
AUGUST 2020 | MEMBER SPOTLIGHT

Lauren Couchois

Culinary Specialist for Food and Nutrition Services
Greenville County Schools



AN UNFORGETTABLE START TO THE SCHOOL YEAR

A short two months into her new role at Greenville County Schools, Lauren Couchois and her team are reinventing their entire food service program, while still trying to maintain student favorites and community engagement. Lauren may not have a resume of global pandemic experience (who here does?), but she does have an extensive experience in school nutrition to help her navigate these uncharted waters. Learn more about fellow member, Lauren, and her school district's plan for feeding students on a complex hybrid schedule.



1. About Lauren

Prior to nutrition, Lauren had a much different career- making her all the more interesting! Her first degree is in Zoology and she worked as an animal trainer-- cool , right!? She then returned to school and majored in Dietetics, completing her internship in Indianapolis. Through her internship she discovered the world of school nutrition. Lauren had an natural interest in school nutrition and chose to do her choice rotation at a school district. A short two days after she graduated, she started at The School District of Lee County in Fort Meyers, Florida. During her 9 years at the district, she held various positions, progressing her way through the department. She started as the Menu Planner/Dietitian, then became the Coordinator (similar to an Assistant Director) before becoming the Director for her last two years with the district. When comparing her experiences as a Director, Coordinator, and Menu Planner/Dietitian, Lauren shared that "the director's role was a very rewarding position, but it was a lot of hours, especially with a 4-month year old at home. I really enjoyed being director because I felt like I had a stronger impact on the employees. In the previous roles, I felt I had more of a connection and impact on the student level though." After a successful 9 years in Florida, Lauren made the decision to move closer to her hometown in Western North Carolina. She recently started as the Culinary Specialist for Food and Nutrition Services for Greenville County Schools in South Carolina. She is excited to be a part of a progressive team, focusing her expertise on their Farm to School Program and student wellness program.

2. How are your students returning to school for the first day (in-person, remote, or hybrid)?

Lauren's district has created the Greenville County Road Map, which has multiple stops along the way, starting with 100% virtual learning if the COVID-19 spread rate is high in Greenville. Given the moderate caseload at this time, the district will be starting with step 2, which is 1 day a week with 25% of students on campus. The next 25% of students would rotate to on-campus learning. So, each group is on campus 1 day a week, Monday-Thursday, and Friday is a 100% virtual learning day. With continued decline in cases, the plan is to then move to 50% 2 days a week and finally full in-person school.



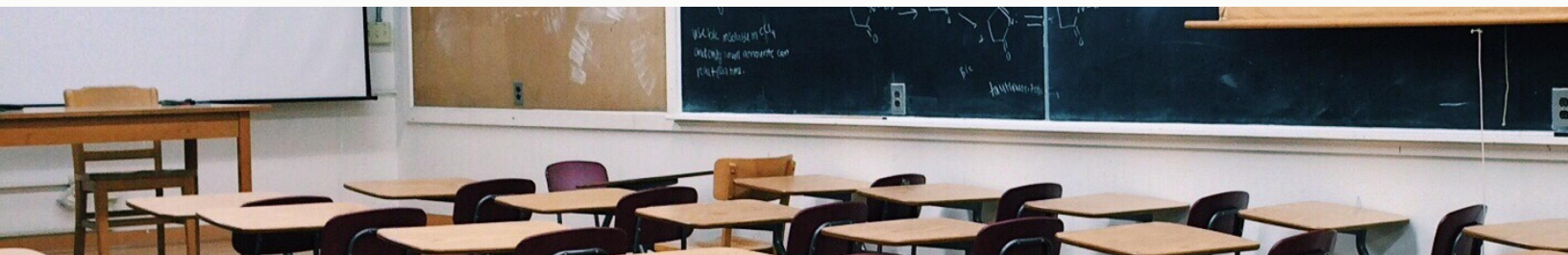
3. What will food service look like and what were the logistical challenges of planning for this service model?

Much of the program at Greenville County Schools is designed to be customizable for the students. There are lots of exciting and fun “build-your-own” type of bars that unfortunately don’t translate easily to hybrid or remote learning feeding models. Lauren and her team are working hard to adapt, while still keeping menu items that they know they are good at and that the kids enjoy. Since there will be a new group of students each day of the week, for simplicity purposes, especially as it relates to menu planning, production, and nutrition standards, they will be serving the same menu item to their rotating groups of in-class learners. They have created a four-week cycle consisting of items such as hot sandwiches, pizza, and nothing but fresh produce. The students in school will then be able to pick up meals for the rest of the week to take home. Within the take-home meals menu, they are sending home frozen, heat-and-serve entrees, so that the students can still have a nice, warm meal during their remote learning lunch break. These menu items consist of Penne Alfredo, Three Bean Chili, and Rotini. The take-home foods are packed in grocery bags for students to transport. A disclaimer with time and temperature details, along with allergy information will be sent home with the frozen foods to ensure that families have the instructions and information that they need to safely prepare the foods.

4. Any changes to your program that you think will stick? What good have you seen come from all of this chaos?

We'll start with the good-- "In general, not just with our employees, I feel like we have more compassion for each other. " In regard to changes that may stick, Lauren and I laughed as she said, "there is nothing about this COVID meal service that we like or want to stick with! We will be ready to get back to all of the fun things we usually do with our program."

Lauren focused on the positive by pointing out the nation-wide recognition and appreciation for school food service. "This has opened up peoples eyes to how important we really are. We have had so much positive feedback for what we were doing for our kids and how hard we work. Even though we've been doing this all along, it wasn't at the forefront, especially for those who didn't know what school nutrition truly is or how hard staff works and how much they care. That has to be the biggest silver-lining to all of this. It's nice that our communities have really come out and come forward to show their appreciation for those on the front line. There are so many kids that rely on us and so many kids who *choose* to eat with us."



5. What else can we do to stay involved with the students, even if they are not in school eating in our cafeterias? How can we still make this fun and inspire our students to live healthy?

Lauren emphasizes the importance of staying involved with the kids and the community, even when students are not attending school. “Even if you don’t have the funding to purchase a special product, you can still do little things, like send home educational information on seasonal produce. At Greenville, we work with our produce distributor to procure anything that’s local. We then choose from the list and highlight items by incorporating them into our menu. We made items, like Sweet Carolina Peach Muffins and actually saw a spike in participation. Give a little hope or inspiration to those out there who feel like it is getting mundane or repetitive. You can still spice it up and be creative!”

Thank you Lauren for taking the time to let us get to know you and for sharing your back-to-school plans!

-The SNS DPG

