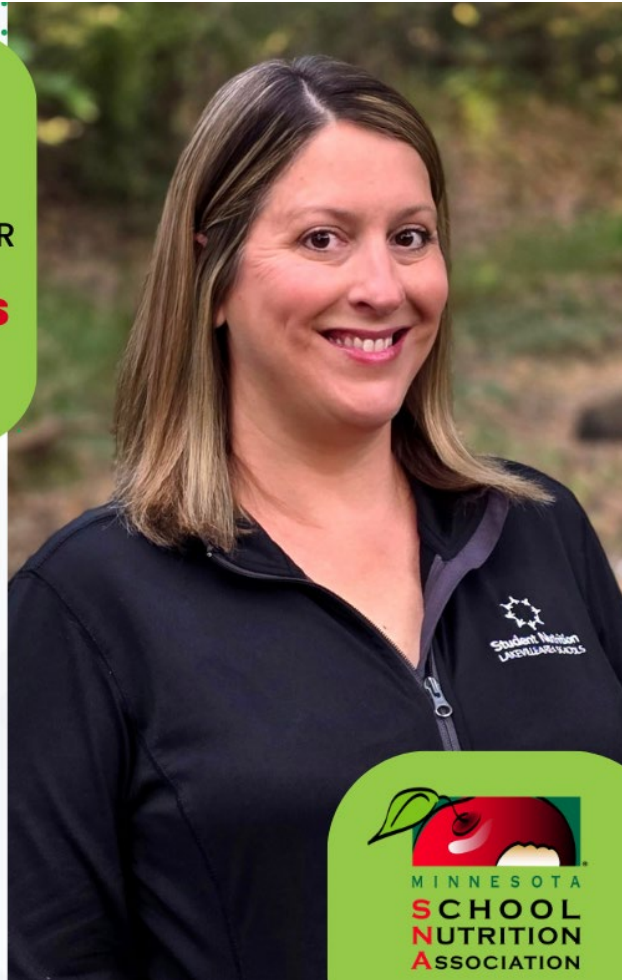


Meet The Member

Jessica Peglow
STUDENT NUTRITION MANAGER

LAKEVILLE AREA SCHOOLS
CHRISTINA HUDDLESTON
ELEMENTARY

"I strive to foster a positive, supportive environment where teamwork, communication, and a shared commitment to serving our students are at the heart of everything we do."



Tell us about your role:

In 2019, I started as a part-time employee to fill some of my extra time during the day once both of my children were in school. At the time, I was already working full-time as a photographer and was looking for a way to earn a little extra income, so it seemed like a fun side job. As my kids got older and became more involved in sports, balancing evening and weekend work became impossible. In 2022, I was given the opportunity to step into the role of Second Cook, and by 2024, I had worked my way up to Kitchen Manager. What started as a part-time job quickly grew into a rewarding career.

How did you first get involved with MSNA, and how has your membership contributed to your professional growth?

A few years ago, I attended my first MSNA conference and have really enjoyed attending each year since. The conferences are engaging and a fun way to learn about student nutrition. I like connecting with others and meeting new people. The classes I've taken through MSNA, both at conferences and online, have not only helped me earn my CEUs but have also provided valuable knowledge that I've been able to use to continue growing and become a better manager.

How do you keep your team engaged, motivated and feeling valued?

I believe that recognition goes a long way, whether it is praising someone for a job well done, acknowledging their hard work during a challenging shift, or simply taking the time to thank them for all that they do. I want my team to feel valued, respected, and proud to be part of our kitchen. I always tell them that communication is key, and I try to lead by example by maintaining a positive mindset and good attitude.

How do you find creative ways to engage students and make mealtimes fun?

We hype up every new meal by offering samples to students and talking with them about the food, encouraging them to try something new. We visit each grade level, hear their thoughts, and gather feedback about their preferences. This helps students feel involved in the menu planning process while encouraging them to step outside their comfort zones and try new things.

Tell us about your “Fancy Lunch” or other themed activities you’ve created for students.

I can't take credit for inventing “Fancy Day”, that was our principal's idea, but I can say that our kitchen team has fully embraced it and looks forward to it every year. Once I find out the date, I work with my director to adjust the menu so we can serve a meal that feels a little more special and fancy.

We go all out to create a fancy dining experience in the cafeteria. Floor lamps are brought in to soften the lighting, a cozy fireplace is projected onto the wall, and every table is dressed with a tablecloth and centerpieces. The students arrive dressed in their finest outfits, from suits and bow ties to beautiful dresses. Our kitchen staff joins in the fun by dressing in black with lavender ties, ready to serve our students.

Fancy Day is not just another lunch service; it's an opportunity to make our students feel like royalty. We all try to interact with them as if we were waitstaff at a fancy restaurant. Parent volunteers carry the students' trays to their seats. The students think it's the best, and their smiles and excitement make the day.

One of my personal favorite parts is serving the breadsticks. I stand at the beginning of the serving line holding out a breadstick as if I'm presenting a bottle of wine and ask the student if it's to their liking before placing it on their tray. The kids think it's hilarious, and the smiles and laughter it brings are priceless.

Seeing how much the students enjoy this experience is incredibly rewarding. Moments like these remind me that school nutrition is about so much more than serving meals. It's about creating memorable experiences, building connections and making students feel special. Those smiles make all the effort worthwhile.

How did the photo guides help students navigate the menu and make meal choices?

This is where my photography skills still come in handy. About two years ago, I noticed that our kindergarteners, first graders, and students in our SPED program were having difficulty identifying the daily second-choice meal. To help, I created a laminated day-of-the-week guide featuring pictures of each day's meal and the items included.

Having a visual guide made it much easier for our younger students to see what was being offered and decide which meal they wanted. This simple change helped reduce food waste and empowered students to make choices based on what they truly wanted to eat.

Because this was such a hit, I try to photograph and feature as many meals as I can in the daily announcements. Having a great visual really helps students better understand their options, feel more confident in their decisions, and choose the right option for them.

What are some of the most popular meals or menu items in your district, and do you have a personal favorite?

Our kids LOVE breakfast day! French toast, cheese omelets, and hash browns are always a hit. Of course, pizza is right up there, too. It's hard to say which one they love more.

When it comes to our kitchen's favorite meal, Orange Chicken with fresh-steamed broccoli takes the top spot, hands down.

What accomplishment are you most proud of in your school nutrition career?

I think what I'm most proud of is the decision I made in 2022 to pursue a full-time career in student nutrition and step back from photography. As hard as it was, it was the right decision for our family. Within just two years, I worked my way up to becoming an elementary school nutrition manager. I'm also incredibly proud of the culture I've created in my kitchen. I strive to foster a positive, supportive environment where teamwork, communication, and a shared commitment to serving our students are at the heart of everything we do.

What advice would you give to someone who is new to school nutrition?

School nutrition isn't for everyone. It's a fast-paced job that can be both mentally and physically demanding, but it's also incredibly rewarding. My advice is to be patient, stay flexible, work as a team, and be ready to learn something new every day.