

INTERVIEW WITH JOHN RIVERA



Job Title: Child
Nutrition Specialist

Employed by: Long
Beach Unified School
District

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WHAT ATTRACTED YOU TO A CAREER IN SCHOOL NUTRITION?

Right before the internship, I had a clear mindset of going into clinical since it was emphasized in undergraduate. I had the mentality that foodservice wasn't glamorous, since it was publicized as wearing hair nets and making food trays. Then moving on to the internship, I absolutely hated my clinical rotation. Patients and staff only referred to me as dietary and only communicated with me for food preferences. The last rotation I had was school foodservice. Learning about menu planning and federal food programs was, and is still, fascinating.

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

Six months.

DESCRIBE YOUR FIRST JOB EXPERIENCE IN SCHOOL NUTRITION.

I volunteered for Melissa Manning for one month. It is important to have some experience and network to get your name out there. I mainly helped Melissa with marketing, including developing materials for the California School Nutrition Association (CSNA) conference. I also helped her with a website for her product formulation statement and learned about the meal buying guide, menus, and meal contributions.

DESCRIBE THE TYPE OF WORK YOU CURRENTLY DO.

As a Child Nutrition Specialist, I primarily work on menu planning and special diets. We have more than 3,000 students with special diets and my role is to develop a feasible menu for them. I ensure that the staff complies with the allergy standards. Additionally, I do nutrition education and marketing, where I have been attending wellness events to get our name out there. I also work with serving guides and recipe development.

WHAT BENEFITS DOES YOUR JOB PROVIDE?

School nutrition is a government job so it offers great perks. It depends on the district, but most districts offer great employee benefits. At Long Beach Unified School District, you have a base salary, and then every 6 months it is increased. It is a great incentive to stay longer and there is a great retirement plan. Also, school nutrition offers a lot of flexibility. For some positions you only work 10 months of the year, so it is very convenient for employees with families.

WHAT DO YOU LOVE MOST ABOUT THE PROFESSION?

I love the idea of what I am doing and how it makes a huge impact in children. We are doing our best to keep up with current research and implement recipes and products that are healthy. I hope that the Healthy Hunger Free Kids Act will continue and effectively reduce obesity and chronic diseases in children. I love that I'm making an impact at an early age, which is a great time to intervene.

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

I least like that school nutrition is poorly represented. We are not well-known in the Academy. The Academy mainly talks about clinical and hospital foodservice. During undergraduate education, we never talked about school nutrition. I wish that the Academy would strive for us to be well known, especially when a lot of professionals will be retiring.

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

Go to events, conferences, including the CSNA, and get involved in any way that you can to find out more information. Work experience doesn't always have to be in the hospital, you can always work in foodservice. Contact RDs that are involved in school nutrition, volunteer for RDs or shadow RDs, and take any opportunities that are available.

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

Yeah, sure! Although I am only entry-level, I still know how to get to where I'm at during an early stage.

IS THERE ANYTHING ELSE YOU WOULD LIKE TO SHARE?

Be open to volunteer work. Even after you pass your RD exam, it is always great to get additional work experience. Don't be discouraged. Keep applying and most importantly, don't limit yourself.

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