

MARCH 2021 | SPOTLIGHT MEMBER

LAUREN THOMAS, RDN

Dietetic Intern Coordinator at San Luis Coastal Unified School District

Meet Lauren

If the driving force behind Lauren Thomas, RDN, could be summed up in one word, that word would be connect. Whether she's building personal connections with students, establishing relationships with farmers and businesses in her community, or connecting the dots for parents struggling to maintain healthy lifestyles during the pandemic, connectedness drives Lauren's passion for dietetics.



And what better way to connect than through school nutrition?

"School food across the country is now front and center and spotlighted, which I think is amazing," Lauren says. "Why aren't we highlighting school food? The amount of local businesses and farmers that we can support because we're feeding so many kids is amazing."

As the Dietetic Intern Coordinator at San Luis Coastal Unified School District—a district comprised of 15 schools and 7,500 students in San Luis Obispo, California—Lauren highlights school food every day. Her "complicated" role includes educating students, providing culinary support and developing recipes as well as stepping in anywhere she can.

A TENACIOUS BEGINNING

While many people hunkered down during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March, Lauren headed outside. She walked down to the central kitchen, located near her home, and asked to help.

“It’s COVID, and school’s shut down. But aren’t you still feeding kids?” Lauren asked her former preceptor at the district, who of course said yes. “Ok, how can I help? What can I do?”

Lauren rolled up her sleeves and helped where needed, from production to curbside service. She even put her bachelor’s of science degree in Culinary Nutrition from Johnson and Wales in Providence, Rhode Island, into action to provide staff meals for the exhausted crew. After she graduated from her dietetic internship at Cal Poly San Obispo, Lauren reached out to her preceptor looking for contacts in school nutrition.

“I fell in love with school food. And I think it was because ... I really like to build strong connections with people,” Lauren says. With kids, these relationships are long-lasting and help create healthy lifestyles.

Her preceptor figured out a way to bring Lauren on staff in the district.



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A TIME FOR INNOVATION

Though nutrition education has changed because of COVID-19, Lauren and her district remain committed to finding new ways to connect with students.

Over the summer, Lauren teamed up with a fellow Cal Poly intern to create a recipe and produce a cooking demo for SLO County Library. Initially, the project involved connecting a library book to food and then conducting taste tests via a food truck. With the pandemic in full swing, the project moved online. San Luis Coastal USD also hosted the class with high school students and sent home ingredients. From the students' feedback, Lauren was able to get menu ideas for the next school year.

The demo featured a Thai Basil Lentil Burger that she created. That burger has gone viral. The idea originated with the idea of including lentils from a local farmer. The plant-forward burger generated so much interest that it became part of the curbside menu.

In addition to the cooking demos, which will resume in the summer, Lauren and her interns work on curbside education. That includes distributing curbside activities (such as coloring sheets) and interesting foods. Recently, a local farmer of exotic products donated kiwanos, a spiky cross between a cucumber and a melon, and the team gave them to families picking up curbside meals.

Each week, the district sends home pantry boxes with local breads, cheeses, eggs and produce. For these types of items, Lauren builds a simple video to introduce the product, shows how to cut it and then provides simple, minimal processing recipes.

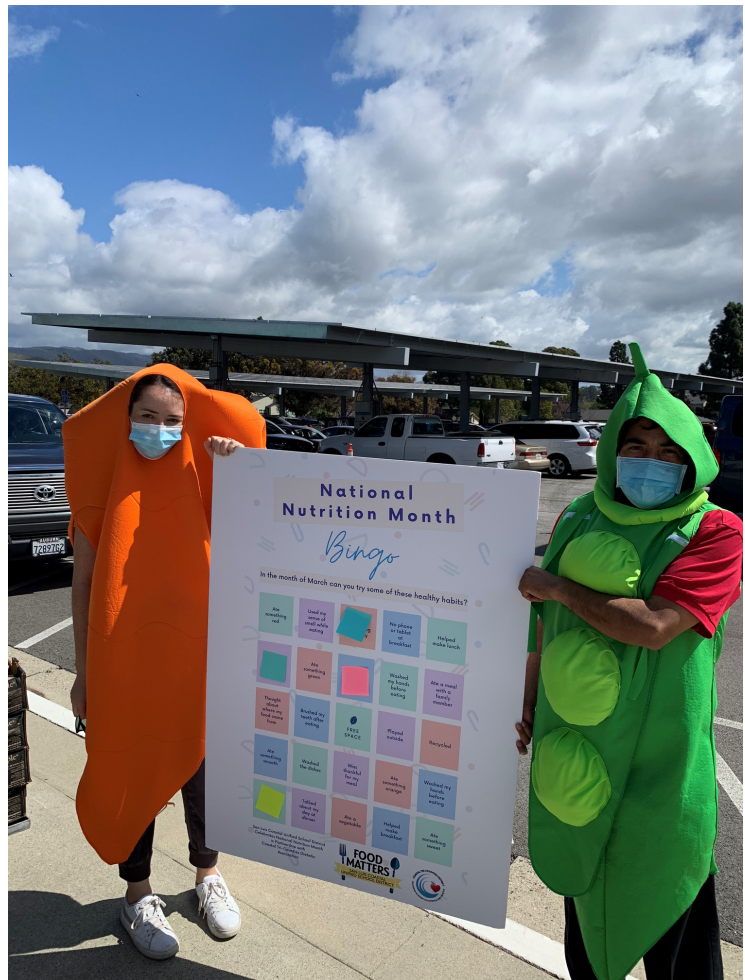
"You can give people food all day long, but if they don't know how to cook with it, they don't know what to do with it, then it sometimes becomes a waste," she says.

Part of the district's goal with nutrition education is connecting farm to table in the community. In regular school years, the team takes students on farm tours or brings local farmers to the district. Now Lauren and her interns visit the farmers and create photos and videos for students.

A TIME FOR INNOVATION *continued...*

Other virtual projects include bitmoji classrooms to share nutrition information and answer questions via Zoom. These have been useful for CACFP enrichment.

For National Nutrition Month, Lauren and the team are doing a life-sized Bingo game during curbside pickup to help students personalize their plates and create a healthy lifestyle. Bingo spaces will include items such as I ate something red or I went on a walk.



Drive-through Bingo is one way
San Luis Coastal Unified School District is
engaging students and encouraging healthy living
during curbside pickup.

SILVER LININGS

Even though working in school nutrition in the time of COVID-19 means always adapting, Lauren knows that a lot of good is coming from this work.

“One thing that’s interesting too is that you get to connect more with the parents because the parents are the ones opening up the classrooms a lot of times with the kids or the parents are driving through with the kids in the car,” Lauren says. “So you get to kind of get the whole family involved.”

In addition, Lauren developed a relationship with a local creamery to make cheese for the pantry boxes.

“Then he told us, through COVID, because you guys have purchased such a large amount, I’m able to not only hire on one more employee but also retain my employees that I would have had to otherwise let go,” she says. “School food is a big deal. We do a lot of things We really benefit the community as a whole.”

For dietitians struggling to meet the demands of the changing school nutrition landscape, Lauren offers this advice:

“You’re doing the work on the ground that is feeding so, so, so many, and you’re preventing so many things later in life by giving them nutrition and nutritious food early on and creating that healthy relationship with food,” she says.

So keep on going!



Article written by Elisha Bury, RD, LD

