

INTERVIEW WITH DARLENE MARTIN



Job Title: Nutrition Services
Director

Employed by: Long Beach
Unified School District

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WHAT ATTRACTED YOU TO A CAREER IN SCHOOL NUTRITION?

A job opportunity attracted me. I was laid off without any notice from my position as a Director of Food Service in a hospital in Long Beach. I knew some colleagues from CSULB in school nutrition and learned from them that the school district had an opening. I applied and started as an Area Manager in school nutrition.

HOW MANY YEARS HAVE YOU BEEN PRACTICING AS A SCHOOL NUTRITIONIST?

Over 23 years.

DESCRIBE YOUR FIRST JOB EXPERIENCE IN SCHOOL NUTRITION.

During my undergraduate work in the dietetics program at CSULB, part of my experience included working in the old central kitchen in LBUUSD, called "Pine Kitchen." When I joined the district in January of 1994, that is where I began my school nutrition career, where I was responsible for 18 schools as well as an outdoor camp with 6th graders. I ensured the schools and camp complied with regulations including health, food, and nutrition. I ensured the food preparation was according to presentable standards. I was also involved with interdisciplinary matters, including training and monitoring.

DESCRIBE THE TYPE OF WORK YOU CURRENTLY DO.

As the Nutrition Services Director at Long Beach Unified School District, I am responsible for the planning, organizing, and directing activities of the Nutrition Services Branch. We operate the Child Nutrition Programs with approximately a \$38 million budget. We work with pretty much every program under the school nutrition program under the federal budget, including the National School Lunch Program, afterschool snacks, Child and Adult Care Food Program, breakfast program, and child care centers. I coordinate the work of the Branch within the District framework of offices and schools. We have different training, organizing, and claims for all of these. Also, I have 9 nutrition staff board members that report to me, including the Assistant Director, Production Center Manager, and Administrative Dietitian. Nutrition services is a huge role since it represents the largest number of classified employees in the district. I also participate in district wide committees and work groups to try to integrate our policies and procedures with other parts of the district.

WHAT BENEFITS DOES YOUR JOB PROVIDE?

My job offers a very nice salary, which most people wouldn't complain about. Working with a school district or large entity typically provides good benefits. You are able to have a retirement plan, investment plan, and health plan (valued at over \$19,000 per year). Additionally, training within the district, as well as the opportunity to participate in professional organizations, is very beneficial. There are many great opportunities where you get to know other directors and programs that you can become involved in. We also have a great work group, with a nice size of operation that a smaller district may not have. It is a manageable size, so you can drive around the entire district in a day. It's nice to be able to know most of the workers.

WHAT DO YOU LOVE MOST ABOUT THE PROFESSION?

I love that we are able to impact children's nutrition and hopefully change their habits when they are still young. We are making lives better for children so that they have the opportunity to do well in school. It is so exciting to expose the children to new foods. The Fresh Fruit and Vegetable program is one that I really like because there is no portion size assigned or doesn't force the child to take a fruit or vegetable, but it's something a child can have if they want it. It can expose them to some more expensive, healthy items that they normally wouldn't be able to try. I also enjoy the non-competitive nature of school nutrition. Directors and staff collaborate with individuals in other districts. It's a worthwhile profession where one can make connections that can last throughout a career.

WHAT DO YOU LEAST LIKE ABOUT THE PROFESSION? WHAT CHALLENGES DO YOU UNDERGO?

Money is always an issue. In this position, having to manage the money in difficult times is very stressful. However, this is part of the job and you should be expected to manage money and resources. There have been many downturns within the past 23 years. Our enrollment is declining, which makes it difficult, and the demographics of Free and Reduced Meals are declining. We believe this is due to the fact that the cost of living is increasing. It would be beneficial to have regional indexing to make it more appropriate for those who don't receive the meals. Along with managing the budget, another issue is that we always adjust back. We wait until a position becomes vacant and see if we can eliminate this position. This year we did a major reorganization to eliminate positions, which amounted

to about a million dollars of benefits. Fortunately, we did most of this through attrition, but some individuals did lose hours and future available positions. However, no one lost their benefits though.

WHAT ADVICE DO YOU HAVE FOR STUDENTS INTERESTED IN GETTING INTO SCHOOL NUTRITION?

Students should get hands on experience in any way they can. The subject is complex and the regulations are cumbersome. Make sure you get a school district rotation during your Dietetic Internship. Participate in local chapters of the School Nutrition Association, gain understanding in the Federal programs and how the States are responsible for administering the programs, attend meetings, connect with people, keep up with the USDA and schools newsletters, volunteer, join the School Nutrition Diagnostic Related Group from the Academy, and become involved in a legislative action committee of a local chapter to get first-hand knowledge of challenges facing school nutrition. If you want to become involved in management or a director position, get an MBA. I only had a Masters in Nutrition with an emphasis in the education portion. When I became the Assistant Director, our Director recommended that I get a business certificate at Cal State Fullerton.

ARE YOU WILLING TO MENTOR A DIETETIC STUDENT INTERESTED IN SCHOOL NUTRITION?

I would be willing to consider it since that sounds important and interesting, but I don't know if I am at the correct position to mentor. It depends on what is involved and what the timeframe is, but I would need to know more information.

IS THERE ANYTHING ELSE YOU WOULD LIKE TO SHARE?

No, I feel like I covered everything!

School Nutrition Tools

