

MEMBER SPOTLIGHT

SARA DAN

MBA, RD

MEET SARA

Is there anything more rewarding than giving back to the school system you grew up in? Sara Dan, Director of Food and Nutrition Services at Sarasota County Schools, grew up in Sarasota, Florida attending the very same school district where she is now the director. Sarasota County Schools is a 50-program school district with a free & reduced percentage of approximately 45% and over 300 employees. Leading up to her journey as Director, Sara received her Dietetics degree from the University of Florida and completed her



Dietetic Internship at Emory University. A few years after becoming a Registered Dietitian, she found herself back in her hometown of Sarasota where she connected with the previous director, Beverly Girard, at a Dietetics Association meeting.

Beverly had been looking for someone to fill the Nutrition Educator position, and Sara was a perfect fit. Since then, Sara has worked in various positions within the program including Internship Coordinator, Training Supervisor, Area Supervisor and now, Director.

A CHALLENGING BEGINNING

"I wasn't sure what to expect when I took on the role of Director," Sara says. "It's been an interesting experience over the last two years." Sara had only been in the position for seven months before the pandemic hit. She remembers sitting in the central office and realizing they weren't coming back. The district had been closed for hurricanes before, but never for longer than a couple weeks. "I watched our fund balance evaporate. We were financially viable, and then we were closed for 48 days." The loss of revenue, supply chain shortages, and staff being unable to work were all unexpected challenges experienced by every district around the country, and Sarasota County Schools was no exception.



With frequently changing regulations, Sara was very grateful that her previous experience in the supervisory positions prepared her to take on the uncertainty of what was to come. As a supervisor, she handled the Summer Food Service Program and frequently had to think on the fly, problem solve and create solutions fast and furious. "We often had to improvise on the spot." Sara helped her team navigate the sudden changes by working alongside them on the front lines. "I am so grateful for the employees who stepped up and worked alongside me to help sustain our program's goals." Sara knew she couldn't do it alone. "The entire team pulled together. We fed outside, we fed in the rain, we did a lot of different things trying to reach the people in need in our community while also navigating a virus we didn't know much about." Sara knows how difficult this year has been on her staff. She strived to stay upbeat and positive while making the best decisions for both employees and students. She did her best to recognize and appreciate them for their efforts as much as possible. She also listened to their concerns and directed them towards the resources they needed.

FARM TO SCHOOL FALTER

Yet another challenge created by the pandemic was losing the entire team that helped manage the five-acre farm that once provided fresh fruits and vegetables for the program. Sara has always had a passion for Farm to School and School Gardens. Growing up in 4-H and FFA, Sara participated in programs at the very same farm when she was in high school and even received a degree in agriculture. She knows how important it is for kids to understand where food comes from. Thankfully, the district was still able to put local foods in the hands of students this year by utilizing DoD funds and milk from a local dairy. Sara is now working with one of the district's high schools and the local technical college to find partners who will help fund the farm again. These partnerships will allow them to continue growing local produce to use in schools and provide students with experiences with agriculture like she had growing up. By doing this, she hopes to not only carry on the legacy of the previous director, but also the agriculture teachers who taught her in high school.



REBUILDING FOR THE FUTURE

As the 2021-2022 school year approaches, Sara and her team are in the process of rebuilding the program. With all students coming back in the fall, the district plans to utilize the Seamless Summer Option which they hope will help rebuild their fund balance. In addition, they will rebuild the infrastructure of their office by filling vacant positions to help support their employees. Sara and her team are simply trying to make the best decisions. Sara says that this year's motto has been "try to do the next best thing."

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"I am so grateful for the mentors who have come alongside me over the years," Sara says as she reflects on her previous experiences. Coworkers, mentors, and various Child Nutrition Directors around Florida checked on each other throughout the pandemic to help support each other during this difficult year. Despite this year's challenges, Sara is excited for what's to come.

"Child nutrition is something I feel is extremely important and it's an amazing field to work in. I don't think I would have taken on the role I did if I didn't feel that way." "It's not just about my personal goals, but also trying to take care of the people that I've worked with for so many years and do my part."



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