

LAURA THOMAS

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Join us for an interview with SNS DPG Spotlight Member of the Month, Laura Thomas, MED, RD, LD, FAND, to learn about her career path and experiences that got her where she is today, creating educational resources for school nutrition programs all across the country.

1. Tell us a little bit about yourself and your career path thus far.

During my 35-year career, my work included: Clinical Dietitian (1 ½ yrs), Director of Nutrition Education Programs, Idaho Dairy Council (18 yrs), and Nutrition Coordinator, Boise School District (3 yrs). After three years and a life-changing education tour comparing school meals in France and the US and childhood obesity rates, I took a risk and started consulting work to return to my love of nutrition education and training. I highly encourage everyone to find an adventure and invest in yourself – for me it was this Field to Plate trip. Others should find their own adventure and investment. My consulting work includes: product development, standardized recipes and compliant cycle menus, training development and delivery including sessions at SNA's ANC and as an Institute of Child Nutrition (ICN) trainer, and conducting the nutrition review portion of the Administrative Review and other technical assistance roles. I loved creating innovative, award winning or worthy nutrition education programs: The Body Walk and A Taste of Space (IDC), Nutrition 101: A Taste of Food and Fitness (1st and 2nd editions of printed and online versions) for the Institute of Child Nutrition (ICN), and USDA projects Grow It! Try It! Like It!, The Guide to Professionals Standards for School Nutrition Programs, and the recently released Menu Planner for School Meals.

2. How have you been involved with DPGs and how did these experiences benefit you?

I served as our SNS DPG newsletter editor for three terms (June 2015 to May 2018) for the quarterly, electronic Nutrition Link. It preceded the new monthly Spoodle Report. Other DPG positions include: nominating committee chair for Nutrition Education and the Public DPG; Webinar Chair and Secretary for Food and Culinary Professionals DPG. Beyond the learning experiences and skills development, I value the friendships with so many amazing RD/RDNs and NDTRs around the country. I encourage all my colleagues to accept the call to leadership and volunteer positions. I have gained more than I gave during my various volunteer and elected positions for local and state offices and national DPGs.

3. Why was the USDA FNS Menu Planner created?

USDA FNS's goals for the Menu Planner for School Meals were to merge technical guidance with additional support resources to develop a step by step guide for planning quality reimbursable meals that appeal to students.

4. Who helped create the Menu Planner and how long did it take to complete the project?

I assembled a team of dietitians with editorial and school nutrition expertise – Liz Marr, MS, RD, FAND and Hope Hale, MS, RD, SNS with graphic elements designed by One L Design – Michele Messenger. We started October 2014 and we completed our work by September of 2015. The publication was released by Team Nutrition in September 2018.

5. How will it benefit School Nutrition Professionals?

The Menu Planner delivers on the goals – a step by step guide for menu planning success. The organization of the content flows from overview of child nutrition in America that created the new meal guidance to the meal components, meal patterns, and nutrient specifications of the updated guidance. Menu planning basics and menu documentation (production records and standardized recipes) provide the foundation for providing reimbursable meals that students will select and enjoy. The guide also provides information for procurement, special diets, and marketing and education efforts.

We created features, such as Check for Crediting, to help district menu planners grasp the most important concepts. Another feature gives tips for the documentation needed during Administrative Reviews. Ideas from others in the Menu Chat showcase how schools can employ different approaches to support local needs while meeting meal pattern guidance. A great example of this is breakfast menu planning. The flexibility to merge grade groups and credit meat/meat alternates toward grains or vegetables towards fruit requirements make breakfast a complicated topic. Add in Offer versus Serve rules and the menu planner truly has many choices for creating a reimbursable meal. Hopefully, we were successful in giving easy to understand information for this and all menu planning concerns.

6. Any themes that you see throughout the menu planner and why were these subject areas of focus?

I am most proud of my team's approach to integrate food safety throughout the Menu Planner rather than treat it as a separate subject chapter. Food safety is critical in school nutrition operations. By integrating appropriate food safety content in each section, we provided a seamless approach to menu planning with food safety top of mind.

For example, the specific food safety concerns of each meal component group are addressed in tandem with the five meal components. When salad bars are discussed as a way to meet weekly vegetable subgroups, food safety for salad bars, including training resources, support the menu planning content. The chapter focused on production records and standardized recipes includes the Process Approach and importance of including time and temperature critical control points in recipe instructions and record keeping on production records or other documents. Food safety aspects of procurement, receiving and storage are included in the purchasing section; this is particularly useful when those responsibilities are handled by someone in the business office who might only read that section of the guide. Special attention to food safety for specialized diets is another content matched topic. Finally, the concept of a culture of food safety, that food safety is everyone's concern in a school, is highlighted in the marketing and education section of the Menu Planner.

The Menu Planner highlights dozens of resources available to schools to help be successful with menu planning and meal service. Many of these are training resources available from the ICN, USDA Team Nutrition and state programs.

7. Do you have any ideas brewing or projects coming up? What is your goal or vision for your next development?

I am currently working on a training for the ICN that helps CACFP programs provide breastfeeding-friendly environments. The updated CACFP meal pattern guidance now allows meal reimbursement when a mother breastfeeds onsite. I am excited to be helping others create the supports that these mothers need when returning to work or school. Helping a mother sustain breastfeeding her baby for long as she desires is a rewarding way to promote good nutrition and health.

At this stage in my career, I am focused on work that fills my need to make a positive contribution. The professionals working in child nutrition programs – from child care settings to schools – have such important work in feeding our nation's children. I enjoy finding ways to support the effort and hopefully make their jobs a little easier. I also have time to devote to volunteer and leadership opportunities, such as the advisory committee for the dietetics program at my alma mater the University of Idaho, and Academy DPGs.