

Member Spotlight

# LYNELLE JOHNSON, LRD, SNS



Boomtown. Western Star. The city of Williston, N.D., goes by many names. And it's no wonder. The town, perched on the confluence of the Yellowstone and Missouri Rivers and 60 miles from the Canadian border, has experienced a 210% population jump since 2010, thanks to an oil boom.

Williston Basin School District #7 doubled in size. And now, when other schools are attempting to return to some semblance of normal, the district is once again bracing for growth. A merger with a neighboring district will expand Williston to 5,000 students across 12 schools.

Lynelle Johnson, LRD, SNS, foodservice director for Williston Public Schools, stands on the very precipice of change. But like any dietitian worth her salt, she's ready for it.

## CHAMPIONING CHANGE

In the 16 years that Lynelle has served as the foodservice director for Williston Public Schools, she's watched the district change, and she's changed right along with it.

Lynelle takes pride in "the ability to grow as a district and grow personally and professionally at the same time."

In the beginning of her career, Lynelle worked in a hospital, in both clinical and foodservice settings. She was initially attracted to school nutrition because of a fellow dietitian she met at a dietetic association meeting.

"I just felt like school nutrition employees loved their jobs, and they didn't have to work nights or weekends or holidays. It just gave them a more positive outlook on life," she recalls.

When her colleague left the district, Lynelle applied for the job. She worked there for 7 years before starting a family. When she relocated to Williston, she sought out a position with the school district that did not have a foodservice director at the time. Sixteen years later, Lynelle has a different take on why she loves school nutrition.

"I think over the years what I would say is I just love the concept of feeding healthy food to healthy bodies – and being a part of nutrition education and being a part of the future generation," she says.

*The high school cafeteria showcases a colorful fruit bar.*





## MEETING CHALLENGES

Working in a school district challenges a person.

"I think you go back 10-15 years ago, I've learned so much. I'm a better person. I'm certainly a long way from being where I want to be, but I'm dealing with people and personalities and challenges," Lynelle says.

Lynelle explains her job as walking down the hallway and getting stopped by different stakeholders in the district. One person wants to know what food is high in vitamin C; the next needs help with a broken dishwasher. You just never know where you'll be needed and how.

Like today's labor shortages impacting the country in the wake of COVID, her district has also struggled with hiring because of the massive growth in the area. "People were coming here and making huge wages 10 years ago. We just couldn't hire anybody. I was just trying to stay above water those days. I was washing dishes or cashiering or whatever," she says.

The district made it through, and the amazing staff helped Lynelle survive the challenges with COVID this past year. "I have a really great staff that just was willing to dive in and do whatever they needed to do to feed kids," she says.

As Lynelle gears up for a new school year, her focus will be on building staff cohesion within the expanded district.

*Williston Basin School  
District #7's Child  
Nutrition food truck  
serves lunches in the  
park.*



*Pizza day is a popular summer meal day in Williston Basin School District #7.*

## COMMANDING THE FUTURE

Once the dust settles with COVID and the district merger, Lynelle is looking forward to getting back to normal. For her, *normal* means focusing on innovation and growing participation.

Lynelle has her eye on the district's Innovation Academy for middle schoolers. There she plans to introduce new menu items and gather feedback. Though the district typically trends toward traditional Midwestern fare, she wants to try regional cuisine and international flavors. Lynelle is working toward a ramen bar, pork carnitas and smoothies.

"I feel like in our districts, kids like more processed foods. We really want to try to introduce more speed scratch items," she says. "So, by the time they get to the high school, they would be more accepting of them."

It's a plan that's worked well for Lynelle in the past. She's most proud of building a high school in 2015 with extensive menu choices. "We went from having a 15% to 65% participation rate at our high school."

If those stats are any indication, Lynelle will be ready for whatever this new school year brings.