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## SLAY Your Way Back!

While pandemic challenges persist, school nutrition professionals are resilient, determined and innovative—and focused on a positive future.

BY PATRICIA L. FITZGERALD



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Four school nutrition directors in Georgia, (l-r) Alyssia Wright, Audrey Hamilton, Kokeeta Wilder and Kantrell Brown, have a blueprint to help fellow school nutrition professionals SLAY (Successful, Logical, Accurate, Yielding Positive Results) their way back from COVID chaos.

The verb **“to slay”** has heroic connotations. It often involves a valiant knight taking on and besting a loathsome foe. It’s fitting, then, that a quartet of school nutrition directors in Georgia seized on the word to create an acronym that they’ve applied to the act of successfully conquering daunting quests—like preparing for an Administrative Review and regaining financial stability in the wake of the COVID pandemic.

Extended school closures and even hybrid learning approaches took a devastating toll on many school nutrition programs that saw participation plummet, extra revenues vanish and expenses skyrocket. While some districts fared better than others, all ended SY2020-21 with the hopeful expectation that SY2021-22 would be much better.

This was certainly the case for the Georgia quartet of Kantrell Brown, MSM, Executive Director, School Nutrition, **Henry County Schools**; Audrey Hamilton, MEd, Nutrition Director, **Clayton County Public Schools**; Kokeeta Wilder, MS, Nutrition Director, **Fayette County Public Schools**; and Alyssia Wright, EdS, Executive Director, School Nutrition, **Fulton County School District**. In spring, when the COVID vaccine rollout showed no signs of slowing, government restrictions on capacity limits were being eased and school communities were anticipating a full return to in-person learning come fall, these directors, filled with optimism and energy, got together to prepare a

presentation for SNA’s 2021 Virtual Annual National Conference (ANC) designed to give colleagues advice and confidence to “Slay Your Way Back After COVID-19!” Recorded in June and presented in mid-July, their session was one of the most highly rated of the conference.

And then the Delta variant of the virus surged. The urgent warnings by industry about looming supply chain disruptions were made manifest. Communities of all sizes and demographics began to experience profound labor shortages, impacting a wide range of segments, from manufacturing and transport to foodservice and retail, plus schools and childcare. The pandemic dragon would not be easily vanquished.

But neither would the determination and resolve of the self-identified Quartet Slayers be extinguished! Interviewed a few weeks into the new school year, they admitted they were feeling:

- » challenged—yet *optimistic*
- » uncertain—yet *hopeful*
- » disheartened—yet *encouraged*

And they are standing by the advice, strategies and solutions, developed using their signature SLAY approach, for rising above obstacles and finding school meal success throughout SY2021-22. In this article, *SN* will share highlights from their ANC presentation, along with fresh recommendations and reflections in light of current circumstances.

## Building Back

Friends and former colleagues, Brown, Hamilton, Wilder and Wright were facing Administrative Reviews (AR) of their respective districts in 2017 and 2018. They teamed up to prepare; after one got through it successfully, the others leveraged what they'd learned to refine plans and processes. They pooled their collective AR expertise into an organized approach to present at SNA's 2018 ANC. Representing districts ranging from 20,000 to 90,000 students, they made sure their advice was not size dependent. The acronym SLAY

(inspired by a popular Beyonce tune, in which the singer is imbued with confidence) reflects an approach that is **S**uccessful, **L**ogical and **A**ccurate, **Y**ielding Positive Results.

In the wake of COVID-19 disruptions, the quartet is applying the SLAY approach to manage recovery efforts in their own school nutrition operations. It begins with identifying top goals and then creating a blueprint for action. **Successful** recovery from the participation and financial havoc caused by the pandemic will likely require a **Logical**, two-pronged approach to both increase revenues and decrease expenses.

School nutrition directors should focus on setting goals around strategies and tactics that **grow participation**. More participation automatically means more direct (student payments) and indirect (reimbursements) revenue—but it also means greater potential for *future* revenue, as well.

With regulatory waivers in place that allow schools to serve meals at no charge to *all* students, that potential for increased participation is huge! And anecdotal reports from districts all across the country confirm that not only are participation rates higher than last year, but they exceed pre-COVID figures, as well. But operators shouldn't rely on the novelty of free meals to sustain participation. You'll need to earn the loyalty of your student customers by offering a dynamic program that anticipates their needs *and* their wants—and offers pleasant surprises, too.

By increasing menu choices—particularly through customization—you can ensure that students have little or no reason to pass up your serving lines, as they can always get what *they* want. Look into offering build-a-bowl options, customized deli sandwiches, personal pizzas and different types of food







components—a fruit/veggie, a grain and a milk—that qualify as a reimbursable meal at elementary schools using the offer-versus-serve model, explains Brown in Henry County. Marketing materials promote the option to students: “If you prefer to bring your favorite entrée from home, then we will provide everything else to create a healthy, filling and delicious meal—

bars. If you have sufficient labor and space, these can be permanent stations in your cafeteria—if not, make them available on select days of the week or month.

Take advantage of the growing awareness of special, limited-time “pop-up” concepts. Clayton County’s Hamilton did a pop-up lunch at one of her high schools. “We converted an old piece of serving line equipment into a mobile cart. We planned the event with the principal, who arranged for music to be played by a DJ. We featured a specialty lunch item outside of the regular menu and gave prizes. The kids had fun—and they got to know our department,” she says. If a pop-up event is beyond your capabilities right now, consider offering limited-time option (LTO) menu items—either new recipes and items or wildly popular favorites. Pay attention to how restaurants and retailers market their LTOs, leveraging the “act now or miss out” nature of the opportunity.

The quartet are big fans of the “Lunch Box Buddy” (aka “Lunchbox Sidekick,” “Pack Pal” and “Pick 3 Free”) concept to encourage participation among the bagged-lunch demographic. This is a supplement, often prepackaged, featuring three to four menu

for free!” It’s a great option to bring in added reimbursements, while also easing some hesitant children into your program. “Be sure to market it to parents as a cost-savings for them!” adds Brown.

Another strategy to build participation and revenue is to expand service options. Does your school have a courtyard? Can you set up a kiosk there to provide grab-and-go offerings? Walk the building and campus grounds with an eye out for other potential sites where you might be able to offer meals, snacks and a la carte items. Are there areas where students tend to congregate? Are there intersections on routes between classrooms and common spaces like the gym, library, music room and auditorium?

Also, explore how you might offer a mobile ordering service, especially for middle and high school students who have no time or patience to wait on long lines. Perhaps you have a system you used for curbside meals that can be adapted to in-school student orders. Look to commercial operations like Starbucks for ideas on how to ensure that pickup is easy and efficient.

Other revenue-generating ideas the Quartet Slayers identified include:



- » Start or resurrect a classroom celebration program. You can offer parents and teachers a safe option to recognize birthdays, holidays and other occasions.
- » Offer catering service for in-school events, ranging from meetings to banquets.
- » Partner with school clubs/organizations and other departments to provide food for various programs, such as concessions at a pep rally or a big game, snacks for the Homecoming dance or intermission treats during an upcoming performance. Also ask these groups to serve as ambassadors for your program by visiting and/or performing at cafeterias or volunteering to help serve or monitor lunchrooms, engaging with younger students.
- » Expand your snack program (but be mindful that for snacks to be claimed as free, students must be enrolled in an associated enrichment program).
- » Take full advantage of promotional opportunities, such as National School Lunch

and School Breakfast Weeks, along with other fun occasions that can elevate student engagement. *[Editors' Note: SNA members should check out the online Promotion Calendar for events and ideas; visit [www.schoolnutrition.org/promocalendar](http://www.schoolnutrition.org/promocalendar).]*

- » Partner with community agencies, nonprofits and other school departments. Fayette County's Wilder teamed up with local food banks to provide pantry items and fresh produce during curbside pickups. She did the same with different district departments to distribute books, toys and personal hygiene kits.

Whatever you do, be sure you are always supporting your efforts with an assertive marketing program. Get messages to parents and students through both social media, text messages, videos *and* old-school means (flyers, signage, letters home, etc.). Industry partners often offer professionally designed marketing collateral for promotions like World School Milk Day. Your state association may





be able to work with industry to develop an initiative with greater scope, such as the billboard advertising campaign several industry members in Georgia helped to fund. [Editors' Note: See the magazine's June/July 2021 issue, where "Outdoor Ed" detailed this innovative project.]

### Cutting Back

With a goal of financial sustainability in mind, school nutrition operators may find that increasing revenue is not enough—or not sufficiently reliable. This is a good time to look hard at your expenses—working to reduce them or, at minimum, keeping tighter control of them. The Quartet Slayers note that decreasing expenses should be the *first* approach to regaining financial stability. Some areas may be out of your control—increased prices for food and fuel, for example—but there are many budget line items that you may have overlooked when you had steady revenue and a deeper fund balance as a cushion. The Quartet Slayers identified several areas to review.

**DIG INTO DATA.** Use data to make important decisions. For example, you may need to recalculate your meals-per-labor-hour (MPLH) and take a look at participation data and production yields at prep kitchens to see if you are right-sized when it comes to staffing and to your menu.

**MANAGE STAFFING.** Although you may be feeling the pressure of talent shortages right now, if your data analysis reveals that you have *more* staff than you can afford, you should start by enacting a hiring freeze. If school administrators complain that they are now under-staffed, you can review the data together and, if necessary, redirect team members to different locations.

Indeed, whether you are facing labor shortages or dealing with too little revenue to justify current staffing levels, your data should help you to redistribute staff based on site participation and production requirements, moving talent where they are most needed. For example, if a site has multiple cashiers, you may be able to reassign one to a site that has no cashiers. Wright, in Fulton County, explains that because "having more hands in the kitchen is important for our operation," she's found staggering hourly positions to



## NEW CHALLENGES, NEW SLAY SUGGESTIONS

*School Nutrition* presented the Quartet Slayers with a hypothetical: If they were to prepare an updated presentation for a fall or winter conference, what new advice and suggestions would they add to help peers **SLAY** their way through current challenges.

- » **Cope with labor shortages.** Ensure that staff understand the implications of the vacancies. Request their patience and their recruitment help. Look at increasing your wages to make sure you are competitive in today's market. Survey other districts to see where you fall. Draft administrative and central office team members to rotate into kitchens and cafeterias to help mitigate vacancies.
- » **Budget for increased food and supply costs.** Kids still need to be fed, and product shortages mean that you must accept some substitutions that *are* available—but are more expensive.
- » **Increase your inventory.** While you typically don't want the expense of carrying too much inventory—not to mention not having the necessary storage capacity—during this crisis, you should be ordering multiple weeks' worth of food and supplies to ensure enough is on hand to keep serving. If you don't have the storage space, keep your focus on entrées and paper goods.
- » **Focus on relationships.** These are key to the success of your program. Meet with district leadership often, keeping supervisors and the superintendent updated on the financial status and other support needs of your program. Similarly, stay in regular touch with vendors and manufacturers so that you can be forewarned of any new changes that may impact your service to students. Make sure your staff knows how much they are valued and that you consider *everyone* to be part of the school nutrition "family."
- » **Breathe.** Keep taking deep, cleansing breaths to manage stress and release tension, especially at the end of the frenetic work-day. Remember that everyone is having the same problems; you are not in this alone.

be an effective tactic for managing her labor costs. "We start with a non-benefitted 3.5-hour position, then a 4.5-hour position and then we increase in 30-minute increments," she says. "You just want to be sure that you're covering their benefit costs." Another step in



reducing labor-related expenses is not filling vacancies and reducing staff by attrition. Also, be sure that managers are not empowered to approve additional work hours for employees without your knowledge. Finally, be mindful of meal service modifications—you may need to reduce the number of serving/cashier lines or close the dish room (but be sure that disposable costs won't erase that savings).

If you're coping with labor shortages, you'll have to hold off or modify some of these tactics. Plus, be mindful that your operating expenses may be on the rise if you need to raise wages or add signing and retention stipends to staff up to levels required to operate effectively.

**DECREASE MENU OFFERINGS.** While increasing menu options can boost participation, if the net is not enough to cover labor expenses, then you may have to limit choices and hold off on labor-intensive customization stations. (You may also be compelled to take this approach if you are facing a labor shortage problem.) Use your MPLH and participation data analysis to determine the most cost-effective strategy.





But consider the pros and cons of offering menu options that are based on school enrollment and individual site participation data. For example, at schools with high enrollment, you want to capture new customers with the dual incentive of free meals and a wide range of menu options. Above all, be prepared to pivot throughout the year, given the fluctuations with the supply chain, along with the possibility of late-breaking school closures due to the virus.

**CONTROL FOOD COSTS.** The most reliable way to do this is to take every advantage of your USDA Foods and DoD-Fresh dollars. Be thoughtful and strategic in your procurement and processing decisions. (Be sure your managers understand how to do this, as well, especially if they have the autonomy to order directly from a central warehouse or distributor.) Check in regularly with your state agency representatives to be sure you're aware when new items become available.

Prioritize food products that offer menu versatility. Use the cost efficiencies gained in procuring greater amounts of items that can be used in multiple recipes. Also, once the supply chain begins to stabilize again, be sure your site teams are managing inventory. Wright says her KPI (key performance indicator) benchmark for inventory is to turn it over twice each month. She also advises periodic checks of inventory as a way to deter theft or mismanagement. ("*Inspect what you expect!*")

Kitchen and serving staff should be trained to minimize waste throughout all stages of meal prep and service. An emphasis on batch cooking is a good approach

**MONITOR ALL BUDGETARY LINE ITEMS.** Drill down, down, down. For example, says Hamilton, you can put budget limits on smallware purchases or tie them to participation data that can demonstrate how they pay for themselves with increases in revenue or decreases in labor. Other ideas include reducing the number of uniforms you provide and monitoring travel expenses, comparing them against a spreadsheet of regular routes to curb over claims. If you contract certain professional services, try to negotiate for the possibility of a site being temporarily closed and thus temporarily suspending the particular service.

## Back Flexibility With Compliance

When it comes to ensuring **Accuracy** in the SLAY approach, regulatory compliance is the top priority, say the four directors. The





waivers issued and extended in response to the pandemic have provided heady flexibility to school nutrition operators. But it's critical that you understand the functionality of each waiver—not only the requirements that are being relaxed but how to manage the *process*, such as the documentation that is still required. Your staff also needs to be trained in maintaining compliance within the waivers—and should be aware if your local policy is more restrictive than the federal waiver. Hamilton also recommends that you keep all state agency waiver approvals on file as an early preparation step for your next Administrative Review.

While there is a possibility that the success of universal free meals will lead to a permanent change in the federal school meals program, right now, operators need to be prepared for most, if not all, of these regulatory waivers to come to an eventual end. That's why all of your goals and tactics should be based on the sustainability of your school nutrition operation without reliance on waivers.

As you become aware of changes to the status of waivers, keep all school nutrition stakeholders in the loop. Plan to explain changes multiple times to be sure the message gets through to *everyone* and you are managing expectations.

## Who'll Have Your Back?

You need to have “The Talk” with key administrators in the district—your supervisor, the financial team, possibly the superintendent—if the pandemic did a number on your fund balance; if you need to make major staffing changes; if you are experiencing product shortages, missed deliveries and cancelled orders; if your operation will need support from the district's general fund to balance the books; or if you are dealing with other significant challenges. And if so, then these may be the most important conversations of your career.

Go in with your plan—it should be budget-focused and goal-centered, but with flexibility for adjusting to unexpected new challenges. Know your finances. Be transparent about hits and misses in different operational areas. Be able to speak with authority about the cuts in expenses that you've made, the cuts you're contemplating and how you will work to close the gaps.

Be prepared to discuss challenges, But also point out successes! Explain how you're keeping your eyes and ears open for internal and external opportunities, such as grants and other funding relief, as well as ideas you're putting into place to generate new revenues.

If you're *prepared*, “The Talk,” while daunting, can be highly productive. It can lead to everyone buying into and supporting your goals, strategies and tactics for slaying your way back to a financially viable school nutrition program. And this, of course, brings us to the last component of the SLAY approach: **Yielding Positive Results**. Keep telling your story—communicating early and often, says Brown—in order to create new champions for your program out of administrators, col-



planned. “Despite our best efforts, staffing and supply chain issues are creating chaos for our programs,” the group told *SN* in an email interview in September. “Directors are being called on to cover vacancies while trying to manage many new complications. In these uncertain times, it is not known [where] our school nutrition programs will land. However, we are hopeful that the support and flexibility will remain as long as needed.”

Above all, remember that *you* can set the right culture, creating a productive and rewarding environment for your whole team. Your staff is watching how you deal with the challenges—so are parents and students. Show them all how resilient you are. Show them how confidently you can *SLAY* your way back to school nutrition success! **SN+**

*Patricia Fitzgerald is editor of School Nutrition. Photos from the Fulton County School Nutrition Facebook page.*

leagues in other departments, state agency staff and your own team.

Speaking of your team, they are absolutely essential to all your efforts toward restoring your program to pre-COVID stability. *Everyone* is tired. Help maintain their morale with regular expressions of gratitude, staff spotlights shared on social media and kudos for achievements. Make staff feel heard and appreciated.

A positive mindset is not magical thinking—just as positive results are not automatic. It takes work. But stay the course. The Quartet Slayers concede that some of this advice from their ANC presentation may not be effective *right now*, given how today’s challenges affect your ability to serve children the way you had





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