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## On the Front Lines of Child Nutrition

Nov 1, 2011 12:00 PM, Michael Buzalka

At Jackson, Mississippi Schools, the school meal program is serious business.



**ONSITE MEAL PREP.** Most production takes place in individual school kitchens the district is trying to upgrade in steps.

She's been quite effective in gaining investments in her program — which is not an easy sell at any time in a cash-strapped district like Jackson. Nevertheless, Hill has an impressive list of successes, including the introduction of an automated POS system way back in the mid 90s (since upgraded) to validate program participation by free/reduced eligible students, streamline production and promote more efficient procurement.

As the district slowly proceeds on a capital improvement initiative to replace aging and inadequate facilities, Hill has added design consultant to her role portfolio, working closely with architects to make sure that the kitchen and dining facilities in the new schools will not only mesh with modern school nutrition requirements but also are flexible enough to adapt to changing circumstances in future years.

Antiquated production spaces and aging equipment hamper meal preparation at the older sites, a significant concern in a district with no central production capability. Equipment upgrades like the combi-ovens help these site kitchens be more efficient even in the older spaces.

With onsite production at most schools, logistics, replenishment and storage are significant factors for the foodservice department,

which has a central warehouse that receives and stores commodities and staples like paper and canned goods.

These are sent to school sites once a week in the department's four delivery trucks. Other replenishment is made to each site by a prime supplier and by bread, fresh produce and milk distributors. Each site keeps an extra day's worth of stock on hand to deal with emergencies.

## Future Plans

Hill says she worries about future federal mandates, such as the one for reducing sodium content, and what that might mean for her meal production options. "Right now, those new requirements would force us to do more scratch cooking because the processed food we get has too much sodium to meet the standard," she says.

Another new initiative she hopes to expand is a breakfast-in-the-classroom project now underway at one elementary site, though it only affects kindergarteners and pre-K students at this time.

"We wanted to start small," Hill explains. "A successful classroom breakfast program needs leadership that starts with the principal, and also a team effort that involves not just teachers but maintenance staff and, of course, the kids."



Executive Director Mary Hill shows off a classic piece of equipment at one kitchen, a vintage mixer still in perfect working order.

To further validate Jackson's accomplishments in the nutrition area, 11 district schools submitted applications to the HealthierUS School Challenge last school year.

This year, wellness initiatives include the Organ Wise Guy nutrition education program. Also, all a la carte items must meet district nutritional standards and no student can buy them until they have purchased a reimbursable meal (brown baggers can buy a milk with a verified sack lunch).

As fits with her longstanding association with SNA, Hill is a big supporter of involvement in the national school nutrition community. All 60 of her site managers and all three area supervisors have completed SNA's certification program ("on their own time," she says proudly). She also encourages membership in SNA, and all managers have complied. Among the perks is a chance to attend regional meetings and even the national convention on a rotating basis.

"I want them to meet and mingle with their peers, to listen and learn and know that they are part of a community with a common mission," Hill explains.

She also taps suppliers to enhance menus and educate staff. For example, she recently sent her managers to one of the district's major equipment suppliers for a course on how to utilize the units more efficiently and broadly.

Her goals for the current school year include implementation of an online payment system, expanding the Organ Wise Guys program to more elementary schools, continuing the USDA Fresh Fruit & Vegetable Program and extending the HealthierUS Challenge application process to all elementary sites.



Foodservice Supervisor Christell Hicks with some of the Organ Wise Guy materials.

## Organic Learning

A particularly popular nutrition education program used by Jackson City Schools is Organ Wise Guy. Funded by a grant from the Kellogg Foundation, it is currently being taught in 18 of the district's schools. The essence of Organ Wise Guy is an emphasis on how proper nutrition affects separate parts of one's body. The program uses a series of age-appropriate tools ranging from books and posters to specially designed dolls that show the different internal organs and explain their functions.

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