

Waccamaw School Cafeteria Sets Shining Example

BY SUSAN USHER

On a typical day nine out of every 10 students eat lunch at Waccamaw Elementary School, a larger percentage than at any other school in the county. And almost half the students eat breakfast as well.

What makes the difference? "These kids love to eat up here," asserts Sharon Long, cafeteria manager. "They have real good appetites."

Overhearing the question, a teacher, Argela Smith of Shallotte Point, offers her own explanation: "We have the best cooks."

Both claims appeared to be the case on this particular day, as first-graders went through the line eagerly choosing lunch.

That day's options created an appealing, colorful array of food. Sue Inman and Assistant Manager Alice Smith were on the line serving ham and cheese hoagies, nachos and chips, lettuce and cheese cups, curly fries, steaming bowls of vegetable soup, chips, mixed fruit and Icelean Bellamy's big chocolate chip cookies. Youngsters had a choice of beverages as well, milk or fruit juice.

Good appetites help, but Mrs. Long and her staff aren't afraid to innovate and find ways to appeal to those appetites. Many of their ideas fall right in line with some of the changes the school system's new child nutrition director, Rebecca Brandon, is encouraging some of the other cafeteria staffs to implement.

Ms. Brandon comes to the school system with 15 years in dietetics and nutrition in the hospitality and hospital industries. The new job gives her a chance to put to use all her accumulated skills managing money and working with employees and the public. "I thought it would be a fun job and I think I was right," she said.

"You know 6-year-olds eat differently from 18-year-

olds," says Ms. Brandon. "If you want to know what the kids like, look at the dishwasher table."

So why, she asks, was the system serving virtually the same menu at all three types of schools, elementary, middle and high?

And why, if a school cafeteria is operating in the red, or near it, as is true at several county schools, would policy discourage or forbid those bringing bag lunches from buying a la carte items to supplement their meal?

Past thinking was that the practice might discourage ordering of plate lunches, a main source of program revenues because of U.S.D.A. reimbursements. Students are offered a choice of five items and must have three items (only one entree) on their tray for the system to qualify for reimbursement from the federal government. Still, Ms. Brandon says she would rather have the increased sales. She wants all school cafeterias operating on the plus side. To make it happen, she's looking at everything from offering students more appealing menus and quick-serve options to more efficiency in operations through bulk purchasing and better material handling.

Interestingly enough, in an a la carte experiment at one county school, full lunch sales didn't drop; instead it looked like the cafeteria was attracting additional clientele—and income Ms. Brandon figures might have gone to a fast-food restaurant otherwise.

Having "closed" campuses, where students are not supposed to leave for lunch, doesn't seem to be making much of a difference in her opinion.

"From what I can see, it's not making any difference. In my humble opinion they're either finding a way to get it someplace else or are not eating, or having a friend who's eating pick up extra a la carte items for them."

Unlike some other county school cafeterias in the past, Mrs. Long's staff has already been offering assorted supplemental food items students can order in addition to or instead of a plate lunch.

"We sell a lot of a la carte items," she said. "We have always offered a la carte items even when the other schools didn't so much."

Typical offerings include chips, ice cream, graham cracker and marshmallow cookies, juices and fruit punch and budget items such as popcorn and dill pickle strips.

"We try to keep something for a dime for the kids who don't have more than that to spend," she said. "Whatever they'll eat, we'll sell."

Ms. Brandon also wants to move toward more low-fat, low cholesterol food items on the menu, but expects to move gradually as the U.S.D.A. works on the same concern in the types of commodities it makes available to schools.

"We want to offer a happy medium," she said. "We want to offer food that people will eat. We want to move as many people through as possible."

One example—serving curly "fries" instead of mashed potatoes and gravy. The potatoes are just as nutritious, the kids like them better and will eat them. And they're a timesaver for staff to prepare.

Knowing what your student body eats goes a long way toward keeping operations profitable; during first semester all schools were asked to survey and come up with a "top 10" list.

At Waccamaw, Mrs. Long knows her students—what



ASSISTANT MANAGER Alice Smith checks to see what kindergartner Steven Norris wants for lunch, as Teacher Assistant Winnie Norris escorts a class through the cafeteria line.

STAFF PHOTOS BY SUSAN USHER



MARSHA COLEMAN adds another hoagie to a growing stack.

they like to eat, how much they can afford to spend. "Pizza's their favorite food—and chocolate milk," she said.

Pizza's also a hit at other schools. Typically Bolivia Elementary School serves about 350 meals a day. But the day pizza and peanut butter and jelly sandwiches were on the menu, 500 ate. "I don't know where they came from. And only 65 ate peanut butter and jelly," said Ms. Brandon.

Taste testings, theme meals and other promotions, such as listing daily menu items and their prices at the door, also are aimed at increasing student participation and introducing new foods.

Students can eat up to two meals a day at school—Brunswick County participates in the national school lunch and breakfast programs, which offer discounted meal prices for students of lower-income families.

However, countywide, breakfast participation was running about 4 percent at the end of the first semester of school, with participation lightest at the high school level and highest at the elementary level.

"Mothers are more concerned about the K-5 kid getting something to eat, even if it's cold cereal and milk," noted Ms. Brandon. "Older youngsters are more inde-

pendent. They get to school and are more interested in socializing."

At one upper-level school, an average of 25 students was eating breakfast every day, but the school was paying salaries for two employees to fix and serve the meal.

"Twenty-five kids at 69 cents each is not a lot of money," noted Ms. Brandon. "I've got to find a way to get kids to eat breakfast, particularly at the high schools and middle schools."

She wants more teamwork and interaction between the food service staff and the rest of the school's staff. "You're teaching them, we're feeding them. We're on the same team. We'd like to work more closely."

A little of that very kind of teamwork at Waccamaw licked the breakfast problem there, says Mrs. Long.

Younger students were turning out for breakfast as soon as they got to school, but not the seventh and eighth graders.

Mrs. Long and Principal William Shoemaker put their heads together. At Shoemaker's suggestion, the older students now eat breakfast after their first class, from 9 a.m. to 9:15 a.m., said Mrs. Long, and "participation has doubled."

"We try to work together, whether we're working out a schedule or trying to increase participation," she said.

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