

2020

December Spotlight

BEN ATKINSON

MS, RDN, CD

Child Nutrition Coordinator & Dietitian
Auburn School District, Auburn, Wash.

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DECEMBER

SCHOOL NUTRITION SERVICES

Article by Elisha Bury, RD, LD



INTRO

Working in a school nutrition program in 2020 feels a bit like taking the RD exam all over again. Dietitians all over the country are being called on to use business knowledge, apply management training, come up with adaptations to handle allergies and clinical-level food modifications on the fly, and still maintain their day jobs. Meet Ben Atkinson, MS, RDN, CD – one such jack of all trades in Auburn, Wash.

“I think we’re all being forced to get out of our bubble and use some of those other parts of being a dietitian. I think it shows the good training that we’ve all had,” Ben said. “I think we’re a creative bunch, and I think that, especially in a pandemic, we’re focused on the right thing. We’re focused on helping our community. We’re focused on keeping our staff healthy and happy. We’re focused on providing good tasting and healthy foods.”

As the Coordinator and Dietitian for Auburn School District, which includes approximately 17,000 students in 23 schools, Ben has been busy to say the least. He’s tasked with planning menus, managing food allergies and feeding requirements, overseeing several grant-funded projects, as well as coordinating the summer meal program, kindergarten feeding, afterschool snacks and CACFP.



CONTINUED... CHALLENGES ON THE FRONTLINE

Some districts might be skeptical about pulling off a bus route delivery model, and Ben understands.

“It was definitely spotty at first,” he said. “It would be like me being asked to go drive a bus. It would be crazy. I think just constant regular training really helped. It took a while, but I think all the bus drivers feel quite confident now.”

Ben started out training bus drivers in the late spring and summer and then continued those regular trainings. For routes with especially difficult setups – sheer volume, complicated counting situations and/or food modifications – he assigned a nutrition professional to the route.

WHAT NOW?

For the 2020-2021 school year, Auburn distributes meals through the summer program, offering grab-and-go lines at each school in addition to bus routes throughout the community. Ben made it a point to menu daily hot specials alongside rotating cold menu options. For example, on December 3, the students chose among scratch-made Chicken Lo Mein, a cold Deli sandwich and a yogurt smoothie with granola.

Going into the New Year, Ben hopes to add more scratch-made recipes to the menu and is working on staff buy-in. These days, you can find Ben in the kitchen doing research and development and creating new recipes.

“We’ve been trying to get away from the situation where we throw the frozen foods in the oven and serve that every day. You know that’s an easy win, right? Kids love pizza. They’re not going to complain too much about that,” Ben said. “But I don’t think it’s the right thing to do. Like most school districts, the kids are quite diverse; (they) come from all kinds of situations. We need to reflect that.”

In addition, a food truck is slated for a spring debut. The food truck will expand the delivery fleet and function as a mobile teaching kitchen for the high school culinary education program. Ben wants to show students other ways of breaking into the foodservice industry as an entrepreneur, and the food truck will serve as a good model.



PROUD TO SERVE

Perhaps Ben's proudest accomplishment has been targeting food insecurity, which is his passion. One way he's doing this is piloting holiday meal service for students. Over Thanksgiving, Ben recruited volunteers to work by paying time and a half and providing contracted benefits. Although the district served only 1,000 meals – a tenth of usual meal participation – he was happy.

"I feel like, hey, that's 1,000 kids who wouldn't have gotten food over that four-day weekend."

Ben plans to distribute meals Monday through Wednesday the weeks of Christmas and New Year's. He's mixing in some holiday fun with unusual menu offerings: homemade burritos, black-eyed peas with cornbread, individual pies and 8-ounce bottles of Martinelli's sparkling cider.

Although 2020 has been a tough year, it has been a rewarding one.

"As school nutrition professionals, I feel like if we can make the student's or the parent's day a little better or easier, if it's one less thing the parents have to worry about, then they can focus on the other crucial things like paying rent and paying the health insurance and all that kind of stuff," Ben said. "I feel like that's a win for us and society."



Thank you Ben for taking the time to let us get to know you!