



She Could Be YOUR CHAMPION

By Susan Davis Gryder

Members of your student advisory group have the power to improve your program, sway opinion, bust misperceptions and spread your message. Wait—what do you mean you don't have a student advisory group?

As a school nutrition professional, your mission is to stay focused on a number of top priorities, among them: feeding kids healthy, safe and nutritious meals and snacks; educating students about nutrition to help them develop habits that will serve them well throughout life; and fighting childhood hunger in your community by providing a safety net for students from food-insecure households. Meeting these goals day in and day out is a pretty tough challenge, and you can use all the help you can get!

And when negative misperceptions of school meals in general—and your cafeteria in particular—persist, despite evidence to the contrary, your job becomes exponentially more difficult. That's why, somehow, you need to make time in your busy day for one more priority: to nurture relationships with everyone in the community who supports all that you are doing in your schools and cafeterias. You need to find champions.

Principals who you can call allies are critical. Ditto district-level administrators with decision-making power or influence on your operation. Board of education members—you want them on your team, too. Teachers, custodians, coaches, school nurses—check, check, check, check. Parents—duh. Area reporters, pediatricians and civic leaders all can play fundamental roles.

Now, are we forgetting anyone? Hmmmm...it feels like there's a group missing.

If you really have overlooked the group with arguably the most power to make or break your operation, then shame on you. Because if your list didn't start with the students in your school or district, you might as well throw in the towel and concede the public awareness battle for school nutrition is lost.

THE AMBASSADOR WORE SNEAKERS

Every day, students decide whether to eat a school meal, whether to choose a healthy extra or snack, even (if they're old enough) whether to enter the cafeteria at all. This isn't news—this is why you invest time and energy in the menu mix, the cafeteria environment, marketing strategies, promotional activities and customer service.

There's nothing wrong with building a customer-driven operation. But what kind of relationships have you built with your customers? How many do you know by name? Do you interact with them beyond the few minutes they travel along the serving line? Most important: Have you put their loyalty to your program to work?

That's right. Your student customers can “work” for you in your public awareness efforts. School-age children arguably are the single-most peer-influenced demographic in society. Kids like what their friends like, what the cool kids like, what the bigger kids like. So, if you aren't nurturing relationships with a key group of school nutrition “ambassadors” to use their peer power in support of school meals—and healthy dietary choices—you are squandering a colossal opportunity.

Such a group also can be a vital source of feedback about what you're doing right—and wrong—in your program. Children and teens can be brutal in their honesty, but you've already gone a long way to win their trust and support just by asking their opinion! (Of course, following through with answers or changes is also essential.)

SNA recognizes the value of ongoing student participation and input in school nutrition operations. In fact, for some 30 years, the Association administered a program designed to encourage its members to establish student-based Youth (later changed to Nutrition) Advisory Councils (YACs/NACs). Although SNA's leadership opted to sunset the official program several years ago, the organization continues to support and promote the development of school nutrition-focused student groups.

That's because many schools and districts all over the country are benefitting from thriving student groups that provide input, lend support and spread the word about the great things their cafeterias are doing. Read on to be inspired by just a few of these model groups and learn how you can start—and grow—one of your own.

MANY AGES, MANY STAGES

There is no age cut-off for a school advisory group, and different grade levels bring different energies and priorities to the table. Elementary school kids can be more enthusiastic about promoting the cafeteria, but might hesitate to provide negative reviews or be less able to articulate specifics about the reasons behind an opinion. Teens, on the other hand, might be less effusive about promoting the cafeteria but are sure to give you a frank assessment as to what you're doing wrong or right!

The ages of your group members also will be a factor in how often and when you meet: High school students are more likely to have free periods or be able to come early or stay late, while elementary school teachers might be reluctant to allow their charges to miss any instructional time. As a group leader, it's important to be flexible and work with students and teachers. For example, some groups might meet as part of an established class period, such as a non-core class for elementary school kids or a related class like home economics or consumer science for high school students.

One successful elementary school student group, the aptly named Food Dudes, is supervised by Mary Lee Martines, cafeteria manager for Forest City (Pa.) Regional School District. Martines' small, rural district has just two schools: one for K-6 and one for Grades 7-12. When forming her student group, Martines contacted 4th-, 5th- and 6th-grade teachers for suggestions of potential members; she ended up with 20 students, two from each classroom, for the group.

Martines confesses that she was prompted to launch her group as a compliance measure of an incentive program from the Pennsylvania Governor's office, which requires that students participate in menu selection. But she quickly discovered that her active group of elementary-schoolers provide her with invaluable feedback and assistance in gaining school-wide acceptance for new foods. Today, "I'm having a blast with it," she reports.

She credits the children's enthusiasm, creativity and open-minded curiosity. As an example, she cites a Hamburger Helper®-type dish that she wanted to improve before returning it to the lunch menu. During her biweekly Food Dudes meeting, she asked for the group's help, explaining the necessary ingredient and nutrition components and letting the children taste the revised recipe and offer opinions and suggestions for change. "We worked on this for a few weeks," she recounts. At the end of the process, "All the Food Dudes named it Meat-A-Roni! That's not exactly what I wanted to call it," she confides, "but I didn't tell them that!" Meat-A-Roni was added to the menu cycle to great success, thanks in no small part to the fact that the Food Dudes gave it their stamp of approval and talked it up to their friends.

Today, Martines is in expansion mode. Some of the Food Dudes soon will move on to the district's high school. She will ask these veterans to take their mission with them and form a similar group of secondary students to provide input for that school's nutrition operation.

NO TEEN TRIFLES

The Food Dudes' energy and enthusiasm clearly are infectious, but will such an attitude be sustained as they grow older? Are secondary students in your school or district interested in voicing their opinions about something as "mundane" as cafeteria food, when their attention is fixed on boyfriend/girlfriend relationships, college entrance requirements, after-school jobs and Justin Bieber?

Mary Leslie, director of foodservices for Blackstone Valley Regional Vocational Technical High School in Upton, Mass., discovered that there's nothing "mundane" about school food to a teen—especially when changes are implemented! During Leslie's first year at the school, she

began using a whole-wheat pasta and found herself confronted by a full-blown, student-organized, Facebook-promoted food strike!

“After the strike, I set up the student advisory board!” reports Leslie. “Now, whenever I serve something new, I try it out with the group first, and ask for compliments and complaints. The kids are very vocal, and it’s very helpful!”

Leslie draws representatives from each of the 15 school-sponsored clubs on campus. “We started out with about 24 members, but have cut it down to 15,” she says, explaining that having too many participants made it difficult to collect feedback effectively. Leslie’s student advisory board meets every other month, during the last period of the school day. Members advise her on proposed menu changes and new foods and carry their opinions back to their friends.

BEYOND THE “BITE CLUB”

The most effective student advisory groups aren’t organized simply to serve as a taste panel. The most successful groups become true public relations partners. Mary Lee Martines worked with the Food Dudes to inaugurate a universal breakfast promotion during National School Breakfast Week this past spring. “The Food Dudes did the advertising!” she reports. “They were so into it. They decorated bulletin boards, made posters.” And in keeping with the official “School Breakfast Detectives” national theme, “We even had students who dressed up like detectives and went around to the classrooms performing a skit they wrote themselves. The kids and the teachers really enjoyed it.”

In Denver, the school nutrition team applies some creative partnerships to form student groups that get the message out about good nutrition. Anne Wilson, who holds the unique title of Superfoods Project Coordinator for Denver Public Schools, coordinates a number of student advisory groups whose mission and makeup vary from school to school. For example, at two Denver elementary schools, she leads groups of 5th-graders in a public-private initiative with a local community radio station, KGNU. The students gather information from their peers about foods they like (or don’t like!), come up with new ways to prepare them (broccoli smoothies!) and create radio spots about nutrition. (You can access some of these spots at eatyourradio.kgnu.org.)

Wilson is always on the lookout for new ways to get students involved in her creative efforts without cutting into precious classroom time. In one school, she arranged for student groups to meet during their art class and subsequently used their artwork to promote a spotlighted food in the cafeteria; for example, bean mosaics featuring facts about different types of beans were a particularly eye-catching approach to nutrition education. The box on page 40 includes additional ideas for specific projects your student advisory group can tackle.

GROUP DYNAMICS

Seasoned veterans offer a miscellany of advice for those now inspired to contemplate the establishment of a student advisory board.

Don't be afraid to mix it up. It might be tempting to pack your student board with those kids who tend to be the most-frequent customers or who write thank-you notes to the cafeteria staff. But Mary Lee Martines recommends an advisory board that will provide you with a variety of perspectives and opinions. “The advisory board should be made up of students who eat often in the cafeteria and those who don't eat there at all or only occasionally,” she says. “There should be students who are free, reduced and full-paid.”

Engage your principals. Denver's Anne Wilson stresses the importance of partnering with the principal of a school. “The support of the principal makes a world of difference,” she notes, advising that the first step should be a meeting with the principal. “If it's a school where participation is low or kids want more of a say in what's served in the cafeteria, the principal will support that. Good principals are in tune with their kids and want to help them feel part of the school, and will look for opportunities to do this,” she affirms.

Wilson also suggests emphasizing some of the added benefits of group participation. “There are learning benefits to [student] groups: research skills, marketing to peers, writing, using reference materials...these are good learning tools for the students,” she notes.

Don't hide their light. Seek out ways to increase your group's visibility and credibility. If no one knows about the group, they won't have much influence in spreading your public awareness messages. The group can staff a table at a school fair or back-to-school night event. Older kids might coordinate a nutrition fair of their own. Maybe group members can contribute a regular column to the school newspaper or make weekly announcements on the public address system.

Be predictable. Avoid ad hoc meetings; set a schedule at the beginning of the year and stick to it! Kids will see that you take their group—and their input—seriously. It's also a good lesson in planning and coming to meetings prepared.

Take advantage of students who are “too cool for school.” In one of her elementary school groups, Anne Wilson asked the 5th-graders—the oldest and therefore coolest kids in the school—to promote nutritious foods that are a harder “sell,” such as broccoli. Their social capital made their younger counterparts more open-minded to the formerly “blah” vegetable.

NO BORED BOARDS

Whenever you assemble a group of enthusiastic kids in a room and then ask for their opinions, you're likely to get some creative answers and probably some pleasantly unexpected outcomes. Mary Leslie knows that her program faces an uphill battle at her school. Not only does it have a low free/reduced eligibility rate, but “These are high school kids, and they can drive,” she points out. “We don't have a state-of-the-art operation; there's no food court.” Nevertheless, Leslie's operation competes successfully with area fastfood restaurants and other competition—and she credits her advisory group with that achievement. Since the group was formed, participation has increased. “We are just one school with 1,200 kids,” she says, “and we serve about 800 of them for lunch.”

Mary Lee Martines is tickled by the success of her student group: “I see a different attitude [toward the cafeteria] in the kids who participate in the Food Dudes—and in some of their friends. Now they want to come in; they want to know what’s in the food. And they pass the information along; they go home and tell their parents, who begin to think differently about the cafeteria, too.”

She also appreciates the opportunity for informational outreach: “If I have small groups of kids who learn, for example, that there are five components to a [school] meal and one must be milk, they will explain it to their friends. So the information is spreading a little.”

For Anne Wilson, one of the most eye-opening outcomes of her student groups’ work with the radio project was how much awareness it gave them of the influence of media and advertising on dietary decisions. “It was interesting to watch them learn more about that.”

Wilson calls the opportunity to provide real input and see it show up on the cafeteria menu “transformative” for participating students. Martines wants “more time and extra help to give to the Food Dudes.” If your school doesn’t have a student advisory group, what more powerful testimony do you need to get started when the new school year begins in the fall? Well, maybe one more: Student advisory groups, says Martines, “really give the cafeteria a good boost. Their positive attitudes about healthy eating and eating in general breathe excitement into our meal programs.” **SN**

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GET YOUR STUDENT GROUP GROOVING!

Want to make the most of your student advisory council? Don’t limit your activities to periodic tasting panels. Check out this list of great group activities, excerpted from SNA’s NAC Handbook. You can download the entire publication at www.schoolnutrition.org/NACHandbook.

National School Lunch and Breakfast Weeks

These annual events are great opportunities for your group to promote school meals to fellow students and the community. Be sure to check out the April issue of School Nutrition for a school year preview of official themes, as well as the online toolkit for each event for activity suggestions. Also, wrap-up articles published in April and November feature reports and photos from schools and districts; these can be great sources of inspiration.

Industry Facility Tours

Students can learn different aspects of the foodservice industry, from production and packaging to marketing and distribution. Contact local companies, businesses, restaurants, etc., and arrange a tour.

School Kitchen Tour

Set aside an afternoon to show how the school meals program is run. Show the students all of the behind-the-scenes ins and outs of their school nutrition program.

Parents/Seniors Day

Invite parents and/or senior citizens to share breakfast or lunch with students. This is a great way to promote school food programs in the community and gain support.

Food Drives

Collect non-perishable foods and donate them to a local charity. Holiday seasons are perfect occasions to kick off a food drive campaign.

School Assembly on Nutrition

Get the entire school involved by holding a fun and educational assembly about child nutrition or any other topic related to health, wellness, food, nutrition and so on. School nutrition professionals, doctors, dentists, nurses or nutritionists can be great speakers. (Consider guest speakers for your advisory group meetings, as well.)

Classroom Presentation on School Nutrition

Use posters, role-playing, speakers, taste testing, etc., to make presentations in the classroom.

Write a Newsletter or an Article in the School Newspaper

Students and staff could write articles for a NAC newsletter. Print up flyers for students, faculty and parents with important information about child nutrition. A NAC column can be added to the school newspaper. Let the local media (newspapers, TV stations, radio stations) know about NAC-sponsored events. Keep people informed about the good things your group is doing!

Let Everyone Know Who You Are

Arrange for custom T-shirts, pens, pencils, stationary, bumper stickers, buttons and decals, etc. Be visible in school and in the community. Items also could be sold as a fundraiser.

Bulletin Boards

Display a large bulletin board in the cafeteria or another highly visible place in the school and work together to post fun facts and nutrition information. Be sure to change displays regularly.