Technology Helps These Ohio Districts Serve Up a Farm-to-School Experience

CHALLENGES

- Complexity due to small staff managing a tri-county K-12 nutrition program
- Desire to incorporate farm-to-school meals and experiences
- Need to drive participation and engagement to fund local-food initiatives

SOLUTIONS

LINQ Nutrition

RESULTS

- Completing inventory, production records, and compliance tasks in just a few clicks
- Minimizing administration and automating compliance to focus on farm-to-school activities
- Publishing engaging, photo-enhanced menus on six-week cycles that spotlight local foods and make nutrition information easily accessible

Students enjoy and learn about their region's bountiful food production as part of their school meals experience at the three districts Food Service Director Stacey Bettis serves in Northeast Ohio: Minerva Local, Brown Local, and Tuscarawas Local School Districts. She takes a unique approach to K-12 nutrition, including sourcing local food for her kitchens, planning hands-on farm-to-school activities, and highlighting locally sourced items on school menus. It's all to make school breakfast and lunch more fun for students, drive participation, and strengthen connections between schools and the community.

Her three districts serve an average of 5,000 students in eight schools. Located approximately halfway between Akron and Pittsburgh, it's a rural region with thriving 4-H clubs. Bettis tells us many of their students make their first visit to a farm as part of a school-sponsored activity. She sees this as an opportunity to provide a unique learning experience while inspiring local pride.

Partnering with an integrated K-12 nutrition system provider

Key to Bettis' approach, she says, is having the right technology in place to minimize administrative workload. With a small team of just eight head cooks, she trusts LINQ Nutrition's integrated front of house (FOH) and back of house (BOH) modules to simplify inventory, production records, and menu planning while maintaining worry-free compliance. "I've been using LINQ Nutrition for about eight years," Bettis says, "and since my schools are in three different counties, it enables me to manage them from a central location while giving me the time I need to focus on the farm-to-school activities." LINQ Nutrition updates inventory in real time and automates production records, turning hours of work into just a few clicks for Bettis.

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Food Service Director

Of course, funding is vital, and LINQ Nutrition helps Bettis put compliance-dependent funding worries out of her mind. Because the POS, inventory, and production records modules work together and update data system-wide in real time, she's confident the information is always accurate. Simplified menu planning with saved items makes it easy to ensure that meal plans are compliant with USDA requirements. She can quickly plan her menus six weeks in advance and knows the system will flag any meal pattern issues.

Engaging, photo-filled online school meal menus

Online menus help Bettis spotlight locally sourced food, keep families and school nurses informed about ingredients, and drive more participation. "I love the links on the website," Bettis explains, "because it's easy for parents to find the menus, and school nurses can quickly access ingredients and nutrition values." She says sometimes this proves critical when a school nurse is caring for a student with diabetes. In just seconds, they can see what the student ate during the day, including calories, carbohydrates, and sugar.

The photo-filled menus also help drive conversations at home. "Students and family members can view the menus together and see exactly what's going to be served," Bettis tells us. This can spark discussions about the food, where it came from, and its nutritional value, as well as excitement to try new items.

Bettis puts her own spin on the menus to reflect her program's focus on fun, delicious, and educational mealtimes. "I can educate families by advertising which items are local, and the food images make the menus so much more engaging." She builds her menus out seasonally, and she says the system makes it easy for her by automating that process. "When I create my menu for that season, it's nice that it rolls over and I can just make adjustments as needed," she reports. Planning menus seasonally also gives kitchen managers more time to think and act ahead, making ordering easier.

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Making a meaningful impact and trendsetting in rural Ohio

With integrated FOH and BOH software helping Bettis keep her schools compliant, smoothly operating, and efficient, she's making her program a leader in The Buckeye State. That means more time to focus on sourcing local beef for use throughout her three districts, processing it into hamburger for spaghetti sauce, taco meat, and some of the freshest, tastiest burgers students enjoy anywhere in the U.S. "We're the first district in Ohio to procure beef from the local county fair from 4-H students, and we have continued to do so for the past three years," Bettis says.

It's not easy work. Bettis says she spends much of her time sorting out procurement processes, aligning her local food initiatives with USDA requirements, and securing funding through grants. Still, it's worth it when she sees the students getting so much more than a meal from her program. With technology helping her simplify the day-to-day operations, she's serving up memorable and enriching experiences that will likely influence some students' career ambitions and postsecondary direction.

See how LINQ Nutrition supports districts like Minerva Local, Brown Local, and Tuscarawas Local Schools

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