THE FUTURE OF SCHOOL NUTRITION IS BRIGHT, THANKS TO OUR INTERNS

Jonathan Isbill is an intern and graduate student at Ball State University in Indiana. Jonathan recognizes the critical role that schools play in ending hunger and connecting communities with health education. He has brought excitement and creativity to schools through nutrition curriculum and fun activities, like the Mystery Bag Game. His innate passion for school nutrition has made him a successful intern with a bright future ahead, as a leader in school nutrition.

CONTINUE TO P. 02
How have your involvements in college prepared you for this internship?

Throughout my undergraduate career I looked for opportunities to be engaged with the lives of young children, such as mentoring through College Mentors for Kids or The Boys & Girls Club. Growing closer to the community of kids and families in this area, allowed me a greater perspective to see the highly important role that food (or the lack thereof) plays in our lives. I began volunteering to shadow Purdue-Extension dietitians, teaching nutrition education at local schools and community centers, actively engaging young minds and bodies in conversations around food and health. I helped prepare fresh hot meals to young students at a local food recovery and distribution nonprofit named Inside-Out: Fresh Directions.

Before long, I started to learn more and more about the difficult challenges facing this community and many like it across the country in regards to hunger, food insecurity, and the overall connection between food and health. In today’s world, these are often at a disconnect for people until someone comes along and bridges the gap, which is what wonderful role schools are now providing, promoting, and growing for the future, oftentimes rooted in the work of a School and Nutrition Services dietitian. Being exposed to more environments within food and society, and recognizing the influential impact these can have on our social learning and development, I’ve grown to see just how important the school nutrition environment is for children and young adults. I’ve written on this in the past, on how I believe the school lunch environment is one of the most influential places in a young child’s life. Feel free to check out that article here.

Additional extra-curricular experiences led me down paths of academic published research, grant writing, grassroots marketing / promotion, social media management, and community coalition modeling. Each of these diverse areas have proven to prepare me well for this internship experience in a dynamic SNS career.
What did you think about your internship rotation with a school nutrition professional?

Many kids may not know of anything different than what is showcased to them by the school they attend; a potent source of leadership, values, and empowerment. I have seen these exemplified throughout the time of my current dietetics internship, in which has pleasantly paired me up with Tarrah McCreary of Beech Grove City Schools in central Indiana. Spending time as Tarrah’s shadow has left me passionately pursuing critical aspects of team management, meeting with other professionals and school service leaders to improve health and nutrition practices, grant writing for exciting new programming opportunities and so much more. I am so grateful for this opportunity as it has allowed me to see just how sensational this line of work really is. In a hidden world unknown to me before, exists powerful leaders and role models who are actively participating in the pursuit of a healthier tomorrow by shaping the lives of young adults in schools.

I have loved the experience as my preceptor, Tarrah McCreary’s, sidekick and teammate, and I have a high respect and gratitude for areas she’s allowed me to not just see, but welcomed me to be an active participant and contributor to the team. With my fast-paced lifestyle and people-driven strengths of leadership and programming, I now have a reimagined perspective of what it would be like for me to step into this world of SNS as a professional in the very near future. I can see myself absolutely thriving in a career within SNS! I really think it may be a perfect world for me to dive into. I now have a wealth of insight and experience to take with me as I complete my graduate degree, study for- and ace my RDN exam, and finally snatch those all important credentials as a Registered Dietitian Nutritionist.

- Let us pause for a moment to applaud these servant-leaders.

What are some of your thoughts regarding a career in school nutrition?

Completing my undergraduate degree and engaging in many community opportunities provided me with a strong heart for kids’ health and the value of nutrition. I believe the culture of the school is crucial to the development of a young student into a mature adult and thriving citizen of our community. Exposure leads to greater education and builds towards personal empowerment. Schools seek to graduate young adults who are strong and empowered to live the happiest, healthiest lives they can. So who are the significant people that make decisions in the school, who set forth the culture of the entire 7+ hour day? These are teachers, staff, other students, the all-important providers of Lunch - the famous “Lunch Ladies,” principal, counselors, nurses, and more. These influential leaders may often spend more time with students than their own family members.

“School is Culture - School is Community - School is Life.”
What would you say to an incoming intern interested in pursuing a career in SNS?

For any expecting intern looking for placement in School Nutrition Services, I would encourage the student to keep an open mind, be willing to adapt on the fly, and sincerely appreciate the opportunity to be involved in such an influential world for young minds. Schools are where culture is built, and you will soon be an active participant and promoter of that culture. Enjoy the time you have with your school system, learn the culture of the school, speak with the staff and glean all the wisdom you can. I often find those who work in schools to be strong servant-leaders and could very well be a strong mentor for the rest of your career if you’re willing to embrace the strength of leadership and these relationships. Be mindful of your influence as a college student in these settings; you may very well be one of the closest touch points for students to see an example from college or university. Use your time wisely without losing a focus on the people around you. The requirements of the internship are will help prepare you for the exam, but it is the people you work with that will have the greatest impact on your life and career.

LIVE quotes from Jonathan’s taste testing event of fresh squeezed fruit juice soda
(made with fresh lemons, limes, and grapefruit!)

“It tastes like Sprite”
“It’s so sour!”
“ooooooh! It’s super super sour!”
“It tastes like a soft drink” – “It tastes like pop” – “It tastes like soda”

These are some of the exclamations made by students during our nutrition education lesson where 3rd grade students had the chance try a fresh take on a bubbly beverage, one that is much healthier than regular soda. Students chose a freshly sliced lemon, lime, orange, or grapefruit to squeeze all of its juice into a cup. We then poured in sparkling water to show the kids how to make a refreshing and creative fruit soda with the added benefits of antioxidants and vitamin C. I was amazed to see how engaged the students were during the lesson. They loved the opportunity to use their hands, make a little mess, and try something new. Many of the students were excited to squish the colorful fruit, see the fizzy bubbles, and asking to try different varieties from other fruits too. The students left with a half sheet recipe and coloring page as a reminder on how to make this at home and reinforce the healthy benefits of citrus fruits in a delicious drink that “tastes like Sprite!” Improving the lives of young kids is what its all about in SNS.

I had set up a mystery game with the students that keep fruit hidden in bags while they had the chance to feel the fruit inside without looking and take a guess as to the fruit inside. To the kids’ surprise, the small green fruit inside one of the mystery bags was indeed not lime, lemon, or an avocado but guava! We included guava in the presentation as an opportunity to introduce a new fruit to the students. I strongly believe in education by exposure and the greater the education provided, the more empowered these students are to make healthy choices for the rest of their lives. Comments about SpongeBob and cutting hair are from the funny display of a Pineapple sticking out of a lunch sac mystery bag. While the other fruits were hidden within the depths of the bags, the pineapple was tall enough to have its “hair” sticking out of the bag. The kids thought this was quite hilarious and enjoyed conversing about SpongeBob’s home and that we could give the pineapple a hair cut to make sure it stays in the bag. We finished our lesson with tasting freshly squeezed fruit juice the kids were able to pick their fruit themselves and then squeeze as much juice they could into a small cup. We then went around and poured sparkling water into their cups to innovate the fruit juice soda. We were impressed to see how many of the kids enjoyed the drink and were excited to try other varieties in the future.