

Case Study: MN International Middle School

Grades: 5-8

Good food, great service turnaround struggling food service program

MN INTERNATIONAL
MIDDLE SCHOOL

Nearly 100 percent of the 430 students at Minnesota International Middle School qualify for free and reduced lunch. And yet, in 2016-2017, only about 50 percent of the students ate school lunch and 50-60 percent ate school breakfast. Staff participation was non-existent. The school's food service vendor for 12 years rarely updated its menu, which was limited in daily choices, variety and creativity. Everyone at the school was bored with the food and disappointed in the quality. Despite requests from the school, the vendor refused to make changes.

So, the school made a change - to CKC Good Food.

"The kids' favorites are the cheeseburgers, orange chicken, chicken patty and mashed potatoes. Pizza Friday is also a big hit since it's much higher quality than the overly processed pizza they were previously served."

In its first year serving the school, CKC Good Food increased lunch participation to 90 percent and breakfast to 99 percent.

Fardos Jama, the school's Office Manager and Food Director, has worked at the school for 16 years and noted the significant change from one year to the next. "The kids love the food this year! They are so fascinated, so excited for the menu. They like that they get different veggies and foods - that they have different choices every day. We have no complaints!"

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"Even the staff is crazy for the food," Jama said of the 60 staff members who look forward to the publishing of the month's menu as much as the kids. "We probably have 70-80 percent of the staff eat every day, which is a huge change the kids notice. They tell us, 'Our teachers never ate the food last year. Now they're in line eating the same food we eat.'"

CKC boosted the school's breakfast participation to 90% by introducing Grab-and-Go breakfast bags pre-filled with the necessary components of a USDA-compliant reimbursable meal. This approach simplifies service, minimizes the mess in hallways, classrooms and the cafeteria, and most importantly, ensures the students are well-nourished for learning.

To round-out the school day, CKC also provides snacks for after-school enrichment programs. "The kids even rave about the snacks!"

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The increased participation across the board has bolstered the school's food service budget significantly – both from the staff's paid meals, and the margin between the contracted price-per-meal and the USDA's free/reduced reimbursement rates.

CKC Difference Extends to High-Touch Service

The school has found the differences between food service vendors goes beyond the food as well. CKC Good Food made Jama's first year as Food Director a smooth one.

"I was nervous coming into the position but CKC has been absolutely awesome. They are so willing to answer my questions," she said. "Our program is more organized now and there's less paperwork. CKC is on top of everything and has great communication."

CKC's on-site Kitchen Manager works closely with Jama and the CKC team to ensure that smooth communication and the kids' satisfaction. He often talks with students about the food and tweaks meals based on their feedback. If needed, he works with CKC's Executive Chef to develop menu items the students will like better, such as curried chicken instead of turkey and gravy. He has introduced the students, who are of East African descent, to a wide variety of herbs and spices. Cilantro and garlic are especially popular with the kids.

At times, the Chef has gone the extra mile to make sure the kids had food. He scrambled to provide food for a field trip when the order hadn't been placed and assembled ready-to-go bag lunches when the school was without power one day.

Even the state has noticed the difference with school's change in vendors. Minnesota Department of Health violations went from 7 to 0 from one year to the next.

Minnesota International Middle School and its students are thrilled with CKC Good Food's delicious, nutritious meals and the concierge-level service that eases the day-to-day stress and workload.

Jama's recommendation to schools evaluating food service providers? "Go see CKC!"



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