

MEMBER SPOTLIGHT

MARIA ANDERSON

MS, RD, SNS

MEET MARIA

Maria Anderson MS, RD, SNS is the Nutrition Services Coordinator for Roseville Area Schools in Roseville, Minnesota. "Amongst all of the hustle and uncertainty of this year, Maria has persevered," Supervisor Angela Richey, MPH, RD, SNS says. "She has maintained a collected and calm demeanor that has helped settle everyone from frontline staff on up. Her work ethic, organization, and passion for food equity has made her a true #trayblazer throughout this pandemic!"

JOURNEY TO SCHOOL NUTRITION

Maria's dietetic journey started at the College of Saint Benedict where she received her Bachelor of Science degree in Nutrition. She went on to do her Dietetic



Internship at Saint Louis University where, like many future RDs do in their internships, she learned that her initial career path was not right for her. After completing her internship and receiving her master's degree, she ended up back at her alma mater, College of Saint Benedict, where she began her career in academia, teaching "Intro to Nutrition" for about two years. While she loved teaching, Maria longed for a more fast-paced environment. She soon stumbled into the world of School Nutrition after a friend encouraged her to apply for a position at a nearby district. "Every day is different. School Nutrition involves education, science, marketing, and management," Maria says. A perfect fit!

CURRENT ROLE

In her current role as Coordinator at Roseville Area Schools, Maria manages two public school districts and five joint agreement schools. The demographics range from high to low free & reduced percentages, and over 82 languages spoken at home in the largest of the two school districts. Maria strives to elevate the views on school meals by creating menus that are not only healthy and delicious, but that also reflect the diversity of students.

EAT LOCAL

One of Maria's goals is to use food as an equity tool and close the opportunity gap for students. She does this by menuing new, local foods and plant-forward protein options that students may not have the opportunity to try at home. Her favorites including lentil crumble nachos, pad thai tofu and pumpkin seed pesto. Maria loves utilizing locally sourced food from farmers to not only support the local economy, but to also be reflective of the community. Theme menus include "Minnesota Thursdays" which features all locally-sourced ingredients one Thursday per month. This has become such a success that they are increasing the frequency to twice per month in the next school year!



A DIFFICULT YEAR

When the pandemic hit, it was evident how crucial school food is for families in the Roseville area. "We needed to find a way to feed students, as well as provide support and opportunities for families," Maria said. "School nutrition came to the forefront as communities were looking to feed families." They strengthened their relationships with the community and non-profit organizations like Every Meal and the grant-funded Minnesota Central Kitchen. Not only does the program provide family-style meals to students and their families, but they also employ hospitality workers who lost their jobs during the pandemic. This partnership has allowed the district to provide twice-weekly meal pick up for students, plus family meals that utilize local products. Although the pandemic has created many unique challenges for their program, the use of local products has certainly not suffered. "I see family meals from Minnesota Central Kitchen and Every Meal as a way to decrease food insecurity during school breaks and extended weekends. We will certainly be continuing the conversation with these organizations to identify how we can continue our partnership next year."

MOVING FORWARD

"After a year filled with a lot of individually wrapped items and disposable trays, we will continue our four phase sustainability plan," Maria says when asked what next year will look like. This plan includes going back to reusable trays and flatware, in addition to utilizing local foods. She is also looking forward to returning to in-person trainings with managers and staff to continue to empower them with the skills to prepare kitchen-made recipes, as well as, introduce managers to new cuisines and culinary preferences. "This year has showed us just how critical school nutrition is to our community's food security safety net. Providing high quality, student-approved meals to our community, no matter where they are, was one small step of addressing disparities in Minnesota."



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