



## Food Service Staff: Heroes of the Pandemic

Back in March, the moment the pandemic first hit and schools transitioned to at-home, virtual learning, food service directors and staff in school districts across the country sprang into action to keep the students in their districts fed. Their reaction was immediate and diligent. Like most, they hoped that the intense effort would be short-term and we would return to “normal” soon. This has not been the case, of course, and yet, their effort has not waned. Since then, feeding staff and nutrition directors have gone above and beyond to make sure no child goes hungry. Their flexibility and dedication to their communities has been crucial and valued in these unsure and difficult times.

Sharon Muscarella and Michelle Coker are just two of the incredibly committed, passionate and knowledgeable members of the Food Service portion of the Central Kentucky Educational Cooperative. CKEC serves as a connector between the cooperative and districts, making sure

that school districts have access to quality food vendors and, as a result, students have access to food whether at school or at home. Muscarella serves as Administrative Bid Coordinator/Food Service Director at CKEC, and Coker is Child Nutrition Director for Fayette County Public Schools and CKEC Food Service



Director Cadre Board Chair. They know the remarkable amount of effort it takes to plan, prepare, and deliver meals in order to meet the nutritional needs of students daily.

Normally, during a pre-Covid time, there are generally two types of feeding programs in school districts in Kentucky. The first is the National School Lunch Program, which offers breakfast, lunch, and after school snacks to students during the school year. Depending on a student's background and situation, they can qualify for either reduced price or free meals under the National School Lunch Program.

During the summer when there is no school, districts switch to the second program - the Summer Feeding Program. In this program, the cafeteria staff can feed a much wider age range. Any child



under the age of 18 can receive free meals, regardless of their financial situation or whether they are enrolled in a particular school. Any child in the community can and will receive the food they need.

Just as schools switched to online learning, districts were fortunate to get the opportunity from the federal government to switch from the National School Lunch Program, which is useful but more limited considering the circumstances, to the Summer Feeding Program. Districts were prepared for this

transition, but that does not mean that this change has been easy. The logistics for getting funding and supplies were and continues to be a challenge. Guidelines and protocols are always evolving, so food service directors have to be nimble in their approaches and delivery methods. Supply shortages have been a challenge, as well. Items like gloves, masks, other PPE, food containers, and even meal ingredients are hard to obtain and organize. Finally, there's the stress of keeping an adequate number of staff working in order to run programs efficiently. The workload is enormous, and districts can experience staffing shortages due to Covid positive cases and staff concern due to susceptibility to Covid. There's the fear of being at risk for Covid, from age, comorbidities and other health concerns. Cafeteria staff has to work five, sometimes even seven days a week, organized in separate groups in the kitchen so they are able to social distance and limit quarantine numbers in the event of a positive case.

Throughout this difficult time, though, food service directors have kept the needs of children as their sole focus. That has made all the difference. Cafeteria staff, nutrition directors and all other food service staff have been working non stop since March. It is physically and

emotionally draining. In Fayette County, for instance, the cafeteria staff have to either drop food off at students' houses, or hand out meals at one of the 64 feeding sites. Throughout all this turmoil, communities have banded together to help each other- and have grown closer because of it. The CKEC food service directors lean on each other for support, even when they can't meet in-person. Sharon Muscarella recalls her experience so far, "We've always been a close knit group, because they're very passionate and compassionate. It's been hard because we feel like we haven't been able to see our family".

While it is rigorous, seemingly endless work for cafeteria staff, a silver lining throughout all this is that food service staff and administrators are finally, fully getting the recognition they deserve for their hard work. "Every day you hear wonderful stories. Sometimes, the highlight of the day for the kids is to get in the car and their parents to drive them to school to go pick up lunch so that those students can see the lunch ladies and meal men, and that's the highlight of their day too." Michelle Coker shares the heartwarming story. "That's rewarding to know that we are essential during this time, because child nutrition people are very passionate about what they do". Food service staff in school districts are quite literally feeding the future. It is an ongoing, demanding task, but one that is absolutely vital to the success and wellbeing of the children in our schools.



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