

FEATURING A CACFP ROUNDTABLE

CACFP Leader

July 2021



Brenda Higgins

FOOD SERVICE SUPERVISOR, EL DORADO COUNTY OFFICE OF EDUCATION

"Brenda can always be counted on to provide healthy and high quality meals all while meeting fiscal constraints. Her recording keeping is immaculate and her work ethic is "off the charts!" During COVID her creativity resulted in families receiving meals both in the classrooms and at home during virtual instruction."

~Jenny Pettit of the El Dorado County Office of Education.

Brenda is the Food Services Manager at El Dorado County Office of Education. There was no question that Brenda should be a part of the CACFP Roundtable's first cohort of CACFP Leaders. We sat down with Brenda over Zoom to learn more about her.

Rise Up

In Her Own Words

"THEY'RE THE BACKBONE OF FOOD SERVICE, I WOULDN'T BE
HERE IF IT WASN'T FOR THEM."

Brenda's Pathway

There was a common thread while I talked with Brenda about her career path – growth and improvement for both herself, her staff and the families they serve.

33.5 is the number of years Brenda has been with the El Dorado County Office of Education. She started as a cook at a site that she managed on her own. She was promoted to lead cook and then to food service supervisor in 2010 where she is now. She supervises ALL of the child nutrition programs but since she's a CACFP Emerging Leader, we're going to focus on the CACFP side. Brenda is extremely proud that her team cooks ALL of the food from scratch for 18 Head Start Centers and 5 State Preschools.

"I want to be able to continue to achieve new things and learn new things." Brenda is always seeking pathways to enhance her skills and knowledge about child nutrition and in leadership. Currently she is proud to be working on getting her CACFP Professional Certificate.

Show them that what they are doing matters.

"I'm really excited to get our cooks more involved in the classrooms." Brenda reflected on making the CACFP connections for her staff and the children they serve. Instead of just providing menus and recipes to the cooks she is working to get them more involved in the whole process – show the cooks that what they are doing really matters. Parts of this wonderful initiative include: getting the cooks in the classroom to eat with the children, teaching them the nutritional value of the food they are making and meeting monthly to reinforce and discuss all of those connections. This doesn't just benefit the cooks but creates a community around food and nutrition. Everyone benefits when the children see and eat with the person who is making their nutritious meals!

Brenda is planning for the long-term sustainability of the programs she leads and she is supporting new leaders to take over when she's ready to retire. When she was becoming a leader Brenda figured everything out on her own and she wants her staff to see that they have the opportunities to fill her shoes. In the same breath, Brenda sees that she couldn't be the leader she is without them.

Empathy and Advocacy

In Her Own Words

"I WALK BESIDE MY COOKS EVERYDAY. I WOULDN'T BE THE LEADER I AM WITHOUT THEM. THEY MAKE ME BETTER WALKING WITH THEM"

Empathy

When asked what quality a CACFP leader should have, Brenda quickly answered, "Empathy." She said you have to be able to learn from others who work with you, "it's a huge concept with people in this environment from the cooks to the teachers to the children and parents." She then added **trust**. She explains that if you don't trust your staff - the people you're surrounded by, "at the end of the day you're walking alone." These ideals were clear when Brenda discussed adjusting to Grab-n-Go meals during the pandemic. "We stepped up and look what we achieved!" She proudly told me that they still served all of their families - every meal they were used to receiving while in person - the same standard of scratch cooked meals throughout the pandemic. "We, as a team, can do anything" Brenda said, "we can't do it alone." COVID also taught Brenda she still has a lot to learn from the cooks - listen to the voice in the kitchen. Trust people and think outside of the box.

Advocacy

"I advocate for what they put inside their little bodies," is what Brenda said when asked about how she sees herself as an advocate in the food program. Becoming more knowledgeable, embracing nutrition and advocating for a more healthy lifestyle. The teachers implement the nutrition program her team put in place and are embracing the exchange with the students which is a big step.

Community

In Her Own Words

"THROUGH CACFP YOU CAN SHOW PARENTS HOW TO PROVIDE GOOD NUTRITIOUS MEALS AT HOME. WE DO A LOT WITH THE PARENTS. BETWEEN THE NATIONAL SCHOOL LUNCH PROGRAM AND CACFP WE DO THE BEST WE CAN FOR PARENTS AND THE COMMUNITY."

"Through CACFP you can show parents how to provide good nutritious meals at home. We do a lot with the parents. Between the National School Lunch Program and CACFP we do the best we can for parents and the community." Brenda's passion about the impact of CACFP gleamed as she talked about the impact it has on the community. She shared that the children and families, through the Food Program, are exposed to new foods. They aren't prepackaged foods many are used to, which at times takes some getting used to but the children are embracing it more and more.

One of the things Brenda enjoys the most in her role is interacting with other parts of the community. "I love being involved in such a great big community," she says. From the vendors to the different programs outside of her own, she establishes long lasting relationships and the community supports each other.

Brenda not only leads humbly with conviction, compassion and empathy but she leads by example. Through COVID-19 and power outages she and her team made sure food was saved and money wasn't wasted - they made sure children were fed good quality food.

Thank you, Brenda, for your leadership in the world of CACFP and congratulations for being a CACFP Leader.

