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1-31-2022

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Recommended Citation

Burkhardt, Chris and Institute of Child Nutrition. Child Nutrition Archives., "Chris Burkhardt – Covid 19 Oral History Project" (2022). *Oral History Project (all interviews)*. 103.
https://egrove.olemiss.edu/icn_ohistories/103

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Chris Burkhardt – Covid 19 Oral History Project

Chris Burkhardt is the executive director of school nutrition for the Cleveland (Ohio) Metropolitan School District.

I'm Jeffrey Boyce, and it is January 31, 2022. Wow, where did January go?

I'm in Mississippi today and I'm talking with Chris Burkhardt in Ohio. We're here to talk about Covid 19's effects.

Welcome, Chris and thanks for taking the time to talk with me today.

Chris Burkhardt

Thank you, thank you for having me.

Jeffrey Boyce

Could we begin by you just telling me just briefly about yourself, where you are and what your job is, to describe it a little bit?

Chris Burkhardt

Yes, I'm the executive director of school nutrition for the Cleveland Metropolitan School District in the great State of Ohio.

We're a school district of 36,000 students. We serve breakfast, lunch, after school snack, and during the pandemic, we did a little bit of everything, which I'm sure we'll dive into.

Jeffrey Boyce

Now let's get rolling on that. Tell me about your experiences so far and the challenges of Covid 19.

Chris Burkhardt

The challenges, where to begin? Our challenges aren't atypical. I think all districts across the country are having the same challenges, whether it be supply chain and getting food. Whether it's having staff in your kitchens and being able to

provide the service, so our employees are not immune to Covid either, so we've got those challenges, and obviously the mental health of going through a pandemic and not knowing what's around each corner, so that, obviously, is an issue.

We've got trucking issues, we've got manufacturer issues, you name it we've got it so we can start wherever you like.

Jeffrey Boyce

Okay we'll just pick one and let's run with that and tell me what you faced and if you've been able to overcome it and, if so, how.

Chris Burkhardt

Yeah, so from a supply chain standpoint I think we're all still dealing with supply chain, and I made a comment the other day in a forum that I don't think we're going to be able to get out of this supply chain issue for at least two more school years, because I think we're going to start, once we get back to some sense of normalcy, we're going to start to accordion, meaning manufacturers are going to start producing back to the levels that they were before and school districts and students eating, we're going to have this accordion effect, and it's going to take us a while to get back to normal.

So, we, like everyone else, are planning menus monthly, but that equates down to either weekly or daily in actual practice, so the hard part is putting together the plan for the month and then figuring out on Monday of that week what's not showing up, and then making those changes on a daily basis, or on a school basis, or on a meal basis, so I think we're all dealing with that.

I think what helps and what has gotten us through this is the communication piece, and communication from manufacturers, manufacturer reps, brokers, distributors, school district officials, kitchen managers, directors, executive directors, I think we all have gotten to a point where we're communicating very effectively. I think, at the beginning, when we were all looking at Zoom and teams and all these other platforms we were using, it was very difficult and kind of disjointed, and no one knew actually what was going on at the time.

Plants were shutting down because employees were getting Covid, and they were having supply chain issues as well, and so everything was real time and really, really tough to navigate. But I think we're better now than we were, from a communication standpoint, but from a supply chain standpoint I think we're all still struggling.

Jeffrey Boyce

I've heard that a lot. So what are some of the things that you tried and what's worked and what hasn't worked?

Chris Burkhardt

So some of the things that we've tried, actually through our menu program, we've started out Cleveland about four years ago, going from a pre-plated meal service to a wrapped product service to speed scratch, and as we were transitioning to speed scratch Covid hit, and so we had to take a step back and go back to wrapped product.

And now that we are in-person we're looking at really ramping back up to speed scratch and eventually some scratch cooking, so the trials and tribulations of doing that, and taking some steps backwards to take steps forward has obviously had some challenges.

I would say also that we've shrunk our many options significantly, and I think that's going to stay for least the immediate future, and when I say that I mean the next year or two. I don't think that we're going to have the offerings that we've always had.

You know, we've had, I don't know, something like between 15 and 20 options for breakfast when you include all the different flavors of cereals and cereal bars and those types of things, and it's impossible to get that variety of product now, so we've realized that we're going to have to shrink our menu and be very, very pointed, and still have as many offerings as we can, to make it a situation in which students have choice, but also being very, very pointed in those products and those items to make sure that we're not doing something that's impossible or putting undue stress and burden on our employees to try to make it happen.

So shrinking the menu and getting down to a realistic menu, I think, is going to stick around for the next couple years.

Jeffrey Boyce

How receptive have the students been to that?

Chris Burkhardt

It's hit or miss. I think most of them have been receptive, because folks are seeing out in the grocery stores and restaurants that those foods aren't available there either. And so we know that restaurants have shrunk down menus and if you go to the grocery store, anecdotally, you go to the cheese section to go buy cheese and there might only be one or two options available. You want shredded cheese, well you get the block cheese. You've got a shred it yourself now.

And we're all dealing with those supply chain issues, so I don't think right now that it's a big deal. Everyone's kind of making it work and realizing that this is the new normal right now.

But let's talk in another year and see what that looks like and go from there. But for the most part, I think we've had the gold standard of menu service, and that's just not possible during the pandemic, so we've had to scale back, and I think everyone realizes this is what it looks like.

But I think we also need to figure out 'Do we really need all those options at breakfast or lunch, or can we scale back a little bit and still meet the needs of the customer?'

We have a philosophy. We want to be everything to everyone, but we can't necessarily be everything to everyone, so we have to take a step back now and look and see 'What do we need to scale?'

Jeffrey Boyce

How long were the students out? Did you go completely remote for a while?

Chris Burkhardt

So over the pandemic we've had a whole bunch of different scenarios. I think, like most districts, we were out of school completely for a period of time, and then we were remote, and then that remote became in-person two days a week, so some

students were coming in two days and off for two days and we had an asynchronous day on Wednesday.

And then students were coming into school fulltime, and then through that, it's been when there's hardships, we've gone remote.

So on any given day, in the morning, or at night, I'll get an email that says 'Hey this school is going remote tomorrow because too many staff have Covid' or whatever, or the school's actually closed, so we're actually doing with a day by day situation in our district to figure out whether we're in-person, whether remote, or schools closed altogether, and obviously that creates a lot of hardship.

As well, in Cleveland here, like most of the Midwest and Northeast, we have to deal with the weather during the winter, and so we've had some storms hit, not to the extent that it's been crippling, but a day off here, day off there and so –

Due to supply chain, trucks don't stop rolling, but then getting that product to our schools and making any changes also is complicated, so through the whole process it's just a matter of taking one day as it comes.

I don't like to be the person who's just getting through that day, but I think in some situations that's all we have to do right now is just get through the day, get through the week, and hopefully get through the month.

Jeffrey Boyce

How have you been getting the meals out, whether it's remote or - what have you had to come up with to do that?

Chris Burkhardt

So initially it was daily pickup at all of our 22 schools, then we opened up daily pickup for our KD schools, because we don't have elementary. We have kindergarten through eighth grade, and then we have high schools, so we don't have any middle schools.

So it was relatively easy to kind of make a dividing line, so if you wanted daily meals you went to one of our KD schools. Those are typically our smaller schools. We didn't have enough space to be able to house the weekly giveaways.

And then at the high school if you wanted to pick up food for the week you could go pick up food for the week at one fell swoop at any one of our high schools. And then during remote that was kind of a little bit of a back and forth.

We tried to keep it the same, whereby, if you wanted to pick up weekly at a high school, and then when we were in school for some days, out of school some days, it got a little challenging, but nonetheless it was good for all of our students to at least have an option or multiple options.

During the pandemic we also took on a lot of other food distribution programs. For example, the USDA food boxes with produce, the USDA dairy boxes, we sent out, as well as some partners gave us either money or resources, i.e. product, to give out to the community.

So we had that going on as well. We have some great corporate partners who said, "Hey, we know that the community is not able to get food in retail locations, so we want to help you out." And so we started giving out different things from a food standpoint as well.

So a lot of different options for students and our families in Cleveland. I will say, one of the disappointing parts of Covid was the lack of support from the entire community, i.e. it was us and the food bank and a couple of smaller organizations.

But restaurants were shut down for the most part in the middle of the pandemic, as well as a lot of grocery stores were having supply chain issues, so folks were really leaning on us to get food, to get meals, as well as the food bank.

And it was really, really tough for our staff, because we were going through the same Covid issues that everyone else was going through, so our staff were getting sick and getting Covid, and we would have to shut down kitchens and sanitize and have the waiting period as well.

So I would say the disappointing part early on, was we were tasked with doing everything for everybody, meaning folks wanted us to go door to door, do food delivery service and that just wasn't possible. We did open up 90 of our buildings and had food stops there, but to be able to be everything to everyone during the pandemic really took a toll on us and specifically our employees.

Jeffrey Boyce

Was there anything you tried that just didn't work?

Chris Burkhardt

We tried to give students a lot of I'm going to say both choice and have the menu be non-repetitious, and that just didn't work.

We didn't have the ability to get a lot of different types of products, and so our menu became a little stale at times, because we just couldn't get the products we wanted to get.

And then we were also looking at making sure that the products are either wrapped or single service, and so that became an issue as well. So in hindsight, had we thought about it differently, and maybe went a different path, we might have had some different results, but overall we did a fantastic job, the team did a fantastic job.

But again hindsight's always 20-20 and we did what we could do. In hindsight though, we would probably look at different menu options and try to really dig in deep to get what we could, to not have the menu be stale, and have some more variety.

Jeffrey Boyce

How much effect has the supply chain had on your forecasting, your planning? I'm sure your lead time has had to increase quite a bit.

Chris Burkhardt

Yeah, what it's forced us to do is look at alternative products. And so, if product X isn't available from a manufacturer we've got to go somewhere else to be able to find it. And that takes a whole nother realm. Does it meet the nutritional guidelines? What's that lead time?

Typically we like to try products in our central kitchen facility with our mini team. We like to try it out, and we do some taste tests with students, and do that whole process. We're kind of vetting the product all the way through the supply chain, and that's just not happening now. We're just getting what we can get.

In some circumstances, it may be the only chicken nugget or beef patty or sausage patty out there, and so we're taking what we can get. Additionally, using

USDA Foods has also been challenging. At the first part of the pandemic, we were not utilizing a lot of our USDA Foods, because they typically went towards our speed scratch or scratch concepts, and we were doing a lot of items that were either wrapped or pre cupped or single servings.

And so that kind of threw us out of whack on those products. And now as we're transitioning, or as we transitioned to those situations in which folks are in-person and we're serving in-person meals, some of those products are not available from manufacturers on the director version. So then, not only are we not utilizing our commodities effectively, we're having to be pushed to purchase products and 'Oh, by the way, these purchased products cost anywhere from 40 to 80% more. So, our budget is upside down.

Our product usage is upside down, and so it's going to take us a couple of years to get back to a point in which what we anticipate is actually what is happening, and what we ask for is what we get.

Jeffrey Boyce

You mentioned already a little bit about some organizations within your community stepping up to help. Have those relationships continued?

Chris Burkhardt

Absolutely, and so we all found out during the pandemic we have to lean on each other and some of those were the hard conversations. To say, "Hey, we can't do this ourselves. We need help and support."

Our great team alliance, the Cavaliers, the Browns, and the Guardians, all have been great partners with us.

No Kid Hungry and some of those other organizations were phenomenal giving us help, support, resources. Couldn't do without the food bank.

They continue to be one of our biggest supporters, as we are at them. And it's just a great collaboration. So I would say yes, we had some partners that were nontraditional.

And we had some partners that were traditional. That I think got strengthened through the process. So I think in some ways it was good.

I kind of struggled to find the shiny spots of the pandemic, but there are a few out there and obviously we're still going through it.

But the lives lost obviously darkened some of those shiny spots that we want to lift up.

Jeffrey Boyce

Can you share with me some of those shiny spots, some of the positive outcomes you've had, and if you intend to keep them once the pandemic has passed?

Chris Burkhardt

Yeah, so I think we all have a new sense of food safety. I think we all have a sense of the heightened awareness of making sure that we're serving safe food, not that we didn't before, but I think just something as simple as hand washing I think has been taken to a new level, and hand sanitizer and making sure folks are healthy when they come to work. I think that is all heightened to the nth degree.

So some of those things are good things that we're all really dialed in. Prior to the pandemic, you know, you might have a cold or something, and you still trudge to work. We as food service employees, all of us know that that if we're not at work the work is shouldered by someone else. And so we all come to work whether we should or not.

And then just I think looking at food safety in general, I think we're all more aware and have a heightened sense now that we see what the pandemic has done. I think communication really took a dip to be really low at times during the pandemic, but I think we've all figured out some digital platforms and ways to communicate digitally that I think also enhance the ability to get our communication across.

I think work/life balance helped. I know a lot of folks are working from home one day a week, maybe two days a week, maybe just a couple of hours.

But I think that helps a lot. I think that rose out of the need for more of a work/life balance was brought front and center and I think that was good.

I think that was absolute good. And so as we navigate through the next 24 to 48 months we'll see how that lands. But I think some of the things that were raised were good.

I think that the fact that Cleveland always had a food insecurity problem was not good, but the fact that it was brought more to light in the pandemic was good, because it's going to help us fix the problem more long-term, so there are some shiny things coming out.

I will also say our employees have been absolutely wonderful. They have pivoted when they need to pivot and taking on different responsibilities, different service models.

And so I also say that that was helpful as well, because when you're forced to do something there is no other option. If we would have said, "Hey, we're thinking about doing this" sometimes there's some pushback, some reluctance to change.

But during the pandemic we didn't have that ability to think about it or to think intentionally how we're going to change to meet the needs. We just had to do it, and I think that was good as well.

So there were some shiny spots. I think everyone worked together. I had more conversations with atypical partners than we've ever had, and I think that's strengthened relationships as well. So that there were some positives that did come out of it.

Jeffrey Boyce

What's your feeding situation now? Are you utilizing the cafeterias or is it meals in the classroom, or a combination? What are you finding?

Chris Burkhardt

Yeah, so for the most part it's meals in the cafeteria. We do have some one offs and we have some students eating in classrooms and such, but for the most part, I think we're back to somewhat of a normal situation.

But as I said earlier, on any given day we could have remote meals or any given day we could not have school at all.

And so we're still dealing with those effects. I think some of that's behind us with Omicron coming in into Cleveland kind of a first in first out. We were hit pretty hard early on, and then we were kind of the first to get back to a little bit of normalcy after Omicron. But obviously there's other variants out there, so we're not out of the woods yet. But for the most part, I would say we're somewhere in the 85 to 90% back to a normal feeding, breakfast, lunch schedule, after school snack.

Jeffrey Boyce

Anything else you'd like to share with me today?

Chris Burkhardt

The other thing that I think that the pandemic taught us is that we're all very fragile still. And whether that be working remotely, or being elderly and afraid of what that means when you're coming into contact with hundreds of individuals a day.

And just mental health, I think we all have to take a step back and look at that again and make sure that that's constantly on our radar. I'll be honest, it wasn't on my radar early on, and when I did finally get a vacation after a long time, I didn't realize how I was so rundown and needed to recharge, and it did help me significantly take a step back and reevaluate.

So that's one thing I think we all need to do better. We're in the service industry, so we want to serve our community. And sometimes we're not in a good spot. It's hard to do that, and so we just need to take a step back and take care of ourselves first so that we can take care of those others who need it.

And that's a lesson that I'm taking wholeheartedly from Covid and the pandemic, is looking at mental health and looking at making sure that everyone around you is taken care of, and that means something different to every single person.

Some people just need some time during the day to refocus or recharge, and others need a day away, and others need a week, and so we all just need to know and recognize what that is for each individual and embrace it.

Jeffrey Boyce

Well, thanks so much for taking the time to share with me today.

Chris Burkhardt

Thank you so much. I appreciate the time.