

Free food!

That is just one of the many innovations instituted by the Hobbs Schools' nutritional chief

There were days when Sonya Moore wondered if she'd bitten off more than she could chew.

Which is ironic given the fact that Moore is director of the school district's Nutritional Services Department.

"At first I was overwhelmed. It was way more of a challenge than I ever expected," admitted Moore, whose previous decades of experience came outside the culinary world.

But the former HMS human resources employee took a leap out of her comfort zone two years ago when challenged to take the reins of a program that employs 112 and operates on a \$6 million annual budget.

"Running the department was an interesting opportunity because I wanted to learn something new," Moore said with understatement.

Understatement because the past 24 months have been a learning experience for Moore, teachers and students alike as sweeping changes in cafeteria services were made.

Most notable among the modifications is Moore's move this August to provide free breakfast and lunch for all 10,848 Hobbs students. Doing so was an educated gamble based on months of cost analysis and a belief that parents would register their students for meal plans - a prerequisite to increased USDA funding.

If the gamble failed, Moore and her self-sustaining department would face a budget deficit of epic proportions. But if the meal move succeeded, every student would eat for free, including many who had chosen hunger over the humiliation of cash lines.

Now, two months into the free meal program, Moore happily recites the statistics: HMS food service applicants increased to 5,000 this year compared to 1,800 last year. As a result, the USDA is subsidizing the cost of low-income meals at a reimbursement rate that pays for those students and higher income students. In addition, the district's 19 schools are serving 2,600 more meals on a daily basis than they did last year at this time.

But that's just the tip of the iceberg lettuce when it comes to totally revamped nutritional services.

"The first six months on the job I just observed," Moore said. "I stood at every position in our cafeterias and watched and learned and took a lot of notes."

What Moore discovered was that 60 percent of students were not eating cafeteria food in 2017. Students were either bringing their own lunch, having it brought to them by parents or abstaining.

Waste of food was also a major issue as Moore routinely saw students dump vegetable and fruits - given to them without choice as a side dish - into the trash.

So, with the help and support of a staff that Moore says has become like family, the nutritional services department increased spending to spice up entrees. Beef products like hamburgers and meatballs, for example, are now 100 percent beef as opposed to soy filled.

Fresh produce - things like watermelon, cantaloupe, honey dew and salad mixes - are purchased through a special state grant from nearby farms in Roswell and Las Cruces.

Central kitchen employees, who cook food that is transported to all schools, now make some items from scratch. Chicken soup, pinto beans, Spanish rice, posole and quesadillas are among a growing list of specialties.

Another innovation is the Hobbs High School coffee bar. After observing a large percentage of students arrive for school every morning with a retail coffee drink in hand, Moore figured she could keep students caffeinated while also creating income for that self-sustaining budget.

It turns out that the USDA routinely recommends that students increase their daily milk consumption. So Moore purchased high quality coffee beans and grinders, invested in frappe frothers, bought sugar free syrups and opened the Eagle Nest. High demand resulted in the hiring of two full-time baristas who increased the offerings at the school coffee bar which expanded its services recently to cold brew and snacks. "The Eagle Nest has been extremely popular," Moore said again with that hint of understatement.

Another success has been the salad bars which Moore gradually opened at every school. The fact that students could pick vegetables and fruits themselves meant they were more likely to eat the items, the cafeteria chief reasoned.

"At first, staff were concerned that students would take too much time or make a mess," Moore said. "But what we learned was that many of our students don't get exposure to fresh fruit or vegetables. Now, they are developing a taste for them and, even at the kindergarten level, they've learned how to go through the bar and serve themselves. I get calls from teachers who tell me,



Sonya Moore took over as the Hobbs School District's director of nutritional services two years ago and has brought a new look to cafeteria lines and food - which includes fresh fruit purchased from farms in Roswell and Las Cruces.



Moore credits her team - which includes HHS cafeteria workers - with helping make food services for all Hobbs students a success. The nutrition department employs 112 people.

"Thank you. My kids are coming back to class full and they are no longer hungry."

Even better, wasted food has been drastically reduced. And leftover food is transported to Manna Outreach every afternoon.

As part of her on-the-job training, Moore said she attended state and national school nutrition conferences in order to bone up on USDA requirements. While learning how to balance calorie counts with grain requirements, sodium levels and a number of other mandates, Moore became certified as a nutritional director.

And then she took that accomplishment one step further by attending online classes for a year and sitting for a lengthy exam. As a result, Moore is one of only nine New Mexico nutrition directors (out of 300 statewide) to earn School Nutrition Specialist certification from the School Nutrition Association.

Still, that doesn't mean there haven't been bumps in the road. The HHS cafeteria came under scrutiny at the beginning of the 2018 school year when students complained that long lines were preventing them from being able to eat during their allotted 30-minute lunch period.

Moore said the problem was created when she abolished the old cash and carry system in favor of online payments. As students and cashiers grappled to learn the new procedure, Moore admits there were delays.

A year later, getting a tray of food is similar to checking a book out of the library: students simply scan their ID. To make sure things are running smoothly, Moore routinely walks through the HHS cafeteria each day. She said she particularly looks forward to seeing what food choices are popular among students. Chicken nuggets and Chinese food are the current favorites. Ever mulling, Moore also doesn't stop serving breakfast until lunch time - meaning students who arrive late always have a chance to eat before class.

"I'm a Southern mama. If you come to my house, I'm going to feed you," said the woman who grew up in a small Georgia town and outfits her office with University of Georgia Bulldog knapsacks. "If you don't eat when you come to my house, it hurts my feelings. When I see a kid that's not eating, I want to know why. If they don't like it, then I fix something the way they do like it."

Which is why Moore was particularly pleased last month to inform HHS students who were unaware about the new, free food policy. "They'd be sitting at a table without eating when I told them it was free, their face would light up. It's just been phenomenal."

"Food has always been my hobby," Moore added. "This job is like my paintbrush and canvas. I love it. For the first time in my life, I know I'm doing what I was meant to do."