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Boosting team morale through mission-driven experiences and excursions.



Connecting the DOTS



BY PATRICIA L. FITZGERALD


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The “big idea” started oh-so-simply: Wouldn’t it be nice to reward the hard-working team of 114 cafeteria site managers at **Austin (Texas) Independent School District (AISD)** a nice lunch out, away from their schools? But in the creatively ambitious hands of Lindsey Bradley, Nutrition and Food Services Marketing Specialist, and Diane Grodek, Executive Chef, the idea quickly mushroomed into something more elaborate—and more meaningful.



It became Cafe Manager Development Days, a series of six day-long events that feature a personal wellness presentation, a field trip to a local vendor *and* a lunch out to an area restaurant specializing in a global cuisine. It became a way to bring Nutrition and Food Services’ mission to life, connecting cafeteria managers to many of the pillars that define the department’s values and guide their programs and initiatives. And it became an opportunity for recognition *and* camaraderie-building *and* personal improvement *and* learning the whys behind their work—all rolled into one innovative program.



Austin ISD Nutrition and Food Services At a Glance

- » 73,000 students
- » 61% eligible for free/reduced-price meals
- » 114 onsite kitchens serving 116 schools
- » 75 CEP schools
- » 550 kitchen employees
- » ~10 million meals served every year
- » 30% average daily participation at breakfast
- » 50% average daily participation at lunch

Investing in Employees

Coming off two years of stressful pandemic-related challenges, AISD Nutrition & Food Services staff recognition opportunities were a priority. New programs rewarded manager, kitchen and employees of the month, and together with a Food Services & Warehouse Worker Appreciation Day event, it was a good start in boosting morale. But Grodek and Bradley felt that the busy team of site managers deserved something more. There were so few opportunities to get them out of their kitchens for training, professional development and face-to-face networking. “When we do

bring teams together, it’s usually very structured. Time is so valuable, and it’s rare for it to be much fun. There is just so much information that must be relayed in back-to-back-to-back sessions,” notes Bradley.

Injecting some fun into the equation was another priority,

“But with our numbers, whenever we try to do something for *everyone*, our budget winds up being \$2 per person, and you can’t do much with that,” laments Grodek.

A solution was found courtesy of the Austin Ed Fund, a grant-style program that allocates funding for various district initiatives. “Teachers were using these grants to support different classroom projects, and we’d never thought to apply ourselves,” says Grodek. “The meal idea was still first on our list, but as we read through the grant criteria, it led us to think how we could take things further. For example, one of the





prompts in the application was ‘How does this [project] affect employee wellness?’”

In the end, Bradley and Grodek were awarded \$5,000 to complete six Cafe Manager Development Days over two school years for a total of 120 employees (including Grodek, Bradley and other department leaders). The money underwrites the restaurant meals, transportation via school bus and speaker fees. The program is held on paid work days that are scheduled to allow for each manager’s absence from their kitchen. Up to 20 managers participate in each Development Day program. Four of the events were held in SY2022-23; two will be held in Fall 2023.

An Experiential Trifecta

Each Day’s agenda starts with a different personal wellness presentation. The first was an Airosti Mobility Workshop, featuring a tailored program on good stretches for kitchen workers on their feet for long periods. The second session tapped the expertise of the AISD Mental Health Counselor, who described many of the free

employee assistance program resources available to AISD employees. “She was so happy we reached out to her; these resources are really under-utilized,” remarks Grodek. In the third session, a district trainer offered advice for “Building a Culture of Respect,” while the most recent Development Day session in Spring 2023 covered “Nutrition for Brain Health.”

Next, participants hit the road to visit a vendor partner. The first, Texas Disposal Systems (“aka the dump,” says Bradley), met with some initial skepticism by participants, but the tour turned out to be fascinating. “They loved it! It had a lot of cool takeaways,” notes Grodek. “We’ve been composting for years, and this was a great way to help staff draw connections. Seeing mounds of compost, they gained a better understanding of why trash sorting is so important.”

Trips to New World Bakery and mmmpanadas left lasting impressions about how much food processing is performed by human beings. “A very small team is turning out hundreds and thousands of empanadas!” marvels Bradley. Similarly, TrueHarvest Hydroponic Farm was an eye-opening visit, as attendees walked through the journey from seeding to harvest. “You turn a corner and see a quarter mile of



Cafe Manager Development Days

The program produces a variety of coveted outcomes:

- » It provides a deeper understanding of our process and goals and the importance of the “whys” behind our work, with special attention on procurement complexities and the Good Food Purchasing Program.
- » It reinforces the values of “feeding the whole child,” by providing education around food.
- » It promotes employee self care, exploring techniques and tools to maintain mental and physical health. “When we take care of ourselves, we are better equipped to take care of others.”
- » It introduces new global flavors to staff before promoting them to children.
- » It provides an opportunity to meet, learn, share ideas and bond.



perfectly produced lettuce plants—it’s a visual that doesn’t leave your brain. It’s just beautiful,” says Grodek.

The final component of the Day’s adventures is the one that started it

all: lunch! But it has a greater purpose than simple conversation and community. In visiting restaurants featuring Ethiopian, Thai, Indian and Colombian cuisines, participants tasted new foods and flavors to spark ideas that would enhance school menus. At the conclusion of the day, the managers were asked to identify dishes that they thought would appeal to their students. (Grodek had selected the restaurants and some of the vendor partners with an eye on menu directions she is considering for SY2024-25.)



Putting It All Together

Initially, Grodek and Bradley encountered some resistance from managers who worried about leaving their kitchens. “It took a little coercion,” Grodek admits. For the initial sessions, area supervisors were asked to identify and assign participants, with mixed success. “It was a struggle to fill the roster for the first two to three events.” But after the pair began to use testimonials from the post-event surveys, as well as photos shared on the department’s internal Instagram feed, to pump up the opportunity, managers began self-selecting their desired Cafe Manager Development Day on a first-come, first-served basis. In general, the excursions have been scheduled when the kitchen load is expected to be lighter, such as toward the end of a week or preceding a holiday or break.

Bradley and Grodek are great, collaborative partners, sparking ideas off one another and adopting a natural division of labor. “I’ll scout the restaurant, often with my family, and select the menu,” says Grodek. “Lindsey is a master of the

Cafe Manager Development Days: Feedback & Testimonials

- » “I was hesitant to leave my kitchen for the day, but so glad I went!”
- » “Everything was amazing. Seeing where our food comes from was really fun and educational.”
- » “I really enjoyed learning about the recycling and composting process. It feels so good to see how the work we do really does impact our environment in a big, meaningful way.”
- » “I enjoyed getting a mental break away from the normal work setting. Thank you for the opportunity for fellowship and to reconnect with fellow managers.”
- » “Super excited to learn [we have access to a] service for getting a will prepared for free!” *(Inspired by the District Mental Health Counselor)*
- » “I’ll be drinking more water!” *(Inspired by the Nutrition for Brain Health presentation)*



timing, knowing exactly how many minutes we have before we need to move on. We'll work together, using our different contacts, to identify the speakers and the field trip destinations.” While they note that the biggest barrier was identifying a date with the least impact on 20 different kitchens, they were also surprised to get turned down by roughly half of the vendors in their initial outreach for tours.

At the conclusion of each Development Day, participants are asked to complete an anonymous survey, sharing feedback about the event, noting what they liked best, what they learned, what they can bring back to the kitchen and suggestions for future Development Days. A full 100% of attendees reported they would encourage



their colleagues to attend future excursions, while 94% rated their overall experience as excellent and that it left them feeling better connected to the department’s mission as a result!

While some managers have expressed interest in attending a second Development Day in order to experience other presenters and field trip destinations, Grodek and Bradley do not intend to apply for funds to run another cycle of the program. “I like to blow things up, make them amazing and then move on,” says Grodek, revealing that the pair are writing a grant for a totally different project. “There are so many things



we can do.” Bradley agrees. “We’re always brainstorming ideas—like maybe cooking a meal together. This experience has taught us that we really need to find ways to give our managers this kind of time together.”

School nutrition staff are immensely deserving of personal and professional development opportunities and peer-to-peer connections, the pair emphasizes. With

minimal investment, you can better connect your team to your mission while promoting camaraderie—and building a staff of happy, healthy and inspired employees! **SN+**

Patricia Fitzgerald is Editor of School Nutrition. This article is based on an upcoming presentation by Bradley and Grodek at SNA’s Annual National Conference in July in Denver.

How You Can Do It

Bradley and Grodek offer advice on how other districts might adapt the Cafe Manager Development Days program.

- » **Start Small:** It doesn’t have to be a full-day event. Choose one focus area (wellness, vendor tour or meal) instead of all three.
- » **Get Input from Your Team:** Be specific about areas of opportunity that connect to your mission, as well as provide personal/professional development.
- » **Explore Different Funding Models:** Vendors or other partners may help cover costs. Check for local and national grant opportunities. Allocate funds in your budget for the future.
- » **Work Your Connections for Free Speakers:** Reach out to guidance counselors, the human resource department, the district’s wellness committee, registered dietitians, nurses, physical therapists, gyms, personal trainers, yoga instructors, chefs and so on.
- » **Don’t Be Literal About District “Vendor Partners”:** Expand your horizon for meaningful field trips. Consider visits and tours of farms, community gardens, food production facilities and the foodservice operations of a large hotel or supermarket.
- » **Share a Meal:** You don’t need to go global or even go to a restaurant. What’s most important is sharing a meal together outside of the cafeteria. Consider inviting a specialty chef to teach your team new dishes or organizing a cooking class where participants will eat their own culinary creations.

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