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WORKING THROUGH IT

COVID-19 creates
new staffing challenges for
school nutrition operations,
but teams continue to rally.

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*A Special Digital
Supplement to
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Ongoing Coverage
of the COVID-19
Pandemic*

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BY PENNY McLAREN

WORKING THROUGH IT

COVID-19 creates new staffing challenges for school nutrition operations, but teams continue to rally.



Bonnie McClain is a foodservice employee who shows remarkable fortitude—the kind that most school nutrition veterans tend to display. At Bridgeton (N.J.) Public Schools, she holds the record for the longest-serving school nutrition employee, ever, working in the school meals operation for 43 years. McClain is 84 years old.

Bridgeton Foodservice Director Warren DeShields has himself been with the district for 21 years, and in that time, he has known McClain to have missed only *one day* of work. Her nickname is “Fast Hands McClain,” he says. “When she is here, she outworks *everyone*.” It seemed nothing could stop her service to kids—until COVID-19. Staying safe in the pandemic means McClain needs to keep safe at home. And

that means she’s staying away from Bridgeton’s cafeterias and kitchens.

DeShields is proud of *all* his team members and the work they do. “I applaud and commend them,” he says, singling out McClain as an example of the kind of dedication and loyalty that you *often* find in the K-12 foodservice segment. District directors across the country likely can name



employees like her in their own operations. The good employees you love are the foundation of school nutrition operations. They can and do work through a wide range of crazy conditions to feed kids. *Without* them, well, nothing seems possible!

Who could have imagined there would be a time when good cafeteria team members stayed away from the jobs they love? Of course, there's little about these days that is predictable. Indeed, never has a school year started with so much uncertainty about how it is going to unfold. *School Nutrition* spoke with eight district directors about the staffing struggles they are facing right now after six months of closed cafeterias amid virtual learning. As with all aspects of this foodservice segment, every district has a different story to tell, but with an underlying message that is the same: Frontline employees are the heart of school meal programs, and although COVID-19 has increased their burdens, most remain resilient and committed.

THE NET-NET

We dive deeper into the specifics of each district's current meal service profile and consequential staffing challenges beginning on page 6, but let's begin with an overview of who's up, who's down and how the school meal workplace is, well....working these days.

In **Bridgeton (N.J.) Public Schools**, the foodservice operation has reached the date when 10-month employee contracts kick in and everyone is back to work. The challenge, DeShields reports, is: "We have more employees than we have work for." With the district currently doing 100% virtual learning, curbside pickup is two days each week, with same-day meal prep. The other three days? They've been focused on training. In mid-October, the district plans to bring 25% of students back into the schools, so DeShields and his team are making plans to transition to classroom meal service, while still maintaining evening curbside pickup at half of the schools. ("It's confusing! My assistant director and I are



constantly reminding each other of the day's plan," confesses DeShields.)

A large a la carte business used to be the budget backbone for the school foodservice operation at **Prior Lake-Savage Area (Minn.) Schools** (page 7). That service is suspended, for now, along with the revenue that went with it. The team is also adjusting to the changed production model that now emphasizes an assembly line approach. Recalculating the right number of staff for the most efficient response to the changes is a real dilemma for Child Nutrition Director Emily Malone. "Staffing is the most difficult challenge," says Malone. "It's pretty tough." On one hand, she wants to fill current openings in anticipation of expanded in-school learning in the weeks and months to come. But on the other hand, if virus outbreaks skyrocket and the district transitions back to all-virtual learning, with all-curbside meal service, then her program may have too many employees to support. But if the district pivots to bringing all kids back for the full school week, then she will have too few staff to get the job done.

Across the country in California, school nutrition employees are back to work and will stay on the payroll no matter what, according to the school budget passed by the state legislature and signed by the governor in July. Schools are prohibited from laying off classroom teachers and classified employees who work in nutrition, transportation or custodial services throughout SY2020-21. For Vivien Watts, Executive Director of Food and Nutrition, **Alhambra (Calif.) Unified School District** (page 8) this means she has roughly 25% of employees who are on the payroll, but not working. Meanwhile, "participation has dropped drastically," she reports.

South Lyon (Mich.) Community Schools (page 9) Foodservice Manager Cherie Myers-Trent understands the frustrations among her team, as everyone deals with continual shifts. "It is change, change, change," she says, with rising emphasis. She tries to be the voice of positivity, emphasizing the importance of keeping staff in the loop on the what and why of everything as a way to combat the anxiety of uncertainty. "Communication is hugely

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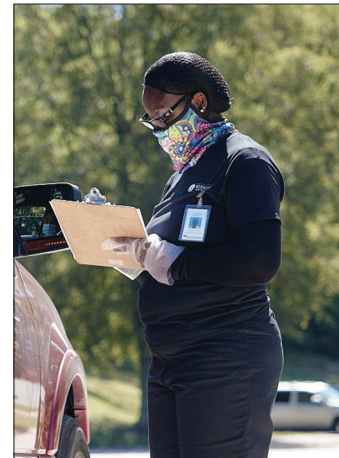
important,” Myers-Trent says. “Until things get back to normal, I don’t want to lose any of our staff. We have held on to all but one, so I am tickled to death that they have stayed on.”

In most communities, school nutrition professionals have been working without a break from spring emergency feeding through to summer meals and now the start of a new year. It has been a particular challenge for teams in smaller districts. For example, for the foodservice department at **New Castle (Ind.) Community Schools** (page 10), it has never been easy to find staff to meet the demands of serving breakfast and lunch. Today, it’s worse. Director of Foodservices Dee Orick has had virtually no applicants for vacant positions. “We have so many job openings,” Orick says, a tone of weariness in her voice. “We don’t have enough people. It is very difficult to get new employees.”

Across the state line in **Illinois**, Anna Wolk is Director of Foodservice for **Johnsburg School District 12** (page 11). “We’re tired,” she reports. “Too few staff is a very real

concern.” Wolk has always needed *every* employee to show up to work, because her sub list is thin. But she doesn’t guilt anyone to make that choice—just the opposite. “I make it clear to my team that family comes first, and if they need a day to tend to the needs of their family, it’s theirs. The district has been very good to me personally, as I’ve needed time to care for my disabled son. I feel it’s important to extend that same courtesy to my ladies.”

Larger school foodservice operations may have deeper budgets that can buffer some of the staffing expense, but the complexities of managing people are no less significant. In **Wake County (N.C.) Public Schools System** (page 12), Paula De Lucca, SNS, Senior Director, Child Nutrition Services, currently has staff working from just 47 of the 190-plus kitchens that are part of the district’s foodservice operation. All learning is virtual, for now, which means meals are distributed from those schools via curbside pickup or the foodservice-operated Big Bus Food Truck pop-ups brought to neighborhoods where families may face transportation needs.



(The district covers an area of 850 square miles!)

De Lucca heads a staff of 850, and everyone continues to work in her operation or in reassigned positions in the district's child care program. It is a complicated operation, because the district is applying more than 10 student calendars, from students following a multi-track year-round school schedule of several weeks in school, followed by certain weeks out. There are also traditional calendars that have been consolidated for initial reopening. By the end of October, the district may be moving back to some form of in-school learning, leaving De Lucca to work on staffing yet another mode of meal service.

Prince William County (Va.) Public Schools (page 13), also began SY2020-21 with a 100% virtual learning model at its 95 schools. At first, Adam Russo, Director of School Food and Nutrition Services, wondered what he would do to keep all his employees busy without cafeteria service. To his happy surprise, families have been showing up for the curbside meals. "We don't have a problem now. In fact, we need all hands on deck," says Russo. "We've become a well-oiled machine." He extended curbside service hours—giving families a lot of flexibility with a 12 to 6 p.m. pickup window. This also extends the number of staffing hours. Some employees work the outside service area, while others are indoors assembling meal kits. There are a limited number of students who are attending an in-school program, and they're receiving hot meals in the classroom.

COMMON COMMITMENT TO MEETING UNCOMMON CHALLENGES

Directors in these school districts, like their peers across the country, are cautiously calculating ways to efficiently manage the labor equation, as this ever-evolving school year unfolds. Like most businesses, labor costs are the biggest component of the school nutrition budget that's also being squeezed with new expenses (to-go packaging and transport equipment, for example), other rising costs and flat income.

When you have many good staff members you want to retain but don't have enough work, what can you do? Can you still meet the bottom line and keep good employees without revenue? And what about the flip side—those district leaders who are strained to find enough labor to manage multiple models of meal service simultaneously? None of the directors that SN interviewed pretend to have magic answers, but they shared their experiences for the small takeaways that might help another colleague, as well as the comfort of knowing that as school nutrition professionals, everyone is in this together. Their reflections may help you to face the road ahead, even when you can't see around the next curve. **SN**

Penny McLaren, a former editor of this publication, is a freelance writer based in Vancouver, Wash.

**Warren DeShields,
Director of Foodservices**

Enrollment: 6,200 at 8 schools
Average Daily Participation:
4,800 (pre-pandemic), 2,800 (current)
Free/Reduced: CEP (94%)
Employees: 74

Bridgeton Public Schools, Bridgeton, New Jersey



Bridgeton began the school year on September 8 with 100% virtual learning. Curbside meal service followed the two-days-per-week model set during the spring/summer distribution. A team of 74 employees (most working a 10-month contract) are very busy on Mondays and Thursdays, when they prep, pack and distribute several days' of breakfasts, lunches and dinners for curbside pickup.

On the other days of the week, DeShields keeps the team occupied with training, expecting that most will be able to meet their annual requirements in this period. He's using programs and modules available through SNA and the Institute of Child Nutrition.

In-school instruction will resume in mid-October, and DeShields's team will deliver meals to classrooms, rather than having students visit the cafeteria. "Our buildings are old," he explains. "We will not serve again in the cafeterias until a vaccine is found and proven effective, because there is no way to socially distance." Families will have the option to continue remote learning; at this point, 1,000 families have opted-in to this model, so curbside delivery, with a 5 to 7 p.m. evening pickup window, will continue.

DeShields recognizes the tedium of assembly-line meal packing. "It gets very, very boring to take a bag, drop in a

sandwich, a fruit," says DeShields. "But we have music playing in the background. And the staff has a passion for their jobs. They like each other and work together well, so that helps." The kitchens also stay busy, with staff engaged in scratch cooking. DeShields rotates team members so each can engage in the more active and gratifying responsibilities.

There are some additional meal service offerings. High school teachers and staff members can order adult meals. Plus, the foodservice staff preps and delivers some 160 meals to school sports teams each evening. Still, overall revenues are down. Participation was initially good last spring, but rates dropped with the introduction of the P-EBT program that provides extended SNAP benefits.

Still, DeShields remains confident that his operation will bounce back. And he notes that morale among his team has not flagged. "Everyone has taken on what they know is an essential role," he explains. "They have been positive. They jumped in and got the job done." In addition, he reports that the virus has yet to directly affect the school community, which boasts zero positive COVID tests. Parents are supportive, staff attendance is still high and kids are getting fed. "For the most part, employees appreciate working in foodservice," DeShields says. "I applaud and commend them. I am proud to be their leader."

Prior Lake-Savage Area Schools, Minnesota



This district, one of several in the Minneapolis/St. Paul metropolitan region, follows the state's back-to-school procedures, which are based on a "dial" established by the governor that establishes reopening stages and phases based on the numbers of COVID-19 cases in the area. Of course the dial is not strictly linear—it can move forward *and* backward throughout the school year, flipping the district from all-distance learning to in-person learning to a hybrid.

So much possibility. So few definitives. This presents a real dilemma for Malone. Last spring, when schools closed, many of her employees resigned or went on extended unpaid leave to care of their children. "A lot of employees are moms who have children in our schools," explains Malone.

Today, with some schools reopened to in-school learning, at least a few days each week, Malone is not sure whether to invite those employees back and fill their positions. "They want jobs where they can work while their children attend school. We love them and they love us." But even a hybrid model makes that staff scheduling tricky to accommodate. And what if the dial reverts back to all-virtual again later in the school year? Or if she leaves the positions vacant and the dial turns to all in-school learning, then the operation could be understaffed.

Malone and her team have been able to operate the curbside meal service with just 30% of normal staffing levels.

"We have gone from a traditional kitchen preparing meals to a production line," she mourns. "We used to be moving around a lot in the kitchens. Now we are just standing and bagging meals. We are worried about our back [health]. And we are exhausted. We are not used to doing foodservice this way."

In the current "home hybrid" model, students are divided into groups, coming to school two days: Mondays/Thursdays or Tuesdays/Fridays, and then everyone is home on Wednesdays. Some students will continue in a Distance Learning Academy, and they will be able to receive five days of meals once a week, on Wednesdays. During in-school days, students come to the cafeteria for meals. In preparation for reopening, Malone and a site assessment group visited each location to evaluate changes that were required to make cafeterias and kitchens as safe as possible for service and dining. In addition to *standing* six-feet apart, children have assigned seats that are similarly spaced, "mouth to mouth."

Self-serve salad and other merchandising areas are all out for now. Even meal trays, utensils and condiments are distributed to students by staff, along with menu components. Once the recipient of a federal sustainability award, the program now struggles to get away from foodservice disposables. It's another factor in their fluctuating morale. "Feelings have changed so many times," reports Malone. "We have been up and down."

Alhambra Unified School District, California



The Food and Nutrition Services department at Alhambra Unified School District is shorthanded right now. Not on paper, but in practice. Watts points to recent legislation that provides employees in a specific category with 80 hours paid leave for COVID-19-related reasons, which not only include illness/recovery within the family, but also in response to child-care challenges. Once the 80 hours are depleted, staff can use any time-off balance they are already carrying and when that's gone, they have 100 days of half-pay available.

"A lot of our employees are on that leave," reports Watts, estimating roughly one-quarter, putting her in a difficult position. She has insufficient staff to manage the workload, a hiring freeze that prohibits the filling vacancies and labor expenses not balanced by meal service revenues. "It is kind of like driving a car with three wheels. We are hoping they will return," she says of foodservice team members currently on leave, acknowledging that "some might retire and some might continue to stay home to take care of their kids."

The district administration is working with the labor union to identify creative ways to address foodservice staffing challenges. For example, it allows employees in other classifications, such as cafeteria monitors, to help out in foodservice, particularly with packing meals or with bus stop meal distribution. (Bus drivers, too, are taking on an expanded role.) "It does help," reports Watts. "Regular employees are able to get more

tasks accomplished and they don't have to put in overtime. If they are three-hour employees, I don't have to keep them for five hours at the schools to get the work done."

Alhambra began its new school year in August in a 100% virtual learning mode. Thanks to the extension of waivers by USDA, free meals (breakfast, lunch and now supper) are available for anyone 18 and under; these are distributed curbside at all school sites on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. On the first day of school, the team packed 820 bags for families, the equivalent of 5,000 meals. Still, there has been a drastic overall drop in daily participation this fall, although "the freaky part is that breakfast participation is way up," reports Watts. "We may be serving fewer students, but they are receiving more breakfasts and suppers." She and her supervisors have set a 6,000 daily student participation goal for the school year ahead—and it's getting closer. It won't fix the revenue shortfall, but "student welfare is paramount," says Watts.

To encourage participation, they've partnered with two local restaurant chains, Pizza Hut and Pick Up Stix, a popular Asian concept, which alternate with featured menu items on Wednesdays. With a student demographic roughly split between Asian and Latino, "We are trying to be creative, can you tell?" asks Watts.

She and her team are trying various ways to keep finding the fun, even without the gratifying interaction with kids in the cafeteria. For example, she initiated a canopy-decorating contest at curbside pickup sites, engaging foodservice staff and even principals. Watts is also promoting a Trick or Treat activity for Halloween and a poster contest for Thanksgiving. These efforts certainly help outreach with students, while also offering a respite to the harder work required—packing meals, sanitizing repeatedly, serving outside in Southern California's record-setting September heat wave, as well as in poor air-quality conditions due to wildfire smoke. There was even an earthquake, although it caused little damage.

"Heat, wildfires and then an earthquake. You almost have to laugh," says Watts, reporting that staff morale remains high in spite of the challenges. "They have a sense of responsibility. They always have wanted to do a good job, and that dedication has only increased. The situation has actually boosted morale and teamwork. Of course, there are always a few who are not motivated. But of those who are, they have resilience, they are gung-ho and ready to go. Those people keep me motivated. When you work with good people, you are motivated, too."

**Cherie Myers-Trent,
District Food Service Manager**

Enrollment: 8,600 at 12 schools
Average Daily Participation: 27% (pre-pandemic)
Free/reduced: 19.7%
Employees: 32 kitchen staff, 1 office staff

South Lyon Community Schools, Michigan



South Lyon Community Schools, in the greater Detroit area, opened with 100% remote learning this fall, resulting in curbside meal service for all. That meant any foodservice employees with young children learning at home also had to stay home. To provide these working parents with an opportunity to keep working, Myers-Trent created an evening shift, mostly managing a 4:30 to 6 p.m. curbside pickup window, which was a win-win for both staff and families.

This flexibility for her team was important, as she only has two substitutes she can currently call on if any of her team can't work. "We are keeping our fingers crossed and taking it one day at a time," Myers-Trent says. "I don't want to lose any of our staff. We have held on to all of our existing staff but one." Another bonus for the staff is that they are being paid their full contracted hours, even though they presently are working fewer total hours.

Although virtual learning means that employees still don't see the children they love to serve, Myers-Trent reports an overall boost in morale since the start of the new school year. "Everyone has been very positive," she says. "They are glad to be back—*thrilled* to be back—to work." (Unlike many districts

across the country, South Lyon did not continue meal service over the summer.) She credits ongoing communication, quelling fears of the unknown and keeping the rumor mill to a minimum as reasons they all can maintain that positive spirit.

Participation was slow at the start of school; they served only 550 meals in the first week. But that doubled to 1,300 in the second week. "It usually takes three weeks for us to get to our usual level of participation," Myers-Trent says, with optimism. Although there is a low free/reduced eligibility in the district, "There is a need in the community."

Elementary schools in the district are expected to shift to four-day in-school learning in October, with everyone home on the fifth day and the option for parents to continue to choose all at-home classes for their youngsters. "I don't yet know who is going to work those [hybrid] shifts," admits Myers-Trent. "My mind just spins. Until I see the numbers of the students actually coming back, I can't do anything. Once I know more, then I can plan. If they are remote only one day of the week, does it make sense to do a curbside distribution model for just one meal in the bag? That is something to figure out."

Dee Orick, Director of Food Services

Enrollment: 3,800 at 8 schools

Average Daily Participation (current):

2,650 (breakfast), 2,400 (lunch)

Free/Reduced: 60%

Employees: 45 (pre-pandemic), 32 (current)

New Castle Community Schools, Indiana



Situated east of Indianapolis, the rural New Castle Schools district reopened August 10 with in-school instruction for all grade levels under a detailed reentry plan. A Virtual Academy was also provided to the families of 700 students who wished to continue distance learning. When school ended abruptly last spring, the school foodservice team was already short-staffed, reports Orick. Another four positions opened up when employees chose not to expose themselves to the school environment and since, there have been very few applicants for the nine total vacancies.

With the innovative spirit that is a characteristic of so many school nutrition professionals, Orick reached out to a previously untapped labor resource: students in the high school’s culinary arts program. She hired three of these teens to work an after-school shift, 2:30 to 6 p.m., three days a week, mainly packaging meals for Virtual Academy students. “They have been a real lifesaver,” she credits. At-home learners pick up five days’ of meals (400 to 600 total) once a week. In addition, she’s exploring the possibility of having bus drivers work for her department between their morning and afternoon runs. Unfortunately, parent and other volunteers are discouraged, as outsiders are not being allowed in school buildings, Orick reports.

All elementary schools currently operate breakfast in the classroom service. “This has increased the workload for school nutrition employees at all of these schools, but we have not

been able to hire any help for them,” reports Orick. “This is physically challenging for some of my staff who have not had to move breakfast meals for 350 from the kitchen to the classrooms in the past. We have purchased carts and insulated bags to try to make it as easy as possible.” The original thought, she notes, was that students in older grades could help with breakfast distribution, but the health department put the kibosh on that, prohibiting students from handling any equipment, including carts, wagons and bags.

At lunch time, students are served and eat in the cafeteria. Principals developed charts for assigned seating. Orick also replaced PIN pads with a barcode scanner at points of sale. All menu components on the serving line are covered, lidded or wrapped. Self-serve stations have been eliminated.

Cafeteria staff at the high school are particularly stretched to serve menu items at four different lines, while also batch cooking—and packaging—plus running the dishwashers in the kitchen. “We have the numbers, unless someone is sick,” says Orick. “Then we have to close lines, because there’s no one left to put in the spot. I’ve talked with managers of fast-food restaurants in our area, and they are having the same difficulties. We just don’t have enough staff to manage all the changes that must be put in place due to the pandemic.”

Orick is also highly aware of how long it’s been since she and her team have had a break. Some 80% of the staff were involved in emergency feeding, which led right to summer feeding and now to the beginning of the new school year. “We had a week before school started that we didn’t serve meals. And then we used that time to get our kitchens in order, conduct inventory, participate in mandated training and complete paperwork,” she reports.

“It is hard asking them to do so much more,” she continues. “It’s harder work, and they are all so tired. I have seen it. It worries me. They could leave and go someplace else for a job.” The school board gave foodservice employees a bonus for their extra efforts last spring and summer. “But we don’t foresee that happening during the regular school year,” notes Orick. Still, she has managed to raise the base pay for new employees and changed the schedule to ensure everyone gets five hours.

One bright spot for the operation is that participation is on track with—or better than—previous school years. Breakfast participation has exploded. And she takes pride in their achievement of “an amazing, mind-blowing job of serving 210,000 meals from mid-March ‘til September 3,” crows Orick.

Anna Wolk, Food Service Director
 Enrollment: 1,900 at 4 schools
 Average Daily Participation: 55% (pre-pandemic),
 10% (current)
 Free/Reduced: 32%
 Employees: 18

Johnsburg Community Schools, Illinois

Johnsburg Community Schools, located northwest of Chicago, opened school in August in full remote-learning mode. Students will return to classrooms for a four-day week in phases through late October. Thus, meal service is also undergoing continual adjustments, with curbside meal distribution combined with increased onsite service. The upshot is that Wolk can bring back her full team—some of whom had been laid off—providing they hadn't found other work in the interim.

"The majority of my staff is eager to return, thankfully," Wolk reports. "However, I have only two subs, and they are in a higher-risk category, so I may not have them to call upon when a team member is out." This puts pressure on her to find new staff, with the added stress of competition from a nearby district that has historically paid a higher wage. "Even though we recently raised our starting pay rate, I just don't have people clamoring to work in a high-exposure area such as a school," says Wolk. Plus the workload is tougher; even though overall participation is down, the effort to prep and package meals—and track orders—is more arduous.

"Too few staff is a very real concern, as some of my team will need to be home with their younger kids on their remote learning days, and some have children that attend a neighboring district and may be on a different academic/instructional plan," she continues, noting that she supports family priorities. Volunteers are not a viable option; the district is trying to reduce the numbers of people in and out of the schools, plus Wolk simply doesn't have a lot of time to train them.

For in-school learners on a hybrid schedule, Wolk and her team are trying to amp up efficiency by having students order meal options from their classrooms in the morning. These are delivered to the cafeteria in advance for an accurate participation count. Cafeteria meals are hot options, portioned, wrapped and handed directly to the student, who uses a barcode scanner at the cashier station and proceeds to an assigned seat in the cafeteria. Each child who signs up is provided with a sack lunch to bring home for the next day's virtual learning schedule.



Our Food Service Department is here to serve! Remember **ALL** district students can now receive a **FREE** lunch daily!! To view sign up and menu click [link above.](#)



Curbside distribution of hot meals at the junior high school continues. These are picked up by families at the back door, which remains open so that staff know when a car has pulled up. But this brings in rain—and bees, reports Wolk. In response, she installed an old-fashioned service-station bell triggered by a car's tires and it's worked really well to signal the team when they need to deliver a meal pack to a vehicle but now can keep that door closed.

These are relatively easy solutions. Wolk has deeper concerns about the cost of disposable foodservice packaging materials. "They're putting a strain on my budget and are very difficult to get," she reports.

While she's personally buoyed by and grateful for her staff's dedication, "We're all tired," admits Wolk. When she has the time available, she'll personally step in to "button things up" after the last meal has been served, letting the team head out. But "it's a definite challenge to keep our focus, keep morale up, satisfy parents, stay up to date on waivers, attend webinars and Zoom meetings, be kind to one another, take care of ourselves and families mentally and physically—and find the humor necessary to get through the day. And we're a *small* district. I'm in awe of the larger districts who are serving close to or beyond 1,000 meals every day!"

Wake County Public School System, North Carolina



The Wake County Public Schools System is big by any measure—including the fact that it covers 850 square miles. “Big” also is the pandemic’s devastating effect on the Child Nutrition Services operation. “Participation is nowhere near our norm,” reports De Lucca.

North Carolina provided its school districts with three model learning plans for reopening. Wake County opted to begin with 100% remote learning, and at press time, it was considering a transition to in-school learning beginning in late October that would gradually add grade levels through mid-November. Opinions on whether and when to bring students back into buildings are varied and based on numerous dependencies. “There is no consensus,” laments De Lucca. “They are trying to meet everyone’s needs, but they have come to the realization that it is hard to satisfy everyone.”

Last spring, when schools closed, De Lucca mustered her team to begin emergency meal distribution, with both curbside pick-up at school sites, plus bus stops, as well as some deliveries (made by social workers) to hotels serving as temporary housing for families. While the emergency feeding effort was impressive, it didn’t touch the “normal” meal counts for the Child Nutrition Services department, and the revenue loss had a significant impact on their ongoing ability to maintain staffing levels.

But instead of turning to layoffs or furloughs, the district reassigned some 520 school nutrition team members to a brand-new childcare program initiative free for all school district employees. This meant that the positions were retained in the school system and staff members did not lose income. But it did diminish De Lucca’s flexibility, as she no longer has the same deep pool of substitutes to turn to when sites experience staffing shortages. And she’s anxious about how she will man-

age if and when her team needs to coordinate both curbside and in-school meal service.

When classes began this fall, 53% of students opted for the Virtual Academy through at least the first semester. By De Lucca’s count, that means 47% of students will be back in schools, but only for about one-third of the week, if a three-cohort plan is selected. The net-net: “It means a compression of our services,” she says, and this will be another headache-inducing monkey wrench in coordinating staffing.

Staff who are parents of young children, for example, likely would have to be on a schedule that matched their child’s learning mode. Right now, they are only operating out of 47 kitchens; what happens when meal service is expected at all sites? And there are plenty of unknowns about the number of hours and employees that will be required to do the evolving job—and what the department can afford. “It will be a compromise to manage labor costs and staff,” De Lucca notes, adding, “We also do not know the district’s plan for the continuation of the childcare program once students begin returning for onsite instruction.”

De Lucca has been with the district for six years, and she has seen how quickly the population has grown. Every year, new schools are added. This ongoing need to adjust may be a saving grace. The Child Nutrition Services staff *always* adapts well, she credits. “They have been great at embracing change effectively.” She’s also proud of her team being several steps ahead of others in the school system when it comes to pandemic adjustments. “We are the one group that continued to operate from March on,” De Lucca notes. From face coverings to social distancing, they have the experience and have developed a level of comfort with the changes. “They have a great capacity of strength.”

Adam Russo, Director of Food and Nutrition Services

Enrollment: 92,000 (pre-pandemic),
 88,000 (current) at 95 schools

Average Daily Participation: 60,000 lunches,
 30,000 breakfasts

Free/reduced: 44%

Employees: 950 FTE (pre-pandemic), 868 (current)

Prince William County Public Schools, Virginia



Kitchen staff are creating friendly rivalries, such as who bakes the best bread or lasagna. Grocery kits are available for families on Monday and Thursday at 56 district CACFP locations. In addition, roughly 1,000 special needs or at-risk students are getting in-school classroom instruction, and foodservice staff are delivering meals to them Tuesday through Friday in another nod to normalcy. “We are servants to the students, so we want to make sure they are taken care of,” explains Russo.

Extending the curbside pickup window to a whopping six hours (noon to 6 p.m.) gives school nutrition employees more work hours and parents, especially commuters, more flexibility. Meanwhile, Russo does have some position vacancies, including manager openings, that he’d like

Russo’s primary concern right now is the safety and well-being of his team of foodservice employees, wanting to ensure that they can remain protected from a virus outbreak while on the job. He’s glad that the superintendent and other district leaders had the foresight a few years ago to modernize all kitchens and related foodservice areas. Among the timely benefits: These state-of-the-art spaces all boast modern HVAC systems that cycle fresh air in and filter pollutants out.

Schools in Prince William County started the year with all students enrolled in virtual learning and the foodservice team continuing the curbside meal service model it had honed in spring. That approach had relied on a skeleton crew of 80 staff working at 22 school sites, and when the new school year officially launched in September, the school nutrition operation had distributed more than one million meals, breakfasts and lunches, Monday through Friday. Russo is relieved to report that his labor costs and revenues broke even through May 2020, and he does not expect to lose money this year, although income likely will be flat.

In fact, “We are serving more meals today than this time last year,” says Russo, citing 320,000 meal equivalents served to Prince William students in the first week of class this fall. This is keeping staff plenty busy. Currently they are prepping scratch meals four days a week from 95 school kitchens.

to fill. “We are about to do a push to recruit new employees,” he reports. “I am looking forward to tapping the talent that is out there.”

One recent hire from the restaurant world has fallen in love with the K-12 segment, he says, and she is promoting it to all her friends in the industry. Thanks to such testimonials, Russo expects to see a greater influx of talented people who otherwise would not consider working in school foodservice. He remembers when it was difficult for the school nutrition operation to compete with restaurants, but perceives that foodservice workers are increasingly anxious about the COVID risks associated with that segment. “Plus, they see we are making *real* food.”

Another draw that helps attract talent is that managers in his department are called “Lunch Teachers,” and they are respected members of the school staff. “We are lucky,” Russo says. “We have a good reputation with our families. People want to work for us. Our staff is a real credit to the community.”

As for the general atmosphere as this school year starts, Russo is encouraged. He finds his team is excited to keep chugging forward. They come to work wearing goofy hats, teasing each other, competing to see who is serving the most meals. “We know this is a stressful situation,” he notes. “But we are all trying to find ways to keep things light, while still taking it seriously. We have the best staff in the business.”

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