

Case Study: Verndale ISD, Verndale, Minnesota

Rural district offers creative, student-pleasing menus within its limited resources

The Verndale school district in central Minnesota is like many rural districts – limited in staff and under-resourced. Foodservice Director Vickie Thompson, who also works in the front office, came into the position with little training on menu planning, USDA nutritional guidelines, HACCP, allocating USDA Foods or ordering.

In her first year in the position, she relied on the district's existing USDA-compliant menus. She realized however, students and district staff wanted a new variety of menus. She also quickly discovered that the federal reporting requirements and service procedures were a challenge. When a foodservice director she knew referred her to NutriStudents K-12®, Thompson checked it out and signed up!

"I loved that it has all the right portions and incorporates different foods," Thompson said. "I also liked that it has all the fats, carbs and sodium listed with each menu item." Those factors alone helped save Thompson and her staff time and worries about complying with the National School Lunch Program guidelines.

In the first year with NutriStudents K-12, the district offered a 6-week cycle from the system. Based on the positive reception from students and staff, Thompson moved to a 12-week cycle the following year.

"Our food tastes better because of the creative use of spices and sauces, and everyone really likes the variety of proteins we provide," she said.

"NutriStudents K-12 makes my whole program a lot less stressful."

The buffalo chicken, grilled lime chicken and enchiladas are tops with students in Verndale. The foodservice staff learned to adapt a few recipes to please the particular tastes of the students, like substituting melted cheese for shredded cheese on the nachos. They also rely on pre-made dressings and sauces rather than the scratch-made recipes from NutriStudents K-12, simply for a lack of staff. They also offer some of the students' favorites from the district's previous menus.

The combination of fresh new menus tailored to the population and the addition of a salad bar has increased lunch participation among students and district staff. On average, 425 of the 525 students eat lunch daily. The foodservice staff quickly warmed up to the new system and menus as they saw the response from both the kids and adults.

The foodservice staff was further enamored with the system's built-in Food Production Reports for every menu week. They no longer struggle with reporting requirements, which is a big relief to Thompson as she looks ahead to her USDA Administrative Review. She is also reassured knowing that the responsive client support from NutriStudents K-12 will be by her side as she goes into the audit.

In addition to the menus and reports, Thompson was thrilled with the simplicity of commodities allocations using the NutriStudents K-12 USDA Foods forecasting calculator. She chose her 12-week menu rotation, selected those weeks in the calculator and was provided the exact amount of each commodity food to order. What could have taken her hours or days to arrive at a "best-guess" estimate, took only a few minutes and the result was much more precise than a best-guess.

In many ways, NutriStudents K-12 has become Thompson's go-to resource to make her foodservice program the best it can be with the resources she has. "NutriStudents K-12 makes my whole program a lot less stressful," she said.