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K-12 FOODSERVICE

# SCRATCHING OUT LUNCH DEBT WITH COMMUNITY SUPPORT

A fundraiser featuring  
scratch-cooked favorites  
helps Cartersville City Schools  
spotlight school meals  
and address student  
food insecurity

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BY CHRISTINA UTICONE



**Cover photo:**  
*Shiela Sander with  
Goldcreek Cheezy Hots.*

**Left:**  
*Amanda Brawner  
preparing green beans  
with onion, chicken  
bouillon and seasonings.*

**“AMAZING!” “EXCEPTIONAL.” “OUTSTANDING.” THESE ARE JUST A FEW OF THE SUPERLATIVES YOU’LL HEAR WHEN YOU ASK SOMEONE IN CARTERSVILLE, GA. ABOUT THE (NOW ANNUAL) “BACK-TO-SCHOOL” COMMUNITY LUNCHEON HOSTED BY THE CARTERSVILLE CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT’S NUTRITION DEPARTMENT.**

Held the Friday before school starts, the event serves as both a fundraiser to help eliminate school lunch debt and as an opportunity to showcase the incredible scratch-made meals the students at Cartersville City Schools enjoy every day of the school year.

### **Inspiration and Implementation**

District director Mallory Whorton has been with Cartersville City Schools since 2018, moving into her current position in May 2024. She was working as a coordinator in

2023 under now-retired director Christina Nichols when the idea for the Back-to-School Luncheon was conceived.

“Our mission here in Cartersville is ‘Every Student Fed,’” said Whorton. “When we went from serving free meals back to paid [post-COVID] it was rough for our school system and it was especially rough for our families. Christine and I, we never wanted a child to feel shame coming through the line if they didn’t have money.”

The concept seemed simple enough: throw a fundraiser and invite the community to purchase tickets to see what school meals





*Cynthia Nunn preparing made-to-order pizzas that run through a convection belt pizza oven.*

in Cartersville City Schools are all about. Cartersville is a relatively small district outside the Atlanta Metro area, serving approximately 4,700 students across four campuses.

"We wanted to get people in here to see what we do and to showcase not just our food, but our staff," said Whorton. "Our staff rocks it out every single day and we want the community to be aware of what we are doing in terms of providing a service to our students every single day."

Administrative support is always important, especially when you're testing out a new idea. When Whorton and then-director Nichols pitched the luncheon fundraiser to Assistant Superintendent of Administrative Services and Operations Andre Weaver, he was immediately on board.

"During COVID, everyone received that free lunch, and it was very difficult [for everyone] going back," said Weaver. "When Mallory and Christina brought this to me, I thought it was a great idea to alleviate student lunch debt."

Tickets for the Back-to-School Luncheon are \$12 each and are sold in timed slots to allow school nutrition staff

to cook in batches and keep up with demand. The event is held in the Cartersville City High School cafeteria which has four different lines where students can customize their entrées: Pizza, Grill, Homestyle and Salad/Sandwich Bar.

The luncheon's featured recipes were selected to showcase many of the scratch-cooked favorites the district is known for: squash casserole, green beans, mac n' cheese, brussels sprouts, garlic parmesan wings, made-to-order sandwiches and, most particularly, their homemade rolls, baked fresh on each campus. The nutrition department also makes fresh dressings, salsas (red and verde) and guacamole, and all of their pizzas are made with homemade sauce and scratch crust.



"We really are known for our rolls," said Whorton. "Our alumni know all about our rolls, but other people might not and we wanted to serve people the same food we serve our students in the cafeteria every day, not something special we might do for a catering event."

Not only were rolls "on the menu" at the luncheon, but attendees could pre-order the district's famous cinnamon rolls to take home—\$10 for half a dozen.

"We did a big promotion with Cindy Castleberry, who has been here making rolls for thirty years," said Whorton. "She was all over social media, inviting people to come down to the school and order the cinnamon rolls."



Although the Back-to-School Luncheon is served at the district's high school, it's all-hands-on-deck when it comes to staffing the event. Cartersville Elementary School cafeteria manager Marilyn Dabbs credits Whorton (and Nichols before her) with creating an event that is fun for both the workers and the attendees.

"It's a party atmosphere," said Dabbs. "It's tons of work, a huge undertaking on Mallory's end, but it's done so well and it's so well-received. It's a lot of fun for us, the staff from different buildings, to get the opportunity to work together. We get to sit down and try the food together before the people come, which is also really fun."

Whorton also appreciates the opportunity for team-building the Back-to-School Luncheon provides her staff.

"This event brings together every single employee from every single kitchen in the district," she said. "That collaboration is wonderful. They are working together, learning together and building those





relationships. It's not often we all get to cook together, and really, the whole event is about building relationships and that's just another example."

### **Foodies Welcome!**

When asked what makes the Back-to-School Luncheon so fun to attend as a community member, retired home economics teacher Dr. Valerie Holt shared what has brought her back to the event two years in a row.

"This event is fun for the adults for several reasons," said Holt. "First, most adults have not been in a school lunchroom since they were a child, so seeing the number of choices students have now is pretty amazing. Second, [Cartersville] is unique in how much homemade, fresh scratch [cooking] they do. Homemade pizza crusts, rolls, guacamole—they do so much. Also, the high school lunchroom with the four lines is really cool, very different from a lot of school lunchrooms."

Holt says food has been "both a hobby and a career." In addition to thirty years of teaching home economics, she's cooked competitively in the Pillsbury Bakeoff and

the National Beans Cookoff in Texas, among many others. Holt met Whorton when they worked in the same school district and the two bonded over their shared love of food and cooking. This year, in her role as a radio personality, Holt had the opportunity to help promote the Back-to-School Luncheon during her monthly radio appearance on WBHF.

In fact, the local radio station was crucial in helping to promote the fundraiser to the Cartersville community. In addition to Holt's signal-boost, Assistant Superintendent Weaver also had the opportunity to appear on-air and talk about the luncheon, which led to a field trip back to Cartersville City Schools for the radio crew to try school lunch. When the 2024 Back-to-School Luncheon came around, the station went one step further, sending out their morning show to broadcast live from the campus the morning of the event.

"It was one thing to go on the show and talk about the fundraiser, but to have them come and be on the air really turned into



*City firemen show up every year to support.*

something positive,” said Weaver. “The broadcast was finished before the event started, but they came back and brought people from the station with them.”

Another refrain from attendees and staff alike—the fundraiser attracted community members from all walks of life. Firetrucks rolled up with firefighters ready to eat school lunch, along with cars from the sheriff’s department and the courthouse. There were bankers, construction workers, students excited to go back to school with

their parents in tow, and of course, Cartersville City School alumni.

“For the community, once an event like this catches on, it becomes an expectation,” said Weaver. “I don’t think we’ll ever be able to stop throwing this event because it’s so popular. People told us they wish we would do it more often!”

## **Building Community Support**

The fundraiser is just the latest addition to the Cartersville City Schools roster of student support programs. They participate in Backpack Buddy program and host a Thanksgiving dinner for at-risk students, with the help of the local Toyo Tire which has a five-year sponsorship agreement for the holiday dinner. These programs along with the Back-to-School Luncheon are opportunities for Whorton to elevate her program as well as create and sustain new community partnerships.

“Toyo Tire was fantastic to come on board to help, and it made me think about how to get other people on board as well,” she said. “If we want to meet the needs of these students and their families we need community support, but you’re not going to







## Spotlight On: School Nutrition Professionals

While the main goal of the Back-to-School Luncheon is to shine a spotlight on school meals and fundraising, it's also an opportunity for some of that spotlight to shine on the people preparing the food. We know school nutrition is hard and rewarding work that requires skill, creativity and passion—but not everyone knows that! The Back-to-School Luncheon gives the Cartersville community a peek “behind the scenes” at what it takes to prepare and serve meals in Cartersville City Schools cafeterias.

“It takes so many people to pull this off and not just the folks who are back there cooking,” said Weaver. “There are people

know how to support us unless you know what we do.”

In just two years, Whorton estimates attendance nearly doubled—from about 230 tickets in 2023 to 480 tickets in 2024. Some strategies that helped build attendance include word-of-mouth, the district scheduling meetings the day of the event to encourage teachers and administrators to attend, and of course good, old-fashioned marketing like those radio appearances.

“Whether you do this as a fundraiser or not, this is a great event I would recommend any district could try,” she said. “Reach out to me, I’ll help you! Just do it. Get people in there and show them what you’re doing and how hard your staff works every day.”



# SQUASH CASSEROLE



## INGREDIENTS

28 oz. bag frozen sliced  
yellow squash (or about  
3 fresh squash)  
1/2 cup diced yellow onion  
4 oz crushed crackers (Ritz)  
1 1/2 cup shredded cheese,  
divided  
1/2 cup milk  
1 egg  
1/2 tsp. black pepper  
1/4 tsp. salt  
3 tbsp. butter

This recipe was a hit with adults and kids alike, featured at the 2024 Back-to-School Luncheon fundraiser.

## INSTRUCTIONS

1. Preheat oven to 350°F.
2. If using fresh, thinly slice squash into circles or half-circles depending on squash thickness.
3. Melt butter in 12-inch skillet and sauté onions and squash over medium heat until translucent, about 15 minutes.
4. Transfer squash and onion to a bowl and stir in 1 cup cheese, milk, egg, salt and pepper.
5. Pour in a 9x13 casserole dish and bake for 30 minutes.
6. Remove from oven, top with 1/2 cup cheese and crushed Ritz and bake for 10 more minutes.

*Makes enough for 3-4 people and is great served as a side.*

managing the people in line, people at the door taking tickets, the cinnamon roll lady set up in her spot! It's spectacular to see that teamwork, which gives everyone on the school nutrition staff from every school that positive spotlight."

Dr. Holt echoed that sentiment, crediting Whorton and her staff with creating an event that offers real value for everyone who works behind the scenes and anyone who attends.

"The fact that they do so much from scratch is so amazing to me," said Holt. "I took a minute to kind of stand back and was amazed to see basically the whole town, people of all walks of life, coming to try these meals. I make sure I tell these ladies that I know what kind of work goes into the food

we're eating and that I appreciate them. If you've never worked in [foodservice] it's really hard to imagine that effort."

Whorton and the Cartersville City Schools nutrition team already have their eyes on what the 2025 Back-to-School Luncheon might look like, holding creative collaboration meetings to collect feedback from everyone—front line workers, back of house staff and managers.

"We are not a district that is stagnant," said Whorton. "We are constantly thinking of new ways to serve our students and our community. One thing I've been preaching this whole week is that while we do have expectations we must meet, we also need to be asking ourselves: how do we become extraordinary?" **SN+**



# LEMON LUSH



Marilyn Dabbs shared her mother-in-law Nora Sue's recipe for her signature "Lemon Lush" dessert to serve at the Luncheon. While it's not "school lunch" ready (this is for special occasions!) it was a huge hit with attendees, who also took home a recipe card so they could make it at home.

"At CCS, we believe it's so important to bring our own food traditions into our cafeterias whether it's a special treat, like this Lemon Lush recipe, or a menu-ed item like our squash casserole." – Director Mallory Whorton



*Pam Mansfield making lemon lush.*

## INGREDIENTS

1 stick butter, melted  
1 cup all-purpose flour  
1 cup chopped pecans  
16 oz. Cool Whip, thawed  
8 oz. cream cheese, softened  
1 cup sugar  
2 – 14 oz. cans sweetened condensed milk  
1/2 cup fresh lemon juice

## INSTRUCTIONS

**Layer 1:** Preheat oven to 350°F. In a bowl, mix melted butter, flour and pecans. Spread in a 13x9 glass dish and press to cover the bottom. Bake for 25 min. and cool completely.

**Layer 2:** Using a mixer, beat together the cream cheese and sugar. Fold in half of the Cool Whip and spread over crust.

**Layer 3:** Mix sweetened condensed milk and lemon juice, then spread over cream cheese mixture.

**Layer 4:** Spread the other half of the Cool Whip on top of the lemon layer. Refrigerate 4 hours or overnight.

*The perfect sweet treat to serve 12 people.*

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*Christina Uticone is an SN Contributing Editor based in Houston.*

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