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Media Release

Pulse of CCSD – It's not nutritious if the children don't eat it

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Charleston, SC – The food and beverage industry is unique in that it teaches valuable skills that are transferable to almost all professions. However, the best place to learn the art of negotiation is at the car dealership as a salesperson.

Luckily, for Walter Campbell, Charleston County School District's (CCSD) Executive Director of the Nutrition Services Department, his life's work has been in the food services industry, with a short stint as a car salesperson.

What Campbell learned in both professions has served him well in his role with CCSD where he has grown the district's meal program to one that is modeled across the country. He will be retiring at the end of the month, but looks back at his 17-year career with CCSD with fondness.

"The food service industry teaches you about customer service, patience, hustle, and more," said Campbell. "The sales side of the automotive industry teaches you those things as well as negotiating practices. I also learned from the dealership's owner that how you treat your employees is what really counts."

In 1986 Campbell's career path led him to Charleston where he saw an advertisement to be a food services supervisor with CCSD. The interview did not go well and he sensed he was not going to get the job. He didn't, but Campbell was not deterred.

Campbell managed and operated several restaurants in the Lowcountry before taking a federal government job in the budget and finance office at NAFVAC (Naval Facilities Engineering Systems Command). It allowed him more time with his family, which was much deserved after years of working late nights and holidays. After three years, though, he was asked to transfer to Florida. Campbell was at a place in his life where his family had settled in and Charleston was their permanent home. Relocating was not something he wanted to consider.

At about that same time in 2006 (20 years after his first interview with CCSD), he was on his child's school website and curiously clicked the "Jobs" tab. Before his eyes was another position in food services with CCSD for a director position. With 20 years in the industry, plus three years in a budgeting role, and a master's degree in finance, Campbell was more than qualified.

"I didn't hear anything for many weeks," said Campbell. "Then the job opening was taken down and reposted with some tweaks to the duties and requirements. My wife thought I was crazy but I found a person in Human Resources and sent her a "Top Ten Reasons List (copied from the David Letterman show)" as to why I should get the job."

Shortly after, Campbell was called for an interview.

"I'm not sure if it was my Top Ten List or that I had Lucy Beckham and Bill Lewis as references," said Campbell. "The interview went lousy. I knew it in my gut. So, I got creative."

Campbell explained that he was a runner, and he looked up the addresses of some of the directors employed with CCSD. He would run by their houses every day to catch one outside so he could introduce himself. That did not work, but Campbell was called back for a second interview over coffee. This interview went much better, and he was even asked if he happened to have a jogging route in the area of the interviewer's home.

During his 17-year career with CCSD, Campbell has continued to expand breakfast to serve more students. He has consistently increased the number of students purchasing lunch, expanded the meal program to serve CCSD charter schools and the Head Start programs, and created a supper program.

"The supper program came from my brother, who worked with the Boys and Girls Club," said Campbell. "He wanted to start a supper program for his students and asked if we could provide the labor. Once we got it off the ground, he found that 60 out of 64 of the students who attended his program and received a hot meal had improved their grade point average."

CCSD now has the largest supper program in the state, thanks to Campbell. Additionally, CCSD utilizes Limited Time Offer menu items that have become a hit across the district. Some of those menu items, like chicken and waffles, have become a mainstay.

Pandemic pivot

"The pandemic changed the way we did everything," said Campbell. "It allowed us to truly focus on the culture of our work environment. We really invested in professional development opportunities for our staff at every level. It was so very necessary at that time because we were asking employees to change everything about the way we served food."

During the pandemic, Nutrition Services brought meals into our communities while students attended classes online from their homes.

"We still had to feed our students," said Campbell. "The easiest way to do that was to bring it to them."

Campbell said that districts across the country modeled that process.

"We all learned from each other," said Campbell.

One of the most important things Campbell learned was to manage turnover instead of letting turnover manage the department.

"A lot of districts may spend 10 hours a week in the hiring process - two hours hiring and 8 hours making up for the hiring mistakes," said Campbell. "We shifted the focus to retention, training, and recruitment so that we are not putting in as much time making up for mistakes."

Campbell relies heavily on his team of 400 employees. He describes the end of every summer as opening 80 little restaurants (year after year).

"We have to be good at what we do to pull that off," said Campbell.

"I can't manage from behind a desk so I join my team on the line or behind the scenes whenever possible," said Campbell. "I am appreciative that my boss, [CCSD's Chief Operating Officer Jeff Borowy], has allowed me to do it."

Borowy said watching Walter Campbell lead Nutrition Services for the district has been something special for him.

"Year after year, he demonstrated an ability to be equally successful in serving quality meals, being efficient, maximizing revenue sources, and taking care of and developing the workforce," said Borowy.

Campbell is often invited to speak at food service conferences and national industry conferences.

"I enjoy telling folks what we are doing in Charleston County and bragging on our employees," said Campbell. "If I didn't have a great team then I couldn't be this successful. As a department, the students are our customers. As the leader of this department, my employees are my customers."

The investment Campbell put into his employees is evidenced by the lengthy careers of so many of his employees. More than a handful boast up to 40 years with the district.

A rewarding career

Knowing that a hungry child cannot learn has been the driving motivator of Campbell's career. He believes that feeding children nutritious meals, three times a day, has a trickle-down effect on the community.

"We work with our community partners to secure grants for take-home meal options because if not, some students would arrive at school on Monday morning hungry from not having enough to eat over the weekend," said Campbell. "We know good nutrition and learning go hand-in-hand."

The district participates in the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) which is a national school breakfast and lunch program where all enrolled students in specific schools, regardless of income level, are eligible to receive a healthy school breakfast and school lunch at no charge each day. Campbell has expanded that program to 68 CCSD schools.

"I am proud of the expansion because the program is for every child, not just the ones who can't afford the meals," said Campbell. "It takes away from the stigma."

The challenge of ensuring every child has a nutritious meal comes with the challenge of serving meals students will enjoy.

"It's not nutritious if they don't eat it," said Campbell. "We've learned that comfort food is our most popular. From the grilled cheese and tomato basil soup to the ham and cheese grilled sandwich with broccoli soup, our scratch-made menu items are favorites of the kids."

Careful planning goes into each menu because food items are heavily regulated by the federal government. The bonus to that is that lunchrooms are no longer churning out pre-made meals. Campbell focuses on quality food purchasing, even if the costs are higher. An example is the whole-muscle chicken sandwich. Additionally, no high fructose corn syrup is used in any recipe. In addition, CCSD serves a burger with just a handful of ingredients in it as opposed to one market option burger with 26 ingredients.

"We are very conscious of what we're feeding our kids," Campbell added.

So conscious in fact, that Campbell regularly assembles teams of taste-testers including students and staff to test products against others so that not only is the food nutritious, but it tastes good.

With all of these decisions comes a price and that is where Campbell's masterful negotiating skills come into play.

"Top quality food comes at a price," said Campbell. "I can negotiate the sale of a larger quantity of a food item at a lower price because I know the students will eat that particular product. We can use it later. The 18 percent inflation rate that we

are all facing in our own wallets is affecting Nutrition Services purchasing as well. I have to be creative and negotiate wherever possible."

Campbell's staff is also expedient in what they do which cuts back on labor hours charged to the department. For example, CCSD food service workers churn out 21 or more meals per labor hour, which is far more than the industry standard. This enables CCSD to be the highest-paying K-12 food service program in the Southeast at just over \$17 an hour.

"Just when I didn't think the program could be any better, he brought forward another brilliant initiative to serve our children," added Borowy. "We are going to miss him fiercely, but I have the utmost confidence in the team he has assembled and the processes that he has implemented. will allow the success of the program for years to come."

Campbell's departure is bittersweet, he said. While he will miss the challenges and the wins, Campbell is looking forward to spending time with his five-month-old grandson. He looks forward to taking his grandson to his first Braves game.

"I'll miss it all," said Campbell. "Being in the schools and spending time with the students and staff has been so rewarding. I will miss the team. As I have watched them work over the years, it became clear that we do not just serve meals. Meeting a child's other needs is just as important and my team is what I consider an added support to each and every school."

Campbell's entire career has been one of service and he looks back on it fondly.

"I am reminded of a quote I have lived by my entire career 'Not everybody can be famous but everybody can be great, because greatness is determined by service.' – Dr. Martin Luther King. It has served me well. It will be hard to walk away from the kids and the district, but it is time."

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About the Charleston County School District

Charleston County School District (CCSD) is a nationally accredited school district committed to providing equitable and quality educational opportunities for all its students. CCSD is the second-largest school system in South Carolina and represents a unique blend of urban, suburban, and rural schools spanning 1,300 square miles along the coast. CCSD serves approximately 50,000 students in 88 schools and specialized programs.

CCSD offers a diverse portfolio of educational options and specialized programs delivered to the students of CCSD through neighborhood, magnet, IB (international baccalaureate), Montessori, and charter schools and programs. Rich educational opportunities for students include programs in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM); music and other creative and performing arts; career and technical preparation programs; military; dual credit; and many more.