

## Successful Foodservice Programs Simplified with NutriStudents K-12

Running a USDA-compliant foodservice program can be a challenge for small, rural districts participating in the National School Lunch Program. Generally unable to attract experienced foodservice directors with dietetic or nutritional backgrounds to their locales, these districts can get overwhelmed in the complexities of the USDA nutritional guidelines for school meals.

Many districts in central Minnesota have found help running efficient, USDA-compliant foodservice programs through Sourcewell, a cooperative purchasing organization serving over 50,000 nonprofit and public agency members nationally. Sourcewell prides itself on providing its members products and services of value through competitively bid contracts. It has introduced and provided NutriStudents K-12 to its Region 5 member districts.

JT Clark, foodservice director of Park Rapids Area Schools, was one director who struggled in the maze of USDA regulations and nutritional guidelines. “NutriStudents K-12 helped me develop a menu I felt confident met the USDA guidelines,” he said. “It has made recordkeeping a snap!” He’s currently using a 4-week lunch menu cycle from NutriStudents K-12.

“With NutriStudents K-12 my whole job is easier. We’re spending less time doing food prep and cooking. Production reports are all right there and so easy.”

Judy Gertz  
Head Cook  
Park Rapids School  
District

NutriStudents K-12<sup>®</sup>  
Menu Freedom. Over 100 Certified Weeks.

The Verndale School District had a similar experience. Before NutriStudents K-12, the foodservice staff was challenged by the USDA reporting requirements. They quickly became enamored with the built-in daily food production reports, weekly verification reports and well-organized nutritional data on NutriStudents K-12.

“I love that NutriStudents K-12 has all the right portions and incorporates different foods. I also like that it has all the fats, carbs and sodium listed with each menu item,” said Vickie Thompson, Verndale’s foodservice director.

Based on the positive reception Thompson received from students and staff after the first year with NutriStudents K-12, the district moved from a 6-week cycle of NutriStudents K-12 lunch menus to a 12-week cycle in its second year. She noted the combination of fresh new menus tailored to her students and staff, and the addition of a salad bar, bolstered lunch participation over years prior to using NutriStudents K-12. Today, she and her staff serve lunch to about 420 of the district’s 525 students daily.

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. NutriStudents K-12 even helped Thompson prepare for and pass her last USDA Administrative Review and is ready to help with the next in the spring of 2020.

Mark Jennissen, foodservice director of Bertha-Hewitt Schools ISD 786, also relied on NutriStudents K-12 to ready his program for its USDA audit. Afterwards, he said, “I am a very grateful client! I highly recommend NutriStudents K-12 to anyone.”

Jennissen uses a 4-week cycle of NutriStudents K-12 menus currently and knows he has a deep well of menus to draw from when he wants to freshen up his rotation. “NutriStudents K-12 offers menu freedom with over 100 weeks of certified menus. They are the answer to menu fatigue!” he said.

Menu quantity doesn't mean much if hungry students don't eat or aren't satisfied. Students in Sourcewell-member districts love the NutriStudents K-12 menus. Across the board, the districts have experienced high rates of sustained participation. On the average school day, the 13 rural districts collectively serve about 8,760 lunches from NutriStudents K-12 menus and more than 3,500 breakfasts.

"Our kids just love the food from the NutriStudents K-12 menus! I haven't had one single complaint yet this year!" said Sue Motzko, foodservice director at Wadena-Deer Creek Public Schools. "NutriStudents K-12 is the best thing that's happened to me in my career so far!" She makes full use of the system's reports and productivity tools and offers a 4-week menu cycle from the system to serve lunch to an average of 82% of her district's students daily.

"My daughters have always enjoyed the breakfasts and lunches they are served. Yes, even the picky one!" said Stephanie Japke, LPN, a parent of two daughters whose schools serve NutriStudents K-12 menus. "I have not had them ever come home to say what a horrible lunch they had."

The Staples-Motley School District has benefited from NutriStudents K-12 in many ways since implementing the system five years ago. In the first month of use, the district had a 5-6% increase in lunch participation and about a 20% decrease in plate waste. By the end of the first year, participation had gone up 10% in every building, at every age, at both breakfast and lunch. The following year, participation increases and costs savings realized by using NutriStudents K-12 resulted in a budget surplus that funded the purchase of two new milk coolers and equipment maintenance not originally budgeted. The district realized a significant budget surplus again the following year.

Brittany Zuhlsdorf, Staples-Motley's foodservice director, relies on NutriStudents K-12 for her 4-week lunch menu cycle, compliance reporting and creating USDA-compliant breakfast menus with the Breakfast Menu Builder.

"[The Breakfast Menu Builder] tells you if you don't have enough grain, fruit or veggies and won't let you finish a menu until you get the right amount," she said. "Without that, I don't think we would offer everything we need to meet the USDA criteria. If we do have enough, it still saves a ton of time for me as I don't have to check and double check to make sure it meets the criteria."

As a new foodservice director, Zuhlsdorf came into the position more confident because she knew the NutriStudents K-12 system and team would help her run a compliant program. That allowed her to focus on learning other aspects of her new position.

"Having NutriStudents K-12 is a great weight lifted off my shoulders," she said, "knowing they are always there to help me when I need it and they will help with USDA reviews. That was one of the fears I had becoming the new food director. I am confident now that they will be there to help me through it. Thanks again for this great program."

These districts' success stories and bolstered confidence in running a USDA-compliant foodservice program are gaining the attention of their foodservice colleagues in Minnesota and nationally. NutriStudents K-12 continues to onboard many new clients who appreciate the ongoing professional support, depth and variety of student-approved menu weeks and productivity tools to simplify operations.

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Stephanie Japke, LPN  
Parent

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