

BEST PRACTICES FOCUS:

STAFF RECOGNITION

School Lunch Hero Day is in May but every day is a great day to celebrate and thank staff for their hard work!

Consistent and ongoing staff recognition has many benefits, including:

- Improved employee morale
- Higher productivity
- Better teamwork
- Less turnover

Regular “thank yous” go a long way when promoting a positive workplace.

Anna Wolk, Food Service Director at Johnsburg CUSD 12, puts this into practice by occasionally sending out personalized notes to her team, “thanking them for their hard work every day. It can be 'just because' or after a particularly challenging period.” Wolk notes that she makes a point of sharing her gratitude after the stressful first weeks of school. She explained, “I want them to know that I see them, their efforts, and it's appreciated.”

Don't be afraid to reinforce even the most basic of behaviors. For example, you could say something like, “I just want you to know that I've noticed how welcoming you are to students coming through the line! Thank you so much for providing such great customer service.”

Or, “Thank you so much for helping me with inventory today. I know it's rough when we're short staffed and I so appreciate you filling in the gaps.”

Include something specific that prompted the thank you and something more general to tie it into the bigger picture of day-to-day operations.

It can also be helpful to thank or acknowledge staff in front of peers. They may get extra reinforcement from the group, which encourages better job



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performance from the whole team. Many school nutrition programs have short meetings or huddles before meal service, which is a perfect time to do this.

Teams can also be encouraged to call attention to the positive things their peers are doing. You can be as creative as you like! At Johnsburg High School, Wolk's staff have a traveling trophy. “They will bestow [it] each week to the person who rose head and shoulders above the crowd.”

Of course, some milestones and annual events are suited to more formal recognition. Examples include when someone receives an award, a major work anniversary, or being recognized for something like employee of the week, month, or year if you have such a program. These milestones can be acknowledged in many ways – on the website, social media, morning announcements, or the school newsletter.

It might also be appropriate to host a celebration event for major milestones. These can range from fun and relatively inexpensive, like an ice cream

social, pizza party, or potluck to a more formal catered lunch or dinner.

Events can also be held simply for staff appreciation. Before the holiday break, Wolk takes her staff out for a meal and celebration. “This way they can reconnect with [team members] from other kitchens, and I'll get them a gift. Nothing extravagant ... but something that speaks to the year and the events thus far: a T-shirt, funny mug, or gift cards.”

Building each other up regularly not only helps individual confidence and encourages “repeat” behavior, but it promotes a positive work environment. Plus, that positivity will be picked up on by your most important customers – the students.

Here's to celebrating school lunch heroes not just in May, but every day!

Want more ideas on staff recognition?

[Check out the ABCs of School Nutrition blog!](#)

The Illinois State Board of Education Nutrition Department partners with the University of Illinois Extension to provide resources and training to support School Nutrition Programs in Illinois.