“Energizing Our Future!:" A Reflection on the School Food Focus National Gathering 2016

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In December 2016, I had the privilege of attending the School Food Focus National Gathering in Braselton, GA alongside Sarah Buranskas (Pittsburgh Food Policy Council) and Joe Beaman (Deer Lakes School District). We participated in this conference with the goal of learning about innovative practices related to school food taking place in school districts across the country. Below are a few of the key takeaways from the conference that resonated with me.

With a background in public health nutrition, the first things I think about when it comes to school food are nutrition content, portion size, quality and taste. The National Gathering made me consider the equal importance of how to frame and present school food. For example, we had the pleasure of visiting the lunchroom of the largest high school in Georgia. My favorite part of the experience was seeing how the food service team used creative marketing techniques to promote school food. Every food service staff member wore an apron that read, “Café Gwinnet: Energizing Our Future!” Though simple, this small gesture demonstrates school pride while also communicating the importance between nutrition and academic performance. Similarly, local items in the lunch line were labeled with “LOCAL” stickers to highlight the school district’s commitment to supporting local farmers. These basic techniques help to display the hard work, thought and care that went into the production, procurement and preparation of the school meals.

Similar to food marketing, I also learned about the value students place on personalization of food. Across the various student panels that were held at the National Gathering, students echoed that they want the ability to tailor their meals to their unique tastes. Outside of the school walls, students are accustomed to quick-serve, build-your-own restaurants, so it makes sense that they would want the same for their school meals. One of the school districts at the conference indicated that it tries to stay on trend by modeling school meals after such restaurants. This strategy seems like a promising way to engage students and meet their needs for personalized meals.

Lastly, I was moved by the passionate testimonials of the food service directors at the National Gathering. During an informal conversation, one food service director challenged the group to rethink the concept of giving young children multiple choices for what to eat for lunch. He argued that as adults, we should be teaching young children what to eat rather than expecting them to make the “right” or healthy choice. Several of the school districts present have taken similar approaches by eliminating flavored milk, sugary items and other processed foods so that the default options are always healthy. We need to continue having conversations like this, both in Pittsburgh and across the nation, that challenge the way we think about school food and its critical role in our children’s wellbeing.

As the Pittsburgh Food Policy Council moves forward with its work on the school food environment in Pittsburgh, I look forward to integrating lessons learned from the National Gathering into our work. Pittsburgh is fortunate to have a wealth of schools and organizations who care deeply for the health of our children, so together, I am confident that our region will rise as a national leader of innovation in good food for our children.