

Meeting the Food Service Needs of Generation Z

A district–food service partnership provides a nourishing vision for a school community.

By Anthony N. Dragona, RSBA

Today’s students—generation Z—are recognized as the most ethnically diverse and food-engaged generation in recent American history. At the same time, no previous generation of youths has faced such great health-related challenges with regard to diabetes and childhood obesity.

Well-nourished kids make better students. Union City School District in New Jersey saw a unique opportunity to develop the traditional school dining program in partnership with the district’s contracted food service provider and to get students involved throughout the process.

Union City is one of the most densely populated cities in the United States, with more than 72,000 residents living in a 1.4-square-mile area. Proximity to the Lincoln Tunnel and the New Jersey Turnpike provides easy access to New York City and other bustling urban areas.

The Union City Board of Education serves 11,670 students in grades K–12 within its 15 school sites and 1,750 three- and four-year-olds with 36 community partners. Student demographics reflect a 92% at-risk, free and reduced-price national lunch program status, with 36% of students having limited proficiency in English and



18% having special needs. Serving the needs of those impoverished students provides challenges that the district is addressing aggressively head-on.

The school community provides much-needed support for its students and their families, working in concert with local government. This urban center is a vibrant home to many Central and South American families—the district serves a student population that is more than 90% Hispanic.

Seeing a Need

School nutrition has taken a prominent place in the Union City Board of Education’s mission to provide for the whole child. Since the schools serve as the hub of activities within the community, most schools are open from 7:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. or later. Many are open seven days a week.

In 2010, only 5 of the 15 sites had full-service kitchens, so school lunches were often transported from a satellite kitchen, limiting the quality and variety of food the students could enjoy. At that same time, parent Angela Andrews spoke before the Union City Board of Education at their monthly meeting, citing a troubling statistic: although at that time 86% of the students qualified for free or reduced-price lunch and breakfast, only 16% were eating breakfast in the schools.

Andrews provided the wake-up call; the time for action had come. During the next few months, the district business office gathered school-level administrators, parents, students, and leaders from the food service management company to develop a comprehensive food service plan that was fresh, exciting, and sustainable. The group assessed programs, operations, and facilities.

The existing services were evaluated with an eye toward rebranding what school nutrition could and should be.

An analysis of programs revealed that the New Jersey Department of Agriculture offered additional opportunities through the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program, Breakfast After the Bell Program, and After School Dinner and Snack grants. With regard to operations, the existing services were evaluated with an eye toward rebranding what school nutrition could and should be. And in the area of facilities, an analysis indicated that the district needed to create a long-range facility plan to



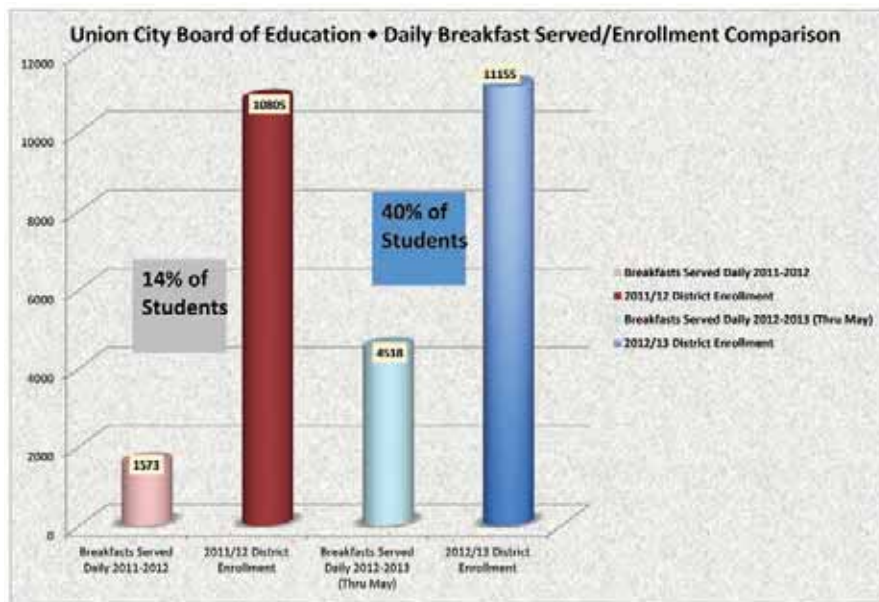
give all school kitchens the capacity to prepare hot and varied meals that met a developed district standard.

Plan into Action

In 2012, Union City leaders worked closely with the district’s food service provider to implement a plan to systematically refresh school cafeterias, introduce new menu concepts, offer more culturally relevant dining options, integrate new technology, and provide regular access to chefs and dietitians on-site at schools. Students were involved through recipe and naming contests and voting on menu items. The enthusiasm was contagious, as students, teachers, administrators, parents, and contracted food service provider staff members developed a new vision for the program.

More information. Traditionally, school menus were printed and distributed each month; however, the menus lacked detailed information about the items being offered. School nurses requested the inclusion of the carbohydrate count for each item so they could properly correlate the menu with their administration of insulin to students. In the month following their submission of the National School Lunch Form, parents mentioned the lack of information that they had received. A monthly newsletter was established to share the menu and the nutrition information, and each school’s webpage features school lunch menus and news.

Breakfast in schools. An important step was the introduction of breakfast in all schools—known as the Breakfast Before the Bell Program—at no extra cost to students. Research has validated the positive effect that eating breakfast has on student attention and performance, and the initiative benefited from the strong support by school principals and parent advocates.



Although the program required significant legwork and open communication to get all schools on board, it laid the foundation for additional programming.

Adding on. Breakfast in the schools was so well received that it whetted the district’s appetite to do even more. The district immediately proceeded to the next phase of the plan: the installation of TurboChef ovens in the high schools (to cook made-to-order pizzas in three minutes) and the Casa Amigos monthly ethnic entrée. The Casa Amigos concept brought Latin American, Cuban, and South American flavors to high school students with such items as fajitas, carnitas, arroz con pollo, and tacos.

Other aspects of the food service program included offering more fresh fruits and veggies and rolling out a snack program, coupled with nutrition education.

Chefs 2 Schools. One of the highlights of the Union City food service program is the Chefs 2 Schools initiative. Program chefs interact with

students, teach them about cooking, and introduce new flavors. That interaction motivates students to try new things and generates excitement about preparing healthy foods.

Program chefs interact with students, teach them about cooking, and introduce new flavors.

That was especially true when celebrity chef Jet Tila, of *Chopped* fame, came to Union City High School as part of a student recipe contest. The culinary-centric generation Z students loved seeing a famous food face and interacting with him throughout the visit, while he made food and nutrition education fun and participatory.

Cooking Up Success

Tackling those types of changes takes a close partnership of and collaboration with many parties: school operations, faculty, contracted food service provider, food service workers, parents, and students. It has

also been important to celebrate the changes and to acknowledge contributions and milestones along the way. When the Thomas Edison Elementary School café renovation was complete, for example, the grand opening involved students, parents, and faculty.

Today, thanks in part to that deep collaboration, the district has earned a Community Eligibility Provision from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The CEP allows schools that serve predominantly low-income children to offer free, nutritious school meals to all students through the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs. The district feeds approximately 12,000 students several meals each school day and continues its efforts to plan and introduce new concepts.

The district recently piloted a menu technology that provides menu and nutrition information—including details for those managing food allergies or diabetes—in multiple languages across multiple platforms: email, the web, and a mobile app. And in 2015, high school students can expect to enjoy a Freshman Pizza Academy and new cook-to-order stations featuring ethnic fare like Asian street food and Moroccan dishes that tie to cultural studies in their curriculum, taking our food education concept even further.

As a former student of Union City schools, I find that endeavor to be particularly rewarding. We are strengthening this tight-knit community and setting an example for other school districts.

Anthony N. Dragona, RSBA, is the school business administrator and board secretary for the Union City Board of Education in Union City, New Jersey. He is also a member of the ASBO International Board of Directors.
Email: adragona@union-city.k12.nj.us