

# KELLEY TOON

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## GA TAKES THE LEAD IN CREATING A NEW ROLE FOR SCHOOL NUTRITION PROFESSIONALS

Kelley Toon, MS, RDN, LD, is the Academic Nutritionist for the Georgia Department of Education. She is the first to fill this unique and much needed role. Kelley enlightens us with more details about her job and the potential future of this new and exciting position in the field of school nutrition. Join us as we get to know Kelley and learn more about her career.

## ORIGIN & CAREER PATH

I am originally from Pennsylvania, more specifically the Scranton area (filming location of The Office!). I attended West Chester University in Pennsylvania and upon completing my undergraduate degree, I was accepted into Life University's dietetic internship program, located in Marietta, Georgia. I then advanced onto my masters degree at the University of Alabama.

I began my career working as Patient Services Coordinator at St. Joseph's Hospital in Atlanta, where I managed the daily operations for a variety of food service systems in a 420-bed hospital. I then quickly made my way back to working with schools. I fell in love with school nutrition during my dietetic internship rotation with Cobb County Schools and my wonderful preceptor Cindy Culver (Thanks Cindy!). I then worked as Program Account Manager with The Dairy Alliance, implementing dairy programs and promotions in Georgia schools (This was a 'dairy' good job; love dairy farmers!). I worked with Cobb County School District serving as an Area Supervisor and then Wellness Assistant Director. Cobb County School District is located in the metro Atlanta area. The district is the second largest school system in Georgia and the 23rd largest in the nation. It serves nearly 113,000 students with 112 schools, including 67 elementary schools, 25 middle schools, 17 high schools, one charter school, one special education center and one adult education center.

All of these experiences helped prepare me for my current position, one that is fairly new to the Georgia school system and to the field of school nutrition, as a whole.



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**It was a dairy good  
job; love dairy  
farmers!**

*(Kelley speaking on her role  
with the Dairy Alliance)*



## THE ROLE AS AN ACADEMIC NUTRITIONIST

The Academic Nutritionist position was created two years ago when the Georgia Department of Education recognized the extreme importance of nutrition education and healthy eating in schools. Food related curricula can enhance student and teacher engagement while also meeting Georgia Standards of Excellence in all K-12 subject areas. We provide examples of ways to connect the classroom to "food-based learning" experiences. The reason I emphasize the term food-based learning is because we found that school administrators were more receptive of this terminology than using the traditional title of nutrition education. The Academic Nutritionist promotes nutrition and activity for the whole child, including their health and academic performance. Partnerships and collaboration are key to success and Georgia is rich with allied health and wellness partners and organizations. The position serves all of the Georgia school system.

Included in our resources is a learning portal for teachers to log in and access nutrition education materials. This ensures that educators are getting factual, up-to-date, nutrition information and that they do not have to take time out of their schedules to create new materials. I am hopeful that other states see the importance of this role and begin to implement a similar model.

## HOW DOES YOUR POSITION IMPACT FARM TO SCHOOL AND THE AGRICULTURE BUSINESS AS A WHOLE?

There are two aspects of our impact on the farm to school program and agriculture. The first is that we incorporate farm to school initiatives in our food based learning resources. This includes Georgia's Harvest of the Month and other learning materials that highlight healthy, fresh, local produce that is grown right here in our state.

The other relationship with the ag. business that we emphasize in our program is the vast amount of career opportunities in agriculture, also in connection with a career in nutrition. We encourage students to explore Georgia's Career, Technical, and Agricultural Education (CTAE). There is a world of opportunity as it relates to agriculture and nutrition, including RD positions within the department of agriculture, dairy and animal nutritionists, food scientists, and farm to school specialists, to name a few.



## THE FUTURE OF KELLEY'S NEW ROLE IN SCHOOL NUTRITION

The Academic Nutritionist has a place in every state. Our diverse country of states has different needs and agriculture, but each state can benefit from nutrition professionals, like us, especially in this capacity. Luckily, here in Georgia, we have great support from state leadership, including the State Superintendent of Schools, Richard Woods. Relationships with state departments are crucial to adding value to our credentials and gaining trust as an RDN or DTR. As we continue to focus on supporting the whole child, nutrition will be a key ingredient in fueling and educating Georgia's future.



### **Food-based learning in action:**

*Pi Day celebrations incorporated delicious blueberries. GA is the 2nd leading producer of blueberries in the country.*

*( [www.worldatlas.com/articles/the-top-blueberry-states-in-america.html](http://www.worldatlas.com/articles/the-top-blueberry-states-in-america.html) )*