

## **Franklin County/North Quabbin Community Health Improvement Plan School Nutrition Initiative**

### Opportunities to Support School Food Service

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#### **Overview**

The Franklin Regional Council of Governments (FRCOG), as host to the Franklin County/North Quabbin Community Health Improvement Plan Steering Committee, engaged Northbound Ventures in school year 2017-2018 to provide technical assistance to local public school food service directors and administrative teams in implementing best practices about food placement, food marketing, new food policies, and local food purchasing. The Committee received funding through the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation County Health Rankings & Roadmaps (CHR&R) Action Acceleration Support and Funding program. This Roadmaps Action Acceleration opportunity is designed to strengthen the capacity of communities to improve health. Sponsorship also came from Mass in Motion Franklin County and the Communities that Care Coalition.

#### **Objective**

The objective of the project was to identify opportunities to increase sustained healthy behaviors through school food and nutrition initiatives within the county's school district.

#### **Approach**

The consultants committed to visit one school in each district during meal time and observe the food service set up, flow of students and other practices. During site visits, they met with the food service director, school nurses, and school/district administrators as schedules allowed. A report capturing observations from each site visit was prepared and presented to food service management to offer technical assistance on policy development and best practice implementation.

#### **School Site Visits in Chronological Order (Food Service Director)**

- Greenfield Middle School, Greenfield (Madison Walker)
- Erving Elementary School, Erving Union 28 (Donna LaClaire)
- Shutesbury Elementary School, Erving Union 28 (Gail Beauregard)
- Hillcrest Elementary School, Gill-Montague (Mistelle Hannah)
- Franklin County Technical School (Liz Bouchard)
- Northfield Elementary School, Pioneer Valley (Gail Healy)
- Athol Community Elementary School, Athol/Royalston (Carolyn Brown)
- Buckland-Shelburne Elementary, Mohawk Trail Regional/Hawlemont (Jennifer Shaw)

- Sunderland Elementary School, Frontier Regional & Union 38 (Mary Delusa)
- Dexter Park, Ralph C. Mahar/Orange (Jacki Dillenback)
- Four Rivers Charter Public School (Madison Walker)

### **Project Deliverables**

The consultants conducted 11 site visits between November 2017 and March 2018. Project progress was presented at the project's midpoint at a Regional School Health Task Force Meeting on January 18, 2018 and again at the Mass in Motion Steering Committee Meeting on May 17, 2018. All presentation slides are available from Rachel Stoler, Community Health Program Manager and Mass in Motion Coordinator. Additionally, each food service director engaged received a site specific report covering:

- Food Services & Nutrition Representatives
- Grades and Meal Periods Observed
- Observations & Recommendations
- Eligibility, Pricing and Payment Policies
- Current Offer and Menus
- Operations & Logistics
- Budget
- Infrastructure and Equipment
- Supply Chain & Regional Sourcing
- Nutrition & Wellness Messaging
- Appendices: project background, district and school profile, site visit photos, sample menus, school wellness policy, funding resources, references

### **Opportunities for FRCOG and its partners to Support School Food Service**

Based on the collective body of information gathered from the site visits and industry expertise, we, the consultant team, identified the following focus areas as opportunities where the Franklin Regional Council of Governments and its partners may be able to offer centralized support to the school districts, food service programs, and/or food service directors.

#### **1. Administrative engagement**

School administrators are a critical ally to food service directors, but some administrators are well versed in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and School Breakfast Program (SBP) and others less so. This is understandable in light of many competing responsibilities, but makes food no less important. If ignored or under-resourced, programs will develop high rates of staff turnover, deliver lower quality menus, and produce poorer student health outcomes. For these

reasons, each food service director was encouraged to share their individual site report with their district and school administrator partners. FRCOG and its partners may consider offering trainings (e.g. Food Service 101) for superintendents, principals, and business/finance managers on the key elements of the programs to help bridge understanding in the requirements, constraints, and resources required to run them effectively and efficiently.

## **2. Staff balancing, training, and substitute pool**

A key metric used in school food service is *meals per labor hour (MPLH)*. This calculation helps food service directors and administrators to benchmark their production capacity and determine how best to allocate food service labor across multiple feeding locations in the district. Most of the schools visited were in the respective range for MPLH, though in some instances, staff were stretched thin or units were overstaffed. This was typically due to budget reductions, contractual/union obligations, or lack of training that could increase productivity. The most acute and universal challenge facing staffing is a deep and reliable substitute pool. Typically a school has just one, if any, food service worker substitute to call into work if a staff person is sick or otherwise unable to make it to work. Reliable substitutes that are familiar with the kitchens, schools, and students, are rare and highly valued. FRCOG and its partners may consider a role to develop, train, and coordinate a larger pool of substitute food service workers available to any district as needed.

## **3. Nutrition information calculation and posting; nurse validation**

The serving requirements of the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and School Breakfast Program (SBP) are devised around the volume of meal components (e.g. protein, vegetable, fruit, grain) offered on an average weekly basis and their corresponding nutritional values. Menu nutritionals are audited once every three years by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE). Districts engaged tended to do a better job of meeting component guidelines rather than tracking nutritional information (e.g. added sugar, saturated fat, sodium) for their daily menus. Districts have nutritional information for all ingredients and select menu combinations, but this is often in paper form only. Most districts lack the time, and some, the familiarity with menu management technology that could help them to maintain nutritional information for all menu combinations and substitutions that can occur. In a few instances, the food service manager or director is also a dietician, but this is rare. An exception for nutritional information is carbohydrates, which several of the schools calculate in consultation with the school nurse for students, who are diabetic. FRCOG and its partners may consider offering food service directors nutrition and technology training or capacity support to better optimize the

functionality of their menu management systems and maintain nutritional information that is easily shareable.

**4. Menu development collaboration and recipe database development**

Every food service lead expressed desire for menu development collaboration and development of a recipe database. This primarily would require facilitation and a dedicated virtual space for the database to live and be shared among the schools. Ideally, each recipe and combinations of menus would include servings, ingredient source, nutritional information, and its component contribution (e.g. ½ cup fruit, one serving of grain). This might be a project for a nutrition grad student or school food service consultant. Such a resource would help districts to diversify their menus , discover new products, and track nutritional information.

**5. Benchmarking and best practice sharing / success stories/ resources toolbox**

Related to a shared recipe database and menuing process, we would recommend overall development of a community of practice for the county’s district food service directors, managers, and staff. Currently, each district and food service manager expends precious time inventing their own food program elements. A resources toolbox might include examples of parent communications, wellness policies, strategies for integrating food service with curriculum (e.g. health, science, math, art), monthly newsletter content, menu templates, and more. Success stories from one district might help a food service manager in another district to gain buy-in from administrators, staff, parents, and students for proposed improvements to the program. Peer-to-peer best practice sharing is already happening in pockets among the county’s food service district, but other operations remain isolated. Similarly, FRCOG and its partners have convened the food service directors at various times over the past few years, though not all food service directors have been able to participate. We would encourage FRCOG and its partners to continue and to expand their facilitation of this peer group, possibly with options such as an email list that would allow these directors to connect anytime they need and/or more frequent phone calls/webinars around a specific topic of shared interest. We recommend that time for participation in the community of practice should be made possible by the respective district administrators and paid.

**6. Breakfast participation**

Breakfast participation is on average lower than lunch participation, especially at the high school level. Typically, schools that qualify for the community eligibility program (CEP) have higher rates of breakfast participation than schools that do not, because breakfast and lunch are free without any requirement that parents complete paperwork. Schools that offer

breakfast in the classroom also tend to experience higher participation rates. Increasing breakfast participation (>70%) is recommended for all schools as it will support student learning, likely decrease nurse visits, and improve the financial health of the school food program it serves when done efficiently (e.g. additional federal reimbursement).

#### **7. Equipment and infrastructure planning**

The school kitchens visited ranged from new (less than two years in operation) to not fully equipped for food service (e.g. unable to boil water). Some schools have equipment that is broken or underutilized due to other factors (e.g. a kettle that relies on lead pipes, no utility hookup, lack of staff training, function not relevant to the menu). It would be interesting to do a more complete inventory of equipment needs and excess equipment across districts to see where exchanges might be possible between schools and districts. Training on equipment use both for basic functions and efficiency would be valuable for food service staff. We recommend that this and any training should be paid time. For larger infrastructure planning such as upgrading facilities, these conversations should be had with the administration and might be helped by facilitation from FRCOG or other collaborators. Of any equipment and infrastructure challenges, safety issues identified by food service teams or inspectors should be addressed immediately.

#### **8. Technology investment**

Districts and their food service programs are equipped with varying technology and software. In at least one case, lack of internet access or wifi prevents a school from expanding its breakfast program. In another case, food service data is hosted in a number of locations (e.g. Excel, Google docs, external website), which can complicate the ease and efficiency with which information is accessed, analyzed, and shared. A successful program relies on a minimum of a functioning computer dedicated to food service, internet (preferably wifi), menu management software, point of sale (POS) system, and adequate electrical outlets to support all of these. Things like digital bulletin boards and iPads, are not required, but helpful and effective communication tools. As with food service equipment and infrastructure, FRCOG or other collaborators may be positioned to gather the technology needs and preferences of the county's food service programs to inform a collaborative bid, grant application, and/or recommendation for collective upgrades.

#### **9. Supply chain relationship building**

All of the food service directors engaged expressed an interest to source more local foods, but either lack the relationships with potential vendors or buying power to negotiate cost

competitive pricing. In general, the districts were not entirely satisfied with the purchasing collaborative they are part of, often due to lack of local, fresh options of produce available as part of the contract. This is an area in which FRCOG has already begun to take steps with partners like Mass Farm to School and the Western Mass Processing Center to build connections between the food service personnel and suppliers. We recommend that this continue and expand to include a collaborative bid for local produce, grant seeking to subsidize any additional cost of buying local products, assistance with introductions, product education, and contract negotiation.

#### **10. Marketing healthy behaviors and school food**

There is no consistent food marketing of any kind across the districts in the county. Most food service directors rely on marketing elements provided by vendors, found on the internet, or related to Mass Farm to School Harvest of the Month where applicable. The result is messaging that is often not strategically aligned with the program (e.g. age appropriate), not regularly refreshed (e.g. dated, torn), and not consistent with the mission and values of food service (e.g. promotion of ice cream as healthy). Marketing is expensive though, requires design skills, printing cost, and ongoing attention to remain relevant and informative. FRCOG and its partners might consider some marketing support to the districts that could be updated easily, printed locally, and customized as needed by food service directors. With every server and cafeteria being different, any creative products would have to be informed by the food service directors for what would work best in their schools. This might mean offering a couple of different formats including tabletop communications, wall posters, and/or digital bulletin board compatible messaging.

Taste testings are an active marketing tool primarily requiring additional capacity and/or some guidance for food service staff to get started. A pool of interns or additional capacity in the form of FoodCorps service members could support food service teams to implement and use taste testings to introduce new recipes and foods to students in service to diversifying the menu and palettes of young consumers.

#### **11. Student engagement (e.g. student food groups, surveys)**

In a few instances, food service directors in Franklin County/ North Quabbin conduct regular student surveys and/or hold focus groups with students about the school food program. FRCOG might consider if it can inform these processes with approach, frequency, content, or facilitation based on its extensive experience administering other youth-focused data

collection. This assistance could easily nest with the other items highlighted as part of the best practice sharing among food service directors.

## 12. Cafeteria role-modeling

There are typically staff circulating in the lunchroom during any lunch period, more or less engaged with the students as they eat. In a few instances, we witnessed staff monitors taking advantage of lunch time to facilitate engagement with the students (e.g. celebrating good behavior). In these instances, the cafeteria was a calmer community environment, more conducive to consumption. In only one instance did we see staff (a custodian) sitting and eating with students, which the students seem to appreciate. Rather than lunch “monitoring”, we would advocate for cafeteria “role-modeling”. This might look like more staff eating with students, demonstrating healthy behaviors, and talking to students about their food (e.g. where it comes from, their preferences).

13. Food service integration with curriculum: Food and food systems education can be integrated into the school curriculum in many ways. Health and science may be the most obvious places to talk about food, but readings on the food system and food justice can be worked into almost any class, calculations of crop yield, recipe quantities, fitting different shaped produce into crates, etc. can be done in math classes, using local produce can be part of cooking classes, the possibilities are endless. Schools with school gardens have found even more ways to include food in curriculum. It is a great opportunity for teachers to collaborate with the food service staff.
14. Parent communications—Parents have much to say about what their children eat at school, but often are not asked for their opinions. Getting parent input into school food can be a great way to engage them in supporting their children’s healthy eating, as well as encouraging them to volunteer when opportunities arise (cooking demos, taste testing, helping with school garden, advocating for local food procurement, connection with local growers, etc.)

For any questions or additional detail of the above recommendations, please contact:

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