and the reason I chose the nutrition field. She is passionate about making sure all bodies are nourished and that no bodies are vilified.

On a national level, I am constantly amazed by Jessica Shelly from Cincinnati Public Schools,

picking my jaw off the floor after every interaction with her. Her ideas are innovative and exciting, and her willingness to share about school nutrition makes me a better director and has led to real positive changes in my district.

And I am beyond lucky to have a strong supportive network in the other northwest Indiana directors. They listen and empathize, and that helps lighten the load.

What are the greatest challenges ahead for the profession?

We need to change the stereotypes that people—often adults—have about today's school lunch and what it means to be a school nutrition professional. We are men and women preparing balanced, delicious and nutritious meals using technology, along with passion and love, to make the world a better place.

We also must continue to understand the importance of lobbying and staying in constant communication with all levels of government, from the local school board to the White House. We

should view our involvement with legislation with as much importance as we view food safety.

What excites you about school nutrition today?

I love that no day is the same. I love, love, love technology—it's changing the world around us, and that includes school nutrition. Students being able to check out what's for lunch on their phones, school nurses being able to give more exact doses of insulin based on what a student had at lunch—it's all overwhelming and thrilling, and I love being a part of it.

My advice to peers: Do not let fear of looking foolish ever stop you. Be brave. Be vulnerable. Remember that it's OK to ask for help. **SN**

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Shirley Brown, EdD, SNS

Director of Product Training, K-12
Rich Products Corporation

Tell us about your long personal and professional connection with school nutrition.

Rich Products Corporation is also celebrating 75 years in the food industry this year. I have been a part of both of these great organizations for 45 years, so I have seen many changes that have contributed to their respective success.

I have fond childhood memories of school meals. The cafeteria was in a converted WWII Army barracks relocated on our school grounds. My grandmother was the cook and my mother, the school baker. Encountering the hungry children of migrant

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farm workers, I would invite them to “lunch with my Grandma and Mother.” Later, as an elementary school teacher, I had hungry children in my classrooms, so I appreciated the value of school meals and the efforts of Association leaders like Past President Gene White. I was so moved by their work, I wanted to be part of it.

What are the turning points that made an impression on you?

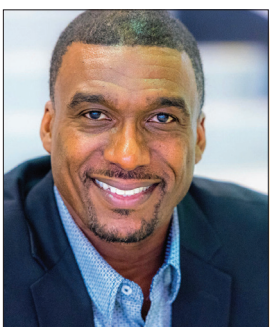
I remember when USDA began offering classes for cafeteria staff, training them in food preparation, nutrition and business management. My mother attended night classes for this training, and I was impressed with the professional development opportunities being offered. Kitchen staff may not have had much formal education, but they had the heart for feeding kids and the desire for self-improvement!

When the Association moved its headquarters from Denver to Washington, D.C., it was a smart decision to be closer to USDA, other advocacy groups and Congressional lawmakers who needed to better understand what school meal programs provide for the children of our nation.

Today’s partnership between industry and SNA is one of the strongest I’ve ever seen. Initially, it felt like we were just a source of income for the organization, but that has changed, as we work together toward a shared mission to improve and advance child nutrition programs. I was so honored when I was invited to serve on the Association’s Education Committee. Our work led to the development of the School Nutrition Specialist (SNS) credential. This, and adding levels to the Certificate program, really lifted the professionalism of the organization and its members.

What makes you optimistic about school nutrition’s future?

COVID-19 has presented huge challenges, and there will be more in the future. But the dedicated men and women in this business have proven they can meet any challenge head-on. Also, SNA and USDA/FNS—and industry and USDA—have come together in stronger working relationships, with more mutual respect. The partnership of all three bring so much power to serve children.



Ervin Watson

School Nutrition Coordinator
Douglas County School District
Georgia

What strikes you as a singular turning point in the history of school meals?

The passage and ongoing implementation of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act (HHFKA) is easily the defining school nutrition event of my career. In bringing sweeping

changes to benefit students, it proved there is power in numbers. Not only have we made substantive changes in the way meals are planned and served, but we’ve been able to influence industry to provide solutions to meet our needs and customer demands. And they did. I *never* thought I would eat a whole-grain biscuit that tasted good, but now there are several!

But HHFKA also revealed a darker side. The debate over the “how”

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and “what” school meals should be unearthed opposition that made me wonder if we all wanted the same bright future for our children. There was so much focus on meeting minimum requirements, but little effort to make decisions that are in the best interest of students. HHFKA continues to define school meals, and although it’s far from perfect, nothing has had a greater impact on school nutrition in the last 40 years.

What are some of the greatest challenges facing the profession?

Although succession planning is probably a regular concern every 20 years or so, and there is always someone who will step up to do the job, I’m concerned that our current leadership is not sufficiently invested to *intentionally* equip new leaders with lessons learned from the past.

We must do more than a ceremonial passing of the baton and truly prepare the next generation to lead and succeed. A failure to transfer the baton properly sets us back. Teams lose momentum, and staff and students feel the impact. With more intentional succession planning, school nutrition will survive *and* thrive.

What gives you optimism about the future of school nutrition?

The up-and-coming leaders moving into more influential positions are my chief source of hope. What millennials and GenZ may lack in experiential knowledge, they make up in creativity and resourcefulness. They see solutions differently. And their divergent thinking under the tutelage of seasoned veterans makes me hopeful that the school meal

programs my grandchildren and great-grandchildren will enjoy will be even better than today’s.

But I would be remiss if I didn’t mention the “elephant” in the room: the recent protests over systemic racism, injustice and inequality. In order to serve students in our communities, those communities must be represented in the decisions that affect them. This applies not only to association leadership, but to the entire school nutrition ecosystem, including vendors and local district leadership. I invite readers to ask: Does your leadership and frontline personnel represent the clientele they serve? If not, do you have a plan to make it so? Remember, a diverse team is not necessarily an *inclusive* team. It’s time to confront this “elephant” as we do everything else: head on!



Ruth Connor, SNS

Director of Food & Nutrition Services, Williamsville Central School District, New York

What is it about school nutrition that inspires your own involvement?

Over 75 years, school meals have evolved to become a critical aspect of our education system. This inspires me every day. This school year, I moved from working in a high-need school district to now being in one with a very low free/reduced ratio. The new challenges have given me motivation to fight for universal school meals that are not dependent on financial need.

In what ways can and should the school nutrition profession—and SNA—grow?

The profession and the program alike need to be tied even more tightly to education. Consider the meal-shaming controversy and the increased unpaid meal charges burdening school nutrition departments. It’s become very clear: *All* children should be fed in school while getting their education. Eliminate unnecessary barriers, and let’s just feed our children! The U.S. has the funding to support so many different priorities in this country and beyond our borders. We *can* afford to prioritize the health and well-being of *all* students. Our profession, through SNA and its state affiliates, must continue to be the voice for those children.

The pandemic also has brought new attention to the value of universal school meals to the *financial sustainability* of school meal programs. Thankfully, SNA’s advocacy efforts paid off and, with support from Congress, USDA has extend-

ed the waivers that will allow us to effectively offer universal school meals throughout SY2020-21. I hope we can continue to advocate for support to ensure that high-quality school meal programs are not compromised by lowered participation rates in the future.

What are some of the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead?

Staff shortages and the competition from a struggling service industry that pays a higher wage is a serious concern. We need to change the perception toward “foodservice helpers” and include them as an essential part of the education system—not just essential in a crisis.

How can feeding children become a desired profession once again? This is an opportunity, too. We need to show the value of what we do for others in order to see that value for ourselves. Everyone in our profession should hold their heads high. **SN**

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Kevin Ponce, SNS

2019 FAME Golden Foodservice
Director of the Year

You recently retired after a long and celebrated career. What are some of your thoughts looking back?

I had several personal defining moments along the way. I was always learning about myself, while learning about the child nutrition profession and about hungry children and food insecurity. I found myself asking, “Could we *really* make a difference?” The short answer? Yes! I remember being a few years into my

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career and a student came up and asked me if I remembered him. I did not, but he remembered an occasion when I sat and ate lunch with him when he was in the third grade. It was now five years later. The story still brings tears to my eyes. Yes, we make a difference.

I also have fond thoughts of so many great SNA events, especially my rookie year attending my first Annual National Conference. I was wide-eyed in the audience, listening to expert presentations and being overwhelmed by the food show, too.

What are some of the greatest challenges school nutrition will face in the next decade?

Wow! Who could have predicted 2020? I think there are going to be more challenges in the future. After all, it’s a profession of hard work, with little pay. It may be a cliché, but it’s really true: You have to love what you do. But I think the next generation of school nu-

trition professionals will be more knowledgeable—and certainly more tech-savvy. That’s going to be a new norm.

I think there are opportunities to bring school nutrition retirees to the table, too. They’ve encountered and overcome so many challenges and can share lessons about integrity, honesty and patience. We can keep learning from one another.

What makes you most optimistic about the future of school nutrition?

For the school nutrition profession, I think the future holds more adversity. And for SNA? It will require more adaptability. It’s a good thing these go hand in hand. Always remember to help those around you, especially your team, to be successful. Make the decision-making process more inclusive. Above all, enjoy each day and each moment as a learning and growing experience.



Danielle Bock, SNS

Director of Nutrition Services
Greeley-Evans Weld County School
District 6, Colorado

What strikes you as a defining moment in the history of the school nutrition profession?

I think this is the greatest time and the most pertinent moment in the history of school meals and in the lives of school nutrition professionals. We’ve never seen the priority and spotlight on school nutrition professionals the way it is today. America is seeing inside our cafeterias via curbs and buses. America is seeing how school nutrition professionals work tirelessly to feed their communities. I think this is our moment.

The pandemic has been a disruptor in many ways. Are there changes that will ultimately be good for school meal programs?

Policymakers opened up free school meals to everyone; it was necessary to manage the different learning situations in districts, but school nutrition professionals have known for *decades* that feeding everyone free school meals would remove the stigma placed on children who can’t afford to bring lunch. The pandemic has leveled the playing field. For in-person and remote learners alike, access to school meals has never been simpler. I hope we can continue to leverage the value of free

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meals access to all students after the pandemic is over.

I also see innovations being made in how meals are prepared and provided, particularly through vending and grab 'n' go. While reduced contact was a safety practice necessary to minimize the potential spread of the virus, it's been wonderful for students to have so many access points to meals. I expect those trends to continue.

What are some of the greatest challenges SNA faces in representing the school nutrition profession?



Rebecca Polson, CC, SNS
Culinary Supervisor, Minneapolis
Public Schools, Minnesota

What is it about the legacy of school nutrition that inspires your involvement?

The National School Lunch Program was established to feed malnourished children, create jobs and help farmers in financial crisis—and that's what we're doing today throughout this pandemic. History is repeating itself. The hard work, from those at every level, to feed communities inspires me to really work to change the negative stigma applied to our meals and our profession. Once life gets back to normal, I hope the students who didn't eat with us pre-COVID, but do now, will continue to do so.

One challenge comes in identifying the most appropriate way to leverage the "lunch lady" legacy. We are caring, kind and strong. We're not just cooking up a stew for the students. There is truth in the archetypal caretaker who connects with the children who walk in and out of our cafeterias every day. In providing for some of students' most basic needs, I take a lot of pride in being a lunch lady. We need to hold one another up for that, while also educating each other.

Another challenge? It pains me how many school nutrition professionals do not understand

the basic legislative process and how it has a *direct* impact on our daily work. SNA needs to provide more than the annual "How a Bill Becomes a Law" video. We need to provide in-depth policy and political outreach training to members.

What excites you the most about the future of school nutrition?

Greater use of local, fresh ingredients! This is the most exciting frontier for school nutrition professionals. We can put resources back into our local economies and sustain meal programs that will nourish all learners daily.

Are there any individual pioneers who serve as inspiration?

One of my favorite things about school nutrition is that everyone wants to help you succeed. We are all in this together, with the same shared goal: feeding the kids. This kind of camaraderie just doesn't exist in for-profit foodservice segments.

I am grateful to Cathy Powers, who, as co-chair of the Culinary Institute of America's Healthy Kids Collaborative (HKC), is my biggest support and cheerleader, after my mother! HKC unites school nutrition professionals, school chefs, suppliers and other stakeholders—including changemakers like Dayle Hayes, Ann Cooper and Bertrand Weber (who I now get to call friend, mentor and boss!)—to create and promote healthier, culinary-driven meals for kids. Each December, after the HKC annual meeting (virtual in 2020!), I leave feeling so motivated to keep pushing forward.

How should the profession grow to stay relevant? What are some of the greatest challenges to overcome?

We have some convincing of the world that this is, in fact, a viable profession with opportunities for growth. I'm always searching out

professional development opportunities for our site-based staff that are like the amazing ones I've been able to attend. These events help to create less turnover and more staff buy-in. Unfortunately, it's just not feasible for districts to afford the travel and conference expenses for all staff. But the virtual trainings that have come out of the pandemic have been fantastic.

I also believe there is too much red tape, hoops to jump and bureaucracy in child nutrition. The pandemic has shown how we need to simplify some of the rules and regulations—and I mean *simplify*, not roll back.

What excites you about the future of this profession?

I'm so excited to see more and more chefs joining school nutrition. I'm also excited that I just attended a school nutrition event where the main topics were sustainability, plant-forward recipes and cultural appropriation of foods and menus. Our conversations are getting deeper, more meaningful and more inclusive of all our students. I can't wait to see everyone in Chicago at SNA's Annual National Conference in July! (#ChicagoorBust) Congratulations on 75 years, SNA! **SN**

CELEBRATING 75 YEARS OF DEDICATION

SCHOOL NUTRITION ASSOCIATION



Mary Begalle, SNS
Consultant
Chaska, Minnesota

You've seen child nutrition through multiple lenses: as an operator, a state agency director, an industry rep. Name some of its defining moments. For a long period, programs enjoyed steady growth, but that was interrupted in 1981 after legislation cut 25% of the federal funding for school meals. The financial distress that followed led to rapid growth of a la carte programs to generate revenue needed to subsidize nutrition programs. It also caused local school boards to turn to contract management companies for relief. It took years for local child nutrition programs to recover financially.

In recognition of the 75th year of school meal programs and the School Nutrition Association (SNA), *School Nutrition* asked three leaders—a **pioneering trailblazer**, a **current champion** and a **rising star**—to reflect on the historic legacy and future promise of the School nutrition profession.

Another turning point was in the late 1980s, when a coalition of child nutrition professionals and hunger advocacy groups promoted the School Breakfast Program—working to connect breakfast participation and learning. Research, including Minnesota's Energizing the Classroom breakfast study, demonstrated that link and legitimized and advanced our profession in the eyes of other stakeholders.

The Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 (HHFKA) went the furthest in changing the meal pattern and establishing nutrition standards. While many of us believe these standards went too far, the legislation did create the Community Eligibility Provision that advanced school meals closer toward universal.

How about in SNA's history? What stands out for you?

I think one of the most notable achievements happened during the Welfare Reform era in Congress in the mid-'90s. Faced with a bill that would change school meals from a federal entitlement program to block grants made to states, SNA

leveraged the power of their diverse membership to protect the entitlement status of the programs. The drama unfolded on live television as legislators got "school lunched" by SNA members. What a lesson in grassroots democracy to see citizens bend the will of Congress!

What keeps you optimistic about the future of school nutrition?

I am optimistic about the emphasis on social emotional learning in education. If that trend continues to grow and strengthen, school nutrition professionals will take their place at the table with school administrators and other education leaders. I also hope that the waivers granted this year to allow all children to eat free meals will demonstrate the need for universal school meals to fight childhood hunger and improve educational outcomes.

I have such gratitude to this profession for giving me a wonderful, fulfilling career. SNA provided me with the community I needed to be successful. Looking back, I would not change a thing.



Angela Olige
Assistant Commissioner
Texas Department of Agriculture

What strikes you as a defining moment in the history of the school nutrition profession?

I am not sure there is *one* defining moment, as the programs continue to evolve to meet the needs of the students we serve. That said, the passage of HHFKA was monumental. It didn't come about in a vacuum, but from public perception, aided by a celebrity voice across the "pond" [aka the Atlantic Ocean] that painted school meals as *the* culprit for childhood obesity.

The pandemic has been a disruptor in many ways. Are there changes that will ultimately be good for school meal programs?

They say necessity is the mother of all invention, and we are now responding to situations and circumstances never before imagined. Program operators are showcasing their creativity and ingenuity in adjusting their approach to resource utilization and management, menu development and meal accessibility. The benefits

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of this new way of thinking will carry on long past the end of the pandemic. In addition, it's important to recognize that the current regulatory flexibilities are challenging fundamental constructs of school nutrition. Seeing things from a new perspective invites a fresh approach to why we do what we do and what is needed to ensure program sustainability.

Through all the changes we are navigating, I hope we remain mindful that good intentions and

quick solutions have a lasting impact and, sometimes, unintended consequences. Let's keep the true mission of the programs in mind as we recognize sustainable solutions that help future generations while maintaining high integrity.

What are some of the greatest challenges faced by SNA and its state affiliates?

The greatest challenge *any* association faces is separating the facts of a circumstance, challenge, hurdle

or complaint from the feelings they create. When we have a firm grasp on the truth the facts represent, we can advocate for and endeavor to implement solutions that deal with the root problems and not just the symptoms.

What gives you excitement about the future of school nutrition?

The belief and hope that there will always be people who want to help those who need assistance.



Tiffany McCleese, DTR, SNS

Child Nutrition Coordinator
West Clermont Local School
District, Ohio

What is it about the legacy of school nutrition that inspires your involvement?

I'm most happy when I'm helping others, and involvement in SNA is a way I'm able to do that. It also has helped me build connections, provided me with training and experiences I wouldn't find elsewhere and reinforced my desire and drive to serve to the best of my capabilities.

An SNA membership slogan from a few years ago, "Alone we whisper, together we shout," is something I believe in whole-heartedly, and I've borrowed the quote when talking with others about the importance of a shared vision and mission for school nutrition. I've never experienced a greater sense of "team" in any other profession.

Are there any individual pioneers who serve as inspiration?

Absolutely! I derive inspiration from many other K-12 program operators, industry partners, college/university directors and restaurant owners. I'm always asking myself, "How can I use this idea or innovation to improve services in *my* district?" From current and future foodservice trends (including robotics), I'm looking at where our kids are going next so I can see what they'll experience when they get there. This helps me understand I need to prepare them to meet the future. I've also been blessed with multiple role models and mentors along the way.

Looking to the future, how should the profession grow to stay relevant?

It's all about doing your homework, knowing what's trending (and what's not), being aware of what you can and cannot bring to your district, gathering resources, networking, focusing on food presentation, controlling the message and educating our families. Get out of your comfort zone. Growth is necessary for improvement, but it's seldom comfortable. If you *do* feel comfortable, it may be time to shake things up a bit. You can't let a fear of failure keep you from trying new things.

Some of our greatest challenges will be in how well—and how passionately—we communicate with one another and outside stakeholders. But if we can continue to be creative in our efforts and passionate in our communications, the sky truly will be the limit. I know we'll achieve what we set out to achieve.

What excites you about the opportunities ahead?

When something I've tried works to our advantage, it's easily one of the best feelings in the world! To know you've done or created something that will help the children and families we serve? Priceless. Even when it doesn't work the way I had envisioned, it's still a win. I've learned from the experience and will keep trying until we find what *does* work.

We are strongest when we are united, and I've seen more people come together in the last year than ever before—all with one mind and one accord to meet one primary goal: to make things better for one another and to help those in need. I am honored to be part of an Association that's composed of so many amazing people. Our future, as an Association, is indeed bright, with so many wonderful, collaborative efforts taking place daily. **SN**

CELEBRATING 75 YEARS OF DEDICATION SCHOOL NUTRITION ASSOCIATION



Barry Sackin, SNS
Consultant
Murrieta, California

You've seen child nutrition through multiple lenses over your 40-year career as an operator, SNA staffer, advocacy expert and consultant. Name some of its defining moments. After the 1980-81 federal budget cuts that forced schools to identify new revenue streams, block grants (an idea that originated in the Reagan years) were raised again by Congress in the mid-90s. SNA and its allies eventually "school-lunched" Congress, largely thanks to the efforts of the incomparable Gene White. This helped cement our role as *the* voice of child nutrition.

There were the local wellness policy provisions of the 2004 CN Reauthorization that underscored

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the fact that the school cafeteria is part of the whole school environment and that child health is a shared responsibility across campus. Plus, the seismic changes of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act (HHFKA) and, most recently, the recognition of school lunch heroes during the pandemic.

You've played several different roles in shaping both the profession and SNA. Which achievements give you the greatest pride?

First is the work my team and I did to grow the school meal program in Anaheim, Calif., during my seven years as Director of Nutrition Services. I'm also very proud of my advocacy work at SNA, especially with the 2004 CN Reauthorization, which included two dozen changes ranging from eliminating cost accounting for breakfast (something only an operator would consider) to supporting local school wellness policies. Lastly, it's been important for me to help mentor many school foodservice professionals through training, writing and presenting. It gives me great pleasure when someone tells me that something I presented, perhaps years before, made them better at their jobs.

Looking forward, what are some of the greatest challenges school nutrition will face—and what keeps you hopeful? There are two issues that loom large. First is the ever-constant funding dilemma. It has always amazed me that we are expected to serve incredible, nutritious meals for less than the price of a cup of Starbucks coffee. And yet school nutrition makes it happen.

The second is finding the balance between good nutrition and economic reality. School meals will be harder and harder to produce with the current reimbursement formula and meal prices. The third sodium target is, by USDA's own admission, unattainable, setting us up for failure. And school cafeterias have been burdened with changing kids'-eating behaviors to healthier patterns while competing against the mass marketing of less-healthy options.

But I'm excited by the new wave of professionals coming to our segment. I see so much creativity and passion in these younger people. People like me have great institutional memory that should not be lost, but it is the fresh look that the next generation brings that will move our programs forward.



Jose Quiñones
National School Business
Development Manager
J.T.M. Food Group

What strikes you as a defining moment in the history of the school nutrition profession?

It's hard to imagine one that will be more memorable than when the pandemic hit! Our "lunch ladies" were immediately recognized by

the media across the country as first-responders to the crisis. They were called "heroes," and it was about time! With almost no notice, they developed plans to provide meals when schools were closed, ensuring food security, along with emotional support, for the hungry, scared and lonely children in their communities.

SNA demonstrated the importance of having a strong, robust or-

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ganization of different stakeholders that share a common goal. From the very beginning, it's been an incredible communication and information resource, and it kept developing new ways to help us share ideas and learn from one another. As the SNA "bus" rolled on across the months, we were all waiting at every "stop" to get the information and instruction the organization delivered.

The pandemic certainly has been a disruptor in many ways. Are there changes that will carry on into a new normal?

Definitely. There has been such a huge communication need across the entire supply chain. It wasn't just about salespeople selling to directors who create menus. We faced a common urgency to solve new and unforeseen challenges. I think

relationships between operators and vendors will be even stronger going forward.

Companies also had to take a hard look at their product portfolio and reduce variety to make it more manageable. Those days where every school district had unique specifications for a burger are over. Everyone has discovered that there's no real need to have 25 different burger variations. The new normal is going to be about meeting in the middle, finding out which products are the most popular across the country—and those will be ones that all kids will love, manufacturers will produce and distributors will stock.

What are among the significant challenges and opportunities school nutrition will face in the coming years?

Throughout the pandemic, we learned just how dependent we are on the decisions of others who are often uninformed about school meal programs. We need to make sure that superintendents, lawmakers at every level and different stakeholders in the supply chain understand that meals do not just appear by magic. We need to step up how we educate and engage all the other entities that have influence and authority over the school meal business, so that we can react faster and deliver results in a much more efficient manner.

But this is also what is exciting about the future. We are working together to make this program easier to manage, to improve communication and to provide restaurant-quality meals to kids every single day of the week.



Dalla Emerson

Director of Food Service Operations
Bowling Green Independent School
District, Kentucky

What is it about the legacy of school nutrition that inspires your engagement?

I remember my new director training conducted by the state agency. It included a video of the history of school meal programs. I knew right away that I was hooked and in the right place at the right time. We have a direct impact on our nation's future!

Are there any individual mentors who have helped you?

With just three years as a school nutrition director, I'm in my infancy in this profession. I am still so new to this world! That said, I have to give it up for the state agency teams who support school nutrition. They are hands-on in every area. Both the Kentucky Department of Education and Kentucky Department of Agriculture work hard at the difficult task of helping operators understand—and follow—the many regulations that make meal service possible.

Looking to the future, how can school meals stay relevant?

I'm a firm believer that the first step is to catch a customer's eye and their sense of smell. Then, you *keep* them through the quality and consistency of your menu items. Fortunately, our industry partners are smart and understand that students have vast culinary appetites that are constantly evolving. Vendors are so important in presenting us with new and exciting menu trends that are taking hold in different regions. Their continued involvement and innovation is what

will help keep this business—and the association—relevant.

What excites you about the opportunities ahead?

The greatest opportunity to me and others who are brand new is being able to capitalize on the terrific work that has been done by our predecessors. I came into a district that was ready to grow to the next level of service. I merely had to engage my students, families and district staff to hear about their needs and wants. Our customer base is a treasure trove for inspiring our team to make a lasting impact. Meaningful conversations with them—both positive and negative—are so important for future growth.

Directors working in smaller districts may not have the resources or support to think outside the box, and they need a lifeline. SNA is one such lifeline. Thank you for striving to be a true partner and friend to those of us in the field, so we can do what we love and take care of our communities. **SN**

CELEBRATING 75 YEARS OF DEDICATION SCHOOL NUTRITION ASSOCIATION



Karen Johnson, SNS
SNA President 2004-05

What comes to mind as a historic turning point for SNA?

It has to be when we changed our name from the American School Food Service Association (ASFSA) to the School Nutrition Association (SNA). We, the members, knew who we were, but we had never looked from the outside in—what did our name mean to others in our community? We wanted the public to know that we didn't just serve food—there was so much more to our story! The minute our organization became "SNA," our Headquarters

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staff team reported that we were on the right track—the phones were ringing off the hook in support! It was a bright day for our Association.

What are your thoughts on the legacy this past pandemic year will leave on this profession?

Those who served meals and reached out to their communities will be remembered for never giving up when it came to feeding children during the crisis. So many programs took to social and traditional media to announce, "We are here for the children." Whether it was hot, rainy, cold or windy, they were outside the schools, ready to serve. I am so in awe of all of you!

What do you see as among the most significant challenges that school nutrition professionals will face in the coming years?

Participation, commodities, adequate staffing, the rising cost of food and supplies and employee training. These have been and always will be challenges in school meal programs;

it's called "doing business." One way to overcome most of these challenges is to serve meals to all students at no cost—it's the right thing to do. Those of you on the front lines need to keep speaking up and telling the stories of the children you see every day.

What excites you the most about the future of school nutrition?

We need to keep reaching out and recruiting new members. The more voices we have, the more stories we share, the more we will continue to raise the level of support and respect from our communities, our states and Washington. SNA's history is filled with pioneers who just would not give up, would not take 'no' for an answer. We need to regain that same level of respect from Capitol Hill. Plus, SNA is a place to make lifelong friends who understand your work and can provide guidance when you need it. I always said I had the best job in the world. School nutrition programs rock!



Aleshia Hall-Campbell, PhD, MPH
Executive Director
Institute of Child Nutrition

What strikes you as a defining moment in the history of the school nutrition profession?

My perspective comes from ICN's mission and work to advance the continuous improvement of child nutrition programs. So for me, it was the Professional Standards requirement. Many other professionals—physicians, attorneys, teachers, engineers, etc.—are required to participate in annual professional development. Ensuring that school nutrition staff have the latest information, knowledge and skills to perform their jobs successfully is a good thing for the field.

What are your thoughts on the legacy of the pandemic on school nutrition?

Without a shadow of a doubt, the pandemic illustrated that school nutrition professionals are unsung heroes in their schools and communities. Their passion, dedication and the speed with which they were able to pivot was amazing to witness. We have a saying at ICN that a cape is an apron turned backward. We applaud and thank everyone for their hard work.

The pandemic forced everyone to think outside the box and become innovative. We witnessed so much

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ingenuity, including improvements in online communications and training. At the Institute, virtual meetings and trainings will become a standard option.

What do you see as top among the challenges this profession will face in coming years?

I think will be the loss of seasoned directors. Burnout and fatigue from the pandemic added to retirement eligibility may prompt many directors to leave in the coming years. Ensuring that the next level of staff are equipped to step into these roles will

be critical. It will also be important to recruit college students in an effort to form a pipeline of new school nutrition professionals.

What do you see as the primary role of ICN going forward, and what excites you about the future?

We will be identifying innovative training techniques and platforms to provide our users with new experiences. We will continue to research best practices and strategies to incorporate into training curriculums and develop interactive programs that increase knowledge and skills.

We also will continue to provide opportunities for SNA members to earn continuing education credits toward the SNA Certificate and offer free trainings at SNA state affiliate conferences.

I'm always excited by the passion and energy that exists in school nutrition. I believe it's time for this profession to be recognized as a foundational construct in whole child development. I'm hopeful that school administrators will gain new respect for school meals and the role they play in academic achievement and student well-being.



**Stefanie Dove,
MBA, RDN, SNS**

K-12 Well-being & Regulatory
Business Partner
Kellogg Company

What is it about the legacy of school nutrition that inspires your engagement?

As a registered dietitian, I truly understand the toll that malnutrition and hunger can take on students, which makes my work in school nutrition even more important. Working in an industry where you know, every day, that when you walk away from your desk, you have made a positive impact on the well-being of children across the country is one of the best feelings!

I am excited to see the narrative of school meals changing. People are so blown away when they hear that not only do school nutrition pro-

fessionals serve millions of meals, they also promote wellness through nutrition education, farm-to-school programming and marketing.

Are there any individual mentors who helped you in your journey?

I was fortunate to have Dr. Becky Domokos-Bays, RD, SNS, as my director in my first professional role in school nutrition. She believed in the power of storytelling and marketing to change the school nutrition narrative. Although I was a new dietitian and new to school nutrition, I had 10 years of marketing experience in the fashion industry. She valued my skills when she hired me and encouraged my voice as a young professional with new ideas and perspectives.

The best piece of advice she gave me was to get comfortable advocating for school meals, because if voices are not heard, changes cannot be made. I followed her lead and grew in my ability to share the stories of school nutrition.

Becky also strongly believed in training your team not only to excel in their own roles but to be empowered to do *your* role, as well. I carried forward this mindset in precepting dietetic interns. (I know how instrumental my school nutrition rotation

was in making *me* fall in love with this profession—thanks, Andrea Early!) It's my goal to always show future dietitians they can find a diverse career path in child nutrition.

What are the greatest opportunities for those like you who are closer to the beginning of their leadership journey than the end?

They are endless! My motto is "If you can dream it, you can achieve it." Don't box yourself into a particular title. If there is a role your program doesn't have but truly needs, put in the work and time to advocate for creating that position for yourself. Never underestimate the value of transferable skills—assess how they can be used in new responsibilities. If there are new skills you want to learn, find a mentor to help you.

What excites you about the future of school nutrition?

I love change and I love how school nutrition is always evolving. I love being able to leverage my experience in school district operations to my new role in industry, creating ways to develop new programming and concepts to distribute to Kellogg's K-12 customers nationwide. **SN**

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Sharlene Wong, SNS

Program Administrator, Hawaii
Child Nutrition Programs

What are some of the historic turning points you've witnessed in the last 30 years?

There's the Healthy Meals for Healthy Americans Act (1994), the introduction of Team Nutrition (1995), proposals by Congress to block grant school meal programs (1995), the charter of the School Nutrition Specialist credentialing program (1997-98), the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act (2010), Chefs Move to School initiative (2010) and, of course, the pandemic (2020-21). Together, these represent a testament to the resilience, flexibility,

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intelligence, talent, commitment and compassion of school meal providers working for the health and well-being of children and families.

What kind of legacy will this past year leave on this profession?

The one aspect that I hope will carry on as a new “normal” is universal access to free meals. Everywhere you look—from Orono, Maine, to Agana, Guam—school nutrition programs are providing much-needed meals for free. Many times this last year, I've thought of the late Frank Harris, from Connecticut. At every SNA Legislative Action Conference, he would find a microphone and call for universal meals. It took a world-wide pandemic to take this big step forward. It is my deepest wish that the Biden Administration fulfills Frank's dream and that universal meals will be the new norm even after the pandemic ends.

What do you see as among the most significant challenges that school nutrition professionals will face in the coming years?

We will need to meet the new *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*, provide more weekend meal service, expand food sustainability within communities, develop more school gardens specifically for cafeteria programs and transition to 100% ecological packaging for meals. Conquering these challenges will improve children's well-being, as well as be good for the planet.

How should SNA and its state affiliates evolve to stay relevant?

Why mess with perfection? Like schools, SNA and the states adapted this last year, continuing to be a vital resource to their members. That is a tribute to our volunteer leaders and to staff at SNA Headquarters. I do hope that our associations will be able to start providing a hybrid of teleconferences and in-person meetings. That will certainly relieve some of the financial burdens associated with conference participation, expanding training options to more members. It is quite an exciting and historic time to be in this profession!



Dayle Hayes, MS, RD

Longtime “Cheerleader” for School
Meal Excellence

What strikes you as some of the defining turning points in school meal program history?

The first is the Child Nutrition Act of 1966, which authorized a pilot for school breakfast—it was the first legislation that said there's more need here than what can be filled by school lunch. Thirty years later, school meal patterns began being tied to the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*. In 2007, the farm-to-school movement really took root. And, of course, there's the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act. It's been

an evolution, with each milestone building on many others that came before. Each was historic and important to where we find ourselves today.

What kind of legacy will the pandemic have on school meals?

Before the pandemic, most families had limited engagement with the school meals program, despite the efforts of school nutrition professionals to develop closer connections. Now, instead of sending kids alone to the school “restaurant,” families are going together through

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the “drive-thru” to pick up meals and meal kits. It has created an exciting new relationship between school meals and meals at home.

This connection and the whole experience of feeding beyond the cafeteria has helped to change the calculus for providing healthy school meals for all. Up until now, it's been mainly the profession that has advocated for universal meals, but the headlines spotlighting *how* kids have been served through the crisis has increased attention on the value of school meals. I think there's now a stronger possibility that Congress can see its way clear to funding universal free meals.

The piece that's gotten a little lost in all the attention on the *essential* nature of school meals is the connection between nutritious food and academics. Few have been tying those pieces together. But

wherever students are *learning*, they need school meals.

What challenges will this profession face in coming years?

I worry about polarization around food philosophies. I'm all for plant-forward, but there are some advocates that really want to institute their values on school meals. I think there could be a lot of tension around that, creating a challenge to ensuring healthy school meals maintain a middle ground. Similarly, I'm concerned about the potential friction between the big business opportunities that school meals present to industry (with no disrespect to my friends there) and the focus on local, sustainable, community-based interests.

What excites you about the future of school nutrition?

A spirit of culinary infusion is at the top of my list. School chefs are certainly a part of that, but it's more about the energy around scratch cooking. It circles back to my thoughts about how the pandemic changed interactions with families, upping their culinary knowledge and expectations through meal kits, family dinners, recipe and menu suggestions, culinary demo videos and more.

I'm also excited about the potential for greater nutrition education—beyond activity sheets. If kids really do get used to eating fruits and vegetables in school, that will be a game-changer for how America eats. In addition, the supply chain disruptions of the pandemic really encouraged operators to look in new directions, and I think we'll see increased connections to local, sustainable food sources.



Adam Russo

Director of School Food and Nutrition Services
Prince William County (Va.) Schools

What and who inspires your professional engagement?

School meal programs were created to nourish babies so they are fit to learn and thrive—what is more rewarding than that?! Helen Phillips, 2011-12 SNA President, gave this restaurant brat a shot in a profession he never knew existed. Her passion for meeting the needs of the under-served and her business-like approach to school meal operations set the bar extremely high.

Where can and should the profession grow to stay relevant?

I believe school nutrition programs should be administered by the Department of Education, not USDA. We are an education intervention program, not a “feeding” program—and meals should be free for all children, with lunch periods that are at least 45 minutes, so that scholars can truly learn healthy habits. I also would like to see the establishment of a K-12 Food Czar to take on the responsibility to standardize more of our operations for increased efficiencies.

What excites you about the opportunities in this profession?

The rate of growth in our programs and the shifting of cultures is *extremely* exciting. “Lunch ladies and gentlemen” are amazing, but we aren't the tropes of our parents' generation. Our teams today are comprised of foodservice professionals who just happen to work in restaurants that lease space inside

schools. So, what excites me most is the idea of doing more for more. Every single day, I want to do the best for all I serve and work to make our program a model so that scholars across the country may receive the same exceptional services we provide in Prince William County.

Are there other reflections you want to share about this anniversary?

I want to thank *all* of the school lunch heroes who show amazing dedication to our babies—the future of our country! Every day, before a bus picks up a single scholar, the lights are on in our kitchens and there are thousands of passionate, highly skilled professionals at work to ensure that every child feels cared for. I am so proud and beyond humbled to be a part of a profession that has had a positive impact on generations. For 75 years, these programs have provided an education intervention to ensure that children are hungry to *learn*, rather than being just plain hungry. **SN**

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Katie Wilson, PhD, SNS

Executive Director, Urban School Food Alliance
SNA President 2008-09

You've played different roles in shaping the school nutrition profession, including as Executive Director of the Institute of Child Nutrition and as Deputy Undersecretary at USDA. Which accomplishments are most meaningful?

My proudest achievement is demonstrating that a small, rural school nutrition program can be as innovative and successful as any other across the country—if the district hires a director who is a trained professional. I came to Wisconsin's West Salem School District with a master's degree and a five-year strategic plan centered on employee training.

I'm so tired of hearing that small districts can't innovate or even manage the requirements. Yes, they can!

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And when they do, students embrace the program. I remember a school board meeting to decide whether to build a new kitchen/cafeteria or a swimming pool. All of the cooks and I attended—and so did the kids, who stood up and said, "We love school meals, and we need a better facility."

What are some of the defining milestones in our history?

One was our fight against block grants in the mid-1990s. That was huge! SNA Past President and legendary advocate Gene White came to D.C. for six months to lead our fight. We went up against then-Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich, who was a very powerful politician—and we won. It showed what grassroots advocacy could do, building on a legacy that stretched back to when the federal program was established. This was why it was so important for the Association to have moved its headquarters from Colorado to Washington in 1990. We needed a presence in the nation's capital.

Another key milestone was the Iowa State University doctoral program designed specifically for school nutrition professionals. Earning a PhD that reflects our area of expertise opened doors for so many of us. It also alerted our peers with *other*

post-graduate degrees, such as a master's in business administration or a doctorate in education, to promote their credentials. We are highly educated professionals, and we demand respect.

What worries and excites you about the future?

I worry about what public education will look like and how trends toward home-schooling, pop-up education centers, charter schools and so on will affect school nutrition. I fear the biggest challenge will be literally hanging on to school nutrition. Most of us were not at the table when decisions were made last year about learning approaches, and serving remotely is not sustainable. We still have so much work to do to get people to understand that school meals are an essential part of the school experience for *all* children.

That said, I'm hopeful about our future, because school nutrition professionals *did* step up when schools closed—and they didn't have to. There were no regulations that required what they did, yet they took care of their communities, showing their professionalism and commitment. These people are real and true American heroes.



Lynn Harvey, EdD, RDN, SNS

Chief, School Nutrition Services
North Carolina Department of Public Instruction
SNA President 2017-18

What strikes you as a defining turning point in SNA's history?
Becoming the School Nutrition

Association after 50+ years as the American School Food Service Association was a game-changer in so many ways. It signaled, in my opinion, the embracing of nutrition as a science and the importance of what we do in the school environment. The name change said school meals are critical for supporting

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children's optimal growth and well-being, and it gave school nutrition professionals a credibility that was needed. Words matter.

What will be the pandemic's legacy on school nutrition?

With the rates of childhood hunger we were facing in North Carolina when schools closed, the first thought by leaders was about getting school meals to students at home, because we could not afford to have a secondary public health crisis on top of COVID. We *needed* this program to succeed, and the school nutrition community stepped up.

I think there's always been recognition that school meals are dependable and meaningful, but that reliability had become some-

what taken for granted. The crisis was a wake-up call that school meal programs are *essential* to children's health, their social-emotional learning and their ability to thrive. And it was a reminder that the trust that district administrators had in their school nutrition teams to get the job done was not misplaced. There is a new level of respect for these programs and these professionals.

What do you see in your school nutrition crystal ball?

I see a lot of exciting opportunities, which will be challenges, too. We're going to have to do even more to provide a student-focused approach to school meals, ensuring unique and inviting dining experiences in a variety of settings to accommo-

date the needs and preferences of students.

Just as there is going to be a greater focus on individualized learning for students, the same model will be necessary for school meals. We're going to have to flex to our customers. I see students ordering and picking up meals when and where they want. I see more satellite dining options on campus, including food trucks. I see strong school breakfast programs—second chance breakfast will be huge! It's all going to require some stretch on our part to look beyond the traditional ways of doing business, but I see an opportunity to transform an amazing program into something even more phenomenal!



Keba Laird, MBA, RDN, SNS

Child Nutrition Supervisor II
Clinton (Miss.) Public
School District

What is it about school nutrition that inspires your engagement?

From its inception, SNA has advanced the availability, quality and acceptance of school nutrition programs. Its vision aligns with my personal career goal: to ensure that all children have access to healthful school meals and nutrition education in a supportive environment that heightens student learning.

I'm also inspired by how SNA invests in its members to help them grow. As a grateful recipient of a Professional Development Scholarship, I want to pay it forward by donating

to the School Nutrition Foundation so that others have *their* opportunity to pursue learning goals. I also want to help those coming up the ranks after me. As a dietetic internship preceptor, I have the awesome opportunity to shape minds, whet appetites and guide the way for future dietetic students considering a school nutrition career path.

How should the profession grow to stay relevant?

Diversity, inclusion, innovation and advocacy will help keep this profession and SNA relevant to me and other emerging leaders. We must continue to emphasize inclusion as we seek to recruit top talent who will bring innovative ideas and different perspectives that can enhance student participation in school meals.

I also believe we must continue to nurture relationships with community partners and legislators who support school nutrition. SNA has been a trusted voice that mobilizes its troops to advocate for national policies that promote coordinated school health in a fiscally responsible manner. We could not have secured the federal waivers for free

school meals through this pandemic without SNA's efforts. We need the Association to continue its outstanding work.

What excites you about the future?

There are so many unique opportunities for dietitians in school nutrition! We can help meet the demand for innovative menu concepts, expansion of farm-to-school programs and promotion of nutrition education from the cafeteria to the classroom. The possibilities are endless! I have 21 years as a registered dietitian, working in foodservice management, medical nutrition therapy, corporate worksite wellness and health coaching. Of them all, I am most excited about my work in school nutrition. It's my calling!

Other thoughts on our 75th?

Child nutrition professionals all over the USA are better at our craft because of SNA. Let's all support the efforts of our Association by encouraging others to join as members and to make a donation to the School Nutrition Foundation. Both are investments that will catapult us to new heights. **SN**