



By Beth Roessner

## Walking Out on School Nutrition?

» During SY 2017–18, teachers in several states protested poor working conditions and low wages. This left many districts shutdown with one persistent problem: How do you continue to feed the hungry students?

Lisa Thrower, child nutrition director at **Yuma (Ariz.) Elementary School District One**, comes from a family of teachers. Her spouse is a teacher, as is her best friend, so she understands teachers' commitments to their students. Thus, when she started hearing rumors that the state's teachers were fed up with working conditions and ready to protest, she dismissed them. "I didn't think they could do it," explains Thrower. "Teachers are attached to their students and want to do what's best. It was a brave thing for the teachers to do...but nobody thought it was going to happen."

But the walkouts *did* come to Arizona at the end of April 2018, closing schools in most districts. This left Thrower and her peers across the state with a problem: How could they continue to feed the kids in their districts when schools were closed?

For Thrower, the answer was to run an emergency summer feeding program during the six-day protest. "We knew there were going to be challenges," she recounts. "But I don't think we quite understood, until we pulled back the layers, just how many layers there were going to be. It was a pretty intense six days."

**Closed for Business** As entire states closed schools to facilitate teacher protests, school nutrition departments in Arizona, Colorado, Kentucky, Oklahoma, North Carolina and West Virginia had little prep time to ready their programs to continue to feed students who rely on school meals as a hunger safety net.

The first of the SY 2017-18 walkouts occurred in February in West Virginia, as teachers protested low wages, stagnant school funding, deteriorating facilities and out-of-date textbooks. Other states' teachers soon followed. The walkouts looked different in each state: Some districts were able to keep schools in session during the walkouts, while, in other locales, they were required to close. The protests varied in duration—anywhere from one day to two weeks. Many nutrition services departments had just a handful of days to prepare for the impending walkouts, and rarely knew how long they would last. For affected directors, the limbo was distressing. (Check the box on page 24 for a brief overview.)

Could this happen in your state in SY 2018-19? Are you ready if it does? While the biggest concern was feeding students, other logistical and financial issues cropped up, including managing perishable inventory, receiving deliveries, paying employees, facilitating emergency menus, addressing staffing and coping with a loss of revenue. *School Nutrition* spoke with several school nutrition directors from across the country who were affected by the protests, and they shared their stories.

**Top Priority: Feeding Kids** After West Virginia educators put the protests in motion across the country, their school nutrition leaders effectively acted as guides to directors in other states facing their own crises. When Patti Bilbrey discovered her Arizona district would be closing, she used social media to connect with her counterparts in West





### SY 2017-18 TEACHER WALKOUTS: THE IMPACT AT A GLANCE

#### » Iredell-Statesville (N.C.) Public Schools

**When:** May 16 (1 day)

**District Enrollment:** 20,000

**Meals Served:** About 250

**Revenue Loss:** \$41,000

#### » Mesa (Ariz.) Public Schools

**When:** April 26-May 3 (6 days)

**District Enrollment:** 64,500

**Meals Served:** 1,200

**Revenue Loss:** \$900,000

#### » Oklahoma City Public Schools

**When:** April 2-13 (10 days)

**District Enrollment:** 46,000

**Meals Served:** 21,403

**Revenue Loss:** \$1.1 million

#### » Scottsdale (Ariz.) Unified School District

**When:** April 26-May 3 (6 days)

**District Enrollment:** 23,000

**Meals Served:** 1,227

**Revenue Loss:** \$125,000

#### » Stillwater (Okla.) Public Schools

**When:** April 2-13 (10 days)

**District Enrollment:** 6,400

**Meals Served:** 1,793

**Revenue Loss:** \$5,492.17

#### » Yuma (Ariz.) Elementary School District

**When:** April 26-May 3 (6 days)

**District Enrollment:** 8,000

**Meals Served:** 9,800

**Revenue Loss:** \$120,000

Virginia and learn how they navigated this uncharted territory. But, not everyone in her district administration realized that she was on top of the situation.

"Our district put out communication through their social media and through emails, that the schools would be closing. They would be non-school days, staff would not be working and there would be no meal service," recounts Bilbrey, director of Nutrition Services for **Scottsdale (Ariz.) Unified School District**. "They just *assumed* that we couldn't serve meals. But there is an exemption from USDA that allowed us to use summer food service steps to serve meals."

Bilbrey quickly corrected her administration and created an online graphic with information regarding her district's six feeding sites. Scottsdale's District Communications Department emailed it out and posted it out social media.

But be warned: "The walkouts made our whole summer food service program difficult, because our application was already in," explains Bilbrey of the administrative process for reimbursement claims. "Everything had to be retouched and redone because you have to change all the dates and do outreach. Then, once the walkouts are done, you have to go back and change it to what you already had."

Although rumors of an Oklahoma teacher walkout had circulated for several days, when the threat came to fruition, the school nutrition team at **Oklahoma City Public Schools (OKCPS)** had just one day to implement an emergency summer feeding program.

"Because we are a severe-needs district, we needed to find ways to still feed our kids," points out Shonia Hall, SNS, manager of Training & Compliance at OKCPS. "We knew we had to feed these kids outside of a normal feeding site, but what does that look like? And how are we going to do that?" In OKCPS, the emergency program ran under the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) at common summer sites, such as community centers, apartment complexes, parks and other public spaces. All children under 18 were welcome to have lunch at no cost.

"There were a lot of moving parts," discloses Director of School Nutrition Services Kevin Ponce, SNS, as they coordinated not only their own large operation but also with district transportation to press 65 buses into service. His team established a command center at the central kitchen, with individual meals being prepped at 10 other kitchens. "I'm proud of the team for putting it together."

During the first week of the Oklahoma walkouts, Ponce and his team established 108 feeding sites, including the state capitol, where many *students* were participating in the protest! Then, the walkouts continued for an additional (and unexpected) five days. For the second week, the number decreased to 33 sites to improve efficiency—and participation actually *increased*. Forecasting the number of meals that would be needed was tough, admits Ponce, saying that all they could do was take it one day at a time.

Despite the challenges, Ponce and Hall are gratified by their team's efforts—and so is the team! "We had gotten back such positive feedback from our staff about how they got to feed kids in a different way," reveals Hall. "They really, really enjoyed being out in the community and feeding those kids."

**Staffing Struggles** Loretta Zullo, SNS, director of Food & Nutrition at **Mesa (Ariz.) Public Schools**, and her administrative colleagues took the walkout rumors in their state seriously and met together to prepare for the possibility. "The decision was made that if the walkouts happened, our district would close schools," describes Zullo.

Faced with the complications of establishing an emergency summer feeding program—something Zullo describes as "unfamiliar territory"—she lamented the effect this crisis would have on her large workforce. Meals would be served from four recreation centers and only three employees were needed at each site.



As a consequence, "Another thing that gave me so much anxiety was what this was doing to our staff—these unscheduled, unplanned days off," recounts Zullo of her contract employees. "They live paycheck to paycheck. My heart was breaking for them."

Site staff also weren't permitted to use sick or vacation leave. "School closures are looked at like a Saturday or Sunday, and you can't use personal time on those days," she explains. Instead, employees were encouraged to have patience, watch social media, keep an eye on the news and wait for information as to when schools would reopen.

To help ease the financial burdens felt by her staff, Zullo's central office team offered special training sessions as a means to regain some lost hours. If staff chose to participate, they could recoup up to a third of the lost time. The sessions were scheduled right after schools closed for the summer break, and the department paid for the program with foodservice funds. Another make-up strategy was to extend the annual cleaning schedule by a day and invite part-time employees to participate.

Zullo doesn't begrudge that "our kitchens got an extra deep cleaning this year," but, she's mindful that it was an additional expense at a time when there was also a loss of revenue. Still, "I believe our department is strong enough to absorb all of this that happened," she asserts.

When North Carolina teachers decided on a one-day walkout, Tina Wilson, School Nutrition director at **Iredell-Statesville (N.C.) Schools**, did not want her employees missing any work as a result. Although she supported the teachers, she was frustrated that her department experienced collateral damage. "We support our teachers, but could they have done that

when school was closed? Or go on a Saturday?" she asks. "Why did they have to choose a school day—and one so close to the end of the year?"

Her team identified seven feeding sites; however, since the district didn't already participate in a summer feeding program, Wilson had to work with the state agency to find another way to recoup the day's meals. And she was adamant that her staff continue to work. "My board asked me if I was going to let them work, and I said, 'Yes, I am,'" she details. "It's not fair for them to be punished because the teachers walked out." As a make-up school day would not be scheduled, she had to pay salaries on a day without corresponding revenue.

Of those cafeteria team members not assigned to facilitate meal service at the seven sites, some chose to take the day off, and the rest were invited to use the day to clean kitchens. Out of Wilson's 200 staff, about 50 took advantage of the opportunity.

**Menu Matters** Flexibility with foodservice vendors helped Krista Neal, SNS, School Nutrition director at **(Stillwater Okla.) Public Schools** power through the two-week closure in her state. Distributors were understanding in adjusting delivery schedules and order changes and, upon return, the school nutrition team cycled through an easy, five-day menu. But that didn't mean reopening was easy.

For the first day back, they served students a simple meal: bread sticks, corn dogs and canned veggies and fruits—foods that required little prep, since cafeteria staff were unable to work in the schools up through the night before they reopened. There was also confusion among staff about how to handle grocery orders and deliveries from the central warehouse.

As schools used what was in their inventories, it took about five weeks for the schools to integrate back with menus, aggravated by the fact that the reopening was in the middle of a four-week cycle menu. Patience was required by all parties—staff, students and parents—to get the menus back in sync.

"We adjusted so that we could use some of what we already had, rather than ordering new product," explains Neal. "We tried to protect our distributors as much as possible. We tried to use what we had already planned with them, since it wasn't their faults, that all Oklahoma districts were out of school at the same time, but came back on various days. It must have been an absolute nightmare for distributors and manufacturers."

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There were grumblings from parents, too, as the published menus did not match up with what schools were actually serving. But, Neal used social media to help quell the situation. “We knew we were meeting our requirements, but not every school was serving the same thing. For three weeks in a row, I tweeted something like ‘Be patient with our menus.’”

**Got a Crystal Ball?** As SY 2018-19 kicks off, there is still anxiety regarding the teacher protests: Will they pop up in other states? Or will teachers in previously affected states protest *again*?

Scottsdale’s Patti Bilbrey says she would not be surprised if more walkouts happen in the upcoming school year, and she wants *everyone* to be prepared. “It’s a multi-layered event. I didn’t realize how many situations I’d be dealing with.”

Emergency feeding programs, staffing issues, inventory control and menu havoc just barely scratch the surface of the logistical nightmares school nutrition directors described. The impact of financial losses has had a long-lasting ripple effect.

Looking back, Krista Neal understands why the teachers felt compelled to protest, but it came with heavy consequences. “I still respect and support the walkout,” she attests. “I still think it was the right thing to do, but it’s interesting that with every decision there are always ripples that you tend to forget about. I’m glad [our administration] thinks we can handle whatever they throw at us but, sometimes, it’s exhausting.” **SN**

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### BONUS WEB CONTENT

#### Walking Out on School Nutrition?

A look at how school meal operations affected by teacher protests are coping with devastating financial losses is part of this month’s online extras. We also offer some clarification between a “strike” and a “walkout.”

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