

## LEADERSHIP SKILLS: COMMITMENT, INNOVATION, AND EMPOWERMENT

When Karen Johnson first became the Food Service Director at Yuma Elementary District her very first function as the Director was a catering event for teacher Jaime Escalante, the inspiration for the movie, *Stand and Deliver*. His mantra; people will rise to your level of expectation, struck home with Karen, so she set high standards for herself and for her staff. By showing the leadership skill of commitment to her district, her program, her staff, her students, and herself, she was able to expand her school food service operation from a \$2.8 million dollars to one with revenue in excess of a \$5 million with no significant change in enrollment in the district since her start in 1988. Annual profits average 50,000 to 80,000 and the fund balance has increased to \$550,000. The remarkable aspect of this growth is that in over twenty years, the price of a school lunch has increased from **65 cents to only one dollar**. She set the bar for her staff for professional growth by providing opportunities for all employees to attend the state conference as well as SNA's Annual Conference and the Arizona Professional Growth Conference. Many have attended SNA's National Conference more than once. Education is a high priority for Karen. Employee continuing education is encouraged; many employees have completed their GED while working in Yuma School District One. In this area Karen led by example; she was always on the "Education Ferris Wheel of Life." She completed her degree many years after high school, even though it was often one class at a time as she was raising (with her husband) five children. But she had her sights set on being a child nutrition director and she persevered until she graduated. She will soon have her Master's degree as well.

In twenty years Karen has maintained and improved the quality of the meals served by carrying on the opportunity to bake fresh bread for the students and staff. Providing the best tasting food has always been one of her highest priorities. When she became director, the district was sorely lacking in modern equipment; for example, here were only two ice machines and two food warmers in the entire district. In order to do the best with what she had, Karen served as many scratch meals as possible to eliminate all unnecessary inter-school transport. Meal production was timed to eliminate the need for on-site holding, and inventory was ordered on a just in time basis. In order to efficiently utilize the extra labor to overcome her lack of equipment, Karen continued to have her employees bake fresh bread and buns. Karen feels that the signature aspect of the Yuma Food Service Department is its fresh bread. The bread quality is so high that now our community still expects Food Services to provide fresh bread. Most people in Yuma grew up on that bread and they request it for their community events and all of their holiday functions. Through equipment grants and profitable management of the program Karen has been able to update the equipment, buy trucks and freezers and expand the warehouse so she has a modern food service operation, but the wonderful smell of fresh baked bread still comes wafting out of the cafeteria every morning.

Karen has also empowered staff to make decisions at the school sites that are best for the program and best for the students. She said that Theodore Roosevelt gave the best advice: "The best executive is the one who has enough sense to pick good people to get what he wants done and the good sense to keep from meddling with them while they do it." Thanks to this approach, the staff is encouraged to operate and manage their site as a business. "I try to stay out of their way, not ever to micro-manage, but to let them learn by the successes and failures" said Karen. By empowering her staff, they have been able to not only grow professionally to meet the increased demands of the child nutrition program, but beyond. The District administration has a much higher regard for the importance and professionalism of the department. For the first time ever, this past year a cafeteria manager was asked to be a member of the new principal selection committee.

Said her Superintendent Darwin Stiffler, "Karen's leadership is inspiring. By setting high standards for herself and her department, she challenges our other departments and teachers to excel. At the same time Karen is a team player in our ultimate mission to educate young minds. With the reality of the higher accountability in education today, hunger and nutrition deficits in our students are not a barrier to academic achievement."

## HOW HAS THE NOMINEE SHOWN DEDICATION TO CHILD NUTRITION

Karen Johnson has made an entire career out of service to the child nutrition community. In her career as a food service director she has served on or chaired many committees and held many offices. The list includes:

**State of Arizona** – Exhibit Chair, Secretary, Legislative Chair, Membership Chair, Vice President, President-elect, President. Chapter level offices: President-elect, President, Secretary, Fund Raising Committee, Certification Chair.

**National** – Governing Task Force, Membership Committee, Resolutions and By-Laws Committee, West Regional Director, Vice President, President-Elect and President, Child Nutrition Foundation President, Chair of the Nominating Committee for SNA, Member of Global Child Nutrition Forum, and Member of SNA Strategic Planning Committee.

Karen, with others, established the National Future Leaders Academy. With leadership participation numbers declining because volunteer participation numbers were down across the country, the Academy was developed to bring potential leaders, sponsored by state affiliates, together and explain and discuss the expectations and requirements of state and national leadership. Many participants have now gone beyond the conference stage, and run for office in their states. Overall this conference has received a “number one” rating!

Her first national committee was the Governing Task Force. Formed to study Association governance issues, its goal was to create a more streamlined structure of business. She also chaired the Name Change Task Force which studied and examined the Association name by seeking input from the membership and ultimately submitting the name change of the Association for approval by the House of Delegates.

Karen has also shown her dedication to child nutrition by helping others advance their careers so that child nutrition programs can maintain and further the high standards they have set. Two former employees of the department moved to the Phoenix area and there was no question in their mind that they would stay in the child nutrition field, one that they had grown to appreciate and love while being in Yuma. In Yuma she heavily supports and promotes her local chapter. Their meetings routinely have seventy-five or more members in attendance. For the recent Annual National Conference in Las Vegas, she and her colleague from across town chartered a bus so that forty chapter members could attend the conference. Furthermore, a savings account open for the last two years to gave members an opportunity to contribute and save towards the trip.

Karen lives right next to the border of Mexico and the United States, so it would be natural for her to have an international perspective. Her support and dedication to child nutrition is worldwide. Gene White, the President of the Global Child Nutrition Foundation states, “Karen is a strong and effective voice for child nutrition here at home and in other countries. She feels deeply about all children and has used her many skills to help support the work of the Global Child Nutrition Foundation.” In 2003 Karen was asked to go to Bangkok, Thailand to give a presentation on school feeding program in American to educators and worldwide industry members. She focused on what students were eating and what the food trends in America where. She will never forget that she listened to other presenters that talked about the scarcity of food in some countries and the way foods had to be shelf stable and transported to students.

## BETTERING THE LIVES OF CHILDREN IN HER DISTRICT

As an experienced Food Service Director, Karen wants to see that every student starts the day on the right path, both nutritionally and academically. She knows how important breakfast is to learning, but in 2000, she noticed that her breakfast participation was at a very low 18% of students. She learned that many of the children that were eligible to receive a free breakfast didn't participate. Karen hypothesized that they didn't participate because they didn't want to identify themselves as low income students by going in the cafeteria at breakfast. Because it would help boost students' overall health and academic achievement, Karen decided to market breakfast by offering a free breakfast to every student on Wednesdays (only), with the food service department absorbing the extra cost. However, there are two elementary school districts in the Yuma area and it was going to be a problem for her if only half of the city had free breakfast Wednesdays. To solve this problem, she convinced her partner district to implement the plan. The results were outstanding. Breakfast participation increased to 43% of the students in her district. At the end of the trial program she enrolled all of her schools in the "Provision 2" program so she could provide a free breakfast for every student that wanted one. Said school Principal Eula Baumgarner, "When the nurse's visits decreased I decided to become Karen's most overpaid employee and started promoting school breakfast by helping out in the cafeteria." The program also had one unforeseen positive side effect. In the neighboring district that partnered with Karen on the program, breakfast participation increased by 22%.

Karen also provided direction to develop the wellness policy for her district. Thanks to her efforts the wellness policy started out with the basics and has improved annually after evaluation. Karen also serves on the following additional committees in her district to support child nutrition and education: Meet and Confer, Salary and Benefits, Strategic Planning, Resource Manager, Pandemic, and Operations.

In 2005, Karen helped the Arizona Legislature develop stricter nutrition standards for foods sold on campus. Gone were foods such as homemade cookies, cinnamon rolls, and chips, being sold by a plethora of campus organizations. Obviously the students were upset about the lack of availability of certain foods, but instead of saying, "Were just following the law," Karen developed a full meal marketing program so that the students would receive positive reinforcement. By preventing the perception that she was "taking something away" from the students, lunch program participation increased and she was still able to offer ala carte items that met the new rigorous state standards.

Karen started increasing students' exposure to produce by incorporating fruit and vegetable bars into the schools and letting the students serve themselves as much as they wanted. By letting the students serve themselves the quantity they want there is less plate waste and greater customer satisfaction. This exposure gave Karen the opportunity to develop a classroom education program with the County Health Department focusing on educating students about the fresh produce available in the supermarkets and the benefits of fresh fruits and vegetables. Karen also knew that many children go hungry between Friday afternoon and Monday morning. She worked with the Food Bank and the local farmers to develop a gleaning program that sent bags of fruits and vegetables home with needy students on Friday afternoons. Just for good measure, some nutrition lessons were inserted into the bags.

Karen and her staff are always willing to go the extra mile to help children in need. She had one student that suffered a terrible tragedy: he witnessed the murder of his mother by his father. The student stopped eating and became extremely thin. The cafeteria staff tried to get him to eat, but he wouldn't. They worried about him being so thin and not receiving a proper meal. Finally they were able to engage him in some conversation about foods that he liked, and they found out that he would eat a certain burrito and a chocolate shake from a popular fast food restaurant. For the next several weeks there was a burrito and shake for him every day. Then one day they were short handed they forgot the burrito. They looked at him coming through the line and apologized. He smiled and said, "Don't worry about it [sic]; I like what you are having for lunch today." After that, he ate school lunch every day. While Karen and the staff didn't approve of his diet, USDA regulations were secondary to what he needed at the time, and that was kindness, compassion and attention. Karen couldn't have been more proud of a group of employees that saw the need, and in the truest sense, made the difference in the life of a child.

## MANAGEMENT INNOVATIONS

Karen's most significant and what will be her most long lasting innovation to child nutrition came as the chair of the association's (now SNA) Name Assessment Task Force and as the "Chief Marketer" of the change during her year as SNA President. As childhood obesity started dominating the news and discussions in state legislatures, it became evident that the old name and its acronym, ASFSA was not promoting the right public perception of school meals programs and the professionals that operate them.

Before the name change could be made, Karen had to convince the ASFSA members that had been members for their entire professional careers that the change was the right thing to do. Karen recalls, "Image was always a concern when we surveyed members, and we had to take a good look at what the name meant to others. We just didn't serve students, we provided a learning laboratory for them every day, and nutrition was an important component. We did more than just serve food, we served nutrition. The students' health was of primary importance to us." After presenting the new name to the leadership in 2004, it became more apparent that the more challenging task was to go out and convey the new name and brand to outside groups. Karen helped publicize that change through public awareness announcements, personal appearances, and official notices. The new name was an instant success.

Other allied organizations embraced the change and SNA started to receive more media requests on child nutrition issues than ever. Media calls went from several hundred per year to thousands. According to SNA Executive Director Barbara Belmont, "When we work with other organizations in Washington on issues, they now see that school feeding is about nutrition." SNA is now seen as the voice of child nutrition and the expert in child nutrition. SNA has now been given more "places at the table" regarding child nutrition issues. The cherry on the top is occurred in March 2008 when SNA was invited to participate in the White House Easter Egg Roll.

SNA's legislative counsel, Marshall Matz said, "Karen Johnson has been a very important national leader for Child Nutrition in so many ways. Karen understood that changing the name of the Association was important to our credibility in the times ahead. An Association dedicated to 'foodservice' is very different than an Association dedicated to 'Nutrition'. Karen understood the importance of the emerging obesity issue and put SNA out front. In Washington, a name can send a very important signal, and **the name change has made it much easier for me to represent the membership effectively.**"

In her district, with money for new equipment virtually non-existent, Karen took a look at her most important resource, human resource. Yuma has always had a home cooking tradition, and Karen capitalized on that to "go new school by going old school." Yuma makes as many dishes as possible from scratch, including almost all of its bread and buns. Recipes were changed to incorporate whole grains and other required nutrition changes. Employees were encouraged to talk to industry about food products and cafeteria managers were trained to give classroom presentations.

What Karen did for her staff to "buy into" the program was change the staff positions from a mere job to a career. All employees work a minimum of six and one half hours per day. When employees worked only three, four, or five hours a day, they were constantly looking for jobs that could give them more hours. With more hours they increased their income and were able to make ends meet, thus eliminating the need for additional jobs. This philosophy has been very successful. In the past twenty one years the turnover in cafeteria staff has been less than 5%. It is harder to get season tickets for the Green Bay Packers than a job in a Yuma Elementary cafeteria.

# **CAREER AWARDS AND INDUSTRY INVOLVEMENT**

## **National School Nutrition Association**

SNA President

West Region Board Representative

Membership Committee

Resolution and By-Laws Committee

Nominating Committee (Chair)

Global Child Nutrition Forum

Strategic Planning Committee

Name Change Task Force

Industry Advisory Board

National Leadership Academy

Attended 24 Annual Conferences, 21 Legislative Action Conferences, and 12 CNIC Conferences

## **Arizona School Nutrition Association**

State President

Membership Chair

Secretary

Legislative Chair

Exhibits Chair

Many offices on the chapter level

## **Awards**

SNA President's Award of Excellence

Thelma Flanagan Gold Award

NAFEM Doctorate of Foodservice Award

Boys and Girls Clubs Community Service Award

Yuma County Private Industry Council Contribution Award

University of Arizona Service Award

Yuma County 4-H Rookie Leader of the Year

## **Community Projects and Organizations**

Habitat for Humanity

4-H Club

Yuma County Cooperative Extension Board

University of Arizona Agricultural Advisory Board

Yuma County Health Department Fun, Food, and Fitness Project

## **Publications**

*Good Housekeeping*

*School Nutrition Magazine*

*Arizona Cactus Trails*

*Yuma Daily Sun*

## **Testimony**

United States Congress – Senate Agriculture Committee

Arizona State Legislature – Testimony Topic- *The Importance of Breakfast in Schools*