

Get Into Formation for



CULINARY BOOT CAMP

BY KELSEY CASSELBURY

As a director or manager, have you ever wished you could afford the budget and time to send staff members in desperate need of nutrition and culinary basics to a cooking school? Or, perhaps *you're* the new hire, and while you know the four "mother sauces," you feel totally bamboozled by all the regulations, protocols and other specificities that come along with operating a K-12 school kitchen. If only there was an intense, fast-paced course that gives you what you *need* to know, whether it's how to hold a knife properly or the components that constitute a reimbursable meal!



Close ranks, school chefs!
Sharpen those knives,
and get chopping!
Discover the benefits of
a boot camp-style
training for K-12 culinary
skills development.

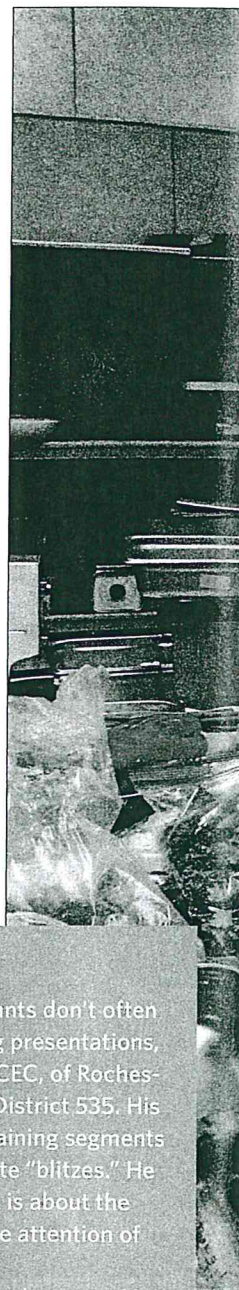


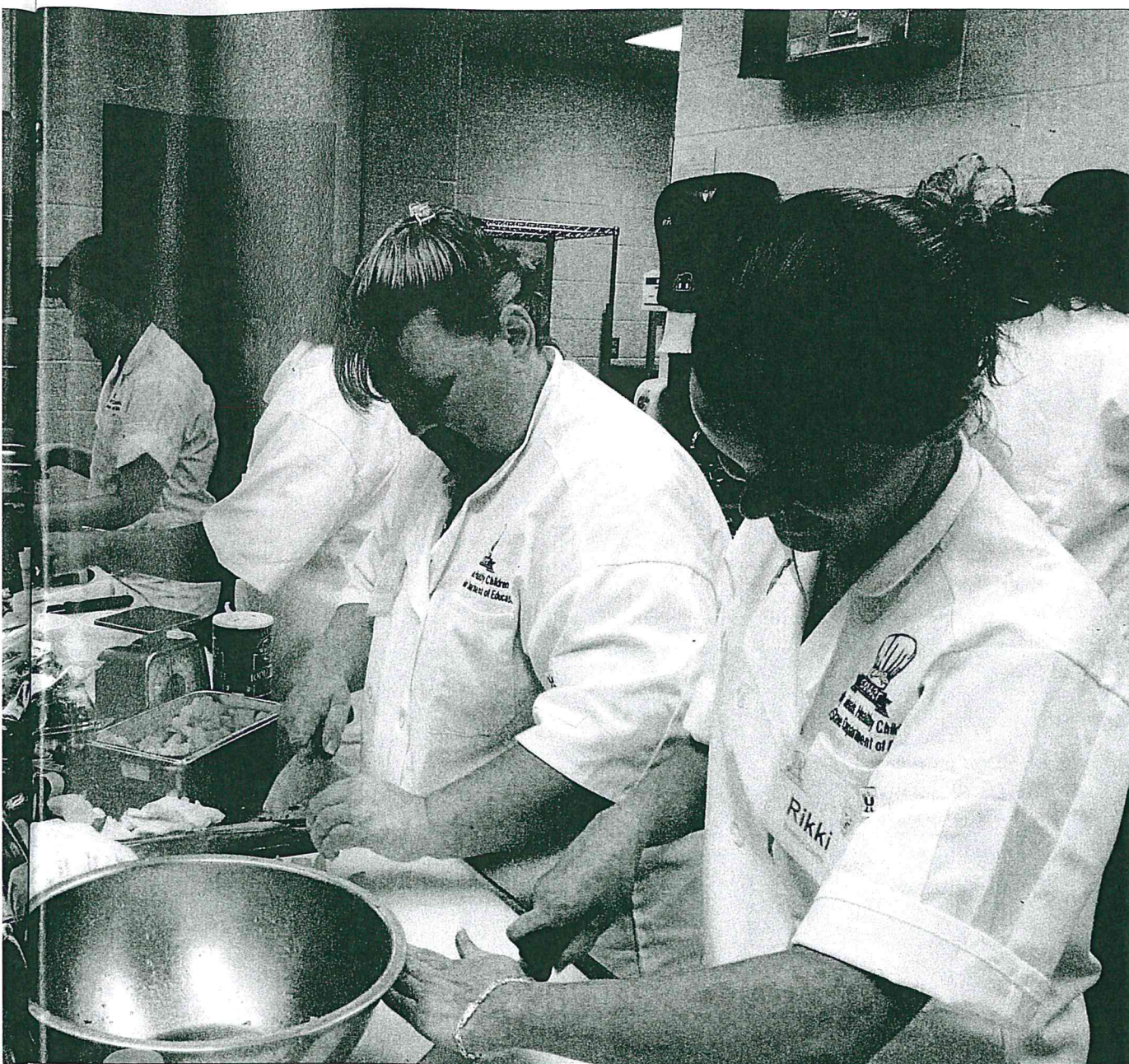
There is! Well, in some places, at least—and there *could* be such an opportunity in your very own state, region or district. K-12 culinary "boot camps"—held for no more than a few days at most—have proven to be an effective way of training school nutrition staff in both the art of cooking and the science of operations. Chefs working in school districts are the natural choice to lead such boot camp trainings, but if you don't have one on your team, don't despair! *School Nutrition* spoke to a number of individuals proffering culinary wisdom in boot camp-type events, including a state agency chief, co-founders of a culinary boot camp organization, corporate chefs and, of course, a few school staff chefs. We sought to learn more about what these courses entail and pass along advice to you about why such opportunities are worth offering—and attending. "Ten-hut!"

QUICK TIP

Boot camp participants don't often respond well to long presentations, says Travis Pearce, CEC, of Rochester (Minn.) School District 535. His method: Compile training segments into 20- to 30-minute "blitzes." He explains, "I feel that is about the max time to keep the attention of the class."

In fact, Pearce conducts weekly "refresher blitzes" with his staff throughout the year. He describes these as "a quick, 10-minute method-of-the-week to reinforce the boot camp's training throughout the year." This blitz training doesn't just help boot camp alums stay fresh and up to date. It also provides introductions to the new employees hired in the period between formal boot camp sessions.





ONSITE EXPERTS

In the U.S. military, another phrase for “boot camp” is “basic training”—which is precisely the purpose of the culinary model. At Colorado Springs (Colo.) School District 11, Executive Chef and Assistant Director Nathan Dirnberger, CEC, hosts a two-day culinary boot camp each August, right before school starts, intended specifically for new hires. (See this month's Bonus Web Content for a sample agenda.) This is followed up with a two-day Training Academy that all school nutrition employees attend. Dirnberger relates these trainings to another school staple: athletics. “Just like a good football team, you can't start the

season without your first practice,” he declares.

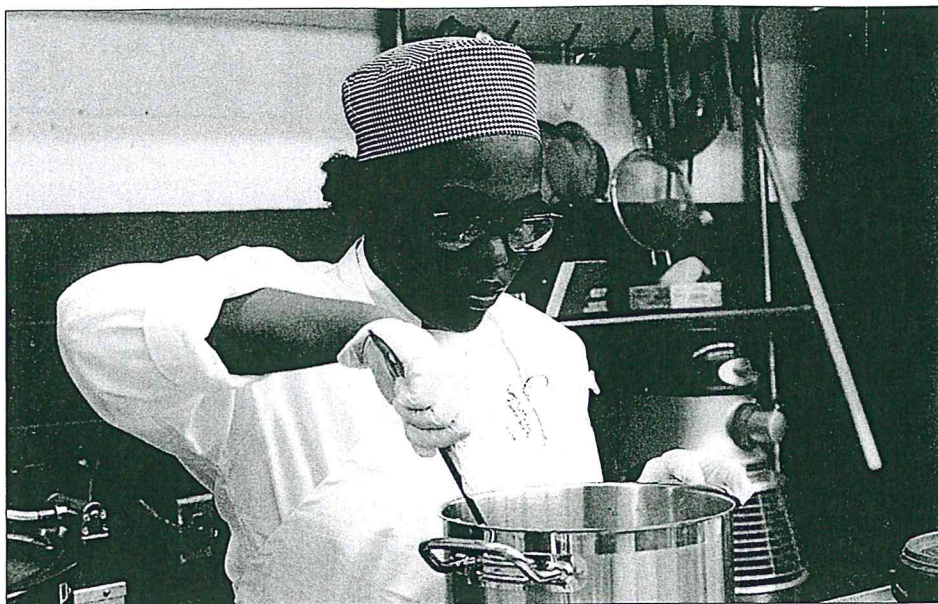
Now, when we say “basic training,” we mean *basic*—Colorado Springs' boot camp goes as elementary as how to make a sanitizer solution. “You think everyone knows it,” Dirnberger comments. “But then you get a health violation on that sanitizer bucket.” After all, in many communities, you can't be so picky as to only hire those with a foodservice background.

In Sacramento City (Calif.) Unified School District, Chef-Manager David Edgar, CEC, sees employees struggle with tasks such as standardized cooking concepts, knife skills and portion and cost control. Because they don't

have that culinary background, the newbies tend to apply techniques that work at home—but those often are inappropriate in quantity food production.

Some other key training topics that Edgar thinks are vital include kitchen etiquette (how to work in tight quarters and community), customer service, food safety, sanitation, professional attire and “basically, how to follow a recipe, properly roast meats and vegetables, plus how to sauté, steam and batch cook,” he details. Travis Pearce, CEC, district chef for Rochester (Minn.) School District 535, says sanitation, knife skills and the use of personal protective equipment

Food Focus



(PPEs) are the top three takeaways from his yearly day-long boot camp. "These are the cause of the most preventable [foodborne] illnesses and employee accidents," he notes.

As many districts turn the clock back and work to provide more scratch-based menu items, the goal

of many training boot camps is to elevate the employees' culinary skills. "I would like to see our folks capable of working at the competitive level of entry-level cooks or higher, and not just be known as 'lunch ladies,'" Edgar declares. He adds that the responsibility rests with the management

to ensure that new school nutrition hires have the skills for inhouse cooking preparation and can do more than just "heat and serve."

Dirnberger, who graduated from culinary school in 2011, has a similar goal. "We try to build a culture of a world-class organization, and the



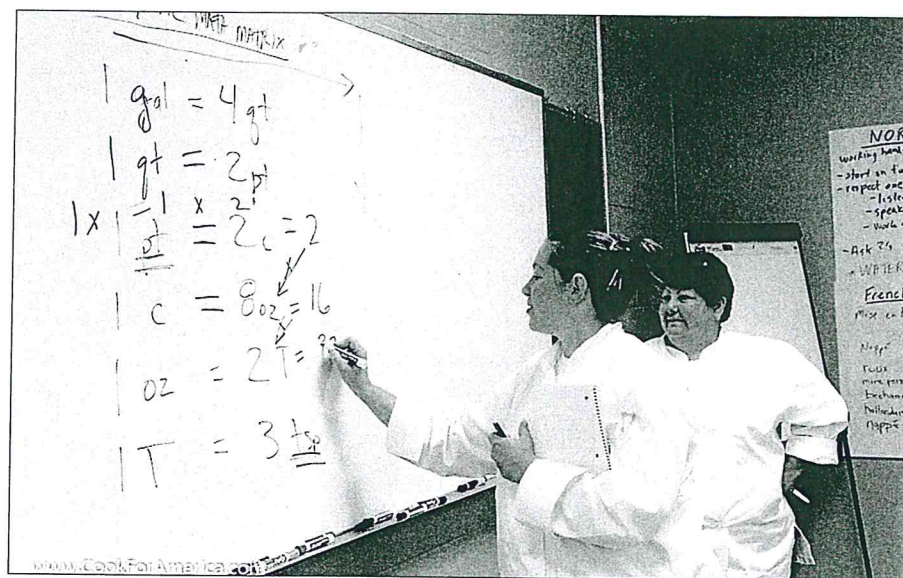
only way you can do that is to engage with your staff," he muses. "Let them know what the expectation is, and that will raise the bar for everybody." Of course, raising the bar pays off in several tangible benefits, too, according to Pearce. A well-trained staff equals increased sales, decreased costs, improved customer satisfaction and increased employee retention. "It costs a lot of money to hire and train new employees," he says. "You can see the benefits, financially, of having low employee turnover."

GOING OUTSIDE THE RANKS

Let's face it—even if your district has some very talented employees, not everyone has the budget to hire an expert chef. So, if you're thinking about putting together a culinary boot camp but you don't have a trained chef on staff, where do you turn for expertise?

There are actually *plenty* of leads to find a chef or other certified culinary trainer willing to help support K-12 initiatives. Start with local restaurateurs. "A lot of chefs are willing to give their time, especially for a good cause, to teach skill sets to those who need it," advises Dirnberger. This form of outreach can generate goodwill in the community and provide important training for your staff. Other sources you can tap are showcased throughout this article.

CORPORATE CHEFS. In Spring 2015, Chef Monica Coulter of General Mills Foodservice was invited to be a presenter at Minnesota School Nutrition Association's (MSNA) one-day culinary boot camp. The participant cap, according to MSNA Executive Director Sharon Maus, was 60 people, divided into six groups of 10. The boot camp structure featured each small group rotating among different learning stations to build a variety of skill sets. The agenda included knife safety, herbs/spice



blending, low-sodium soup preparation and baking with whole grains.

Chef Jessica Wright, CEC, who currently works as a certified trainer/implementation specialist for PCS Revenue Control Systems, has been offering training in school nutrition skills for roughly a decade. When she began her K-12 school foodservice career in 2001, the need for training was very clear, she recounts. Wright insists that the most effective way to provide skills development is hands-on, in-the-kitchen training, such as boot camp-style sessions, though she recognizes that most school districts have neither the budget nor the time for these. The next best thing might be online training, she notes. Among the lessons she's taught are recipe conversions, food chain supply, gram weight conversions, menu planning and software training for ordering and inventory.

Wright finds that trainings that appeal to new food trends or those that "refresh" knowledge areas, such as standardized recipes and recipe formulations, are reliably popular, "Especially as kitchens revert to more cooking-from-scratch menu items," she notes. "School foodservice really lost a lot going to prepared, prepackaged menu items, both nutritionally for the students and in the lost knowledge base of cooking with real ingredients and mathematically calculating the proper conversions."

STATE AGENCY. Many state agencies organize training opportunities for K-12 school nutrition professionals. In Maryland, for example, the Office of School and Community Nutrition Programs in the state's Department of Education began offering K-12 foodservice boot camps in 2010 after being awarded a Team Nutrition grant from USDA. "If you include the four camps planned for this year, we will have taught 27 camps and trained more than 400 school nutrition professionals in almost all the public school systems in Maryland. The participants have, in turn, trained more than 1,400 individuals," boasts Stewart Eidel, chief of Professional Development and Technical Assistance.

Originally, the camps were six days long; now, they've been shortened to just three days. The topics were developed based primarily on the provisions in the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010. Since, they have been modified to reflect other changes and priorities in the profession over the past four years, such as how to conduct a food tasting, smarter lunchroom marketing techniques and preparing school-developed recipes from districts throughout Maryland. "These skills are critical for the staff to be able to treat the food they prepare, whether it is fully scratch or 100% commercially processed, in a manner that will maximize the qual-



Making It Fun

Wait, boot camp isn't supposed to be fun, is it? It can be! When General Mills' Chef Monica Coulter participated in Minnesota SNA's training, the day culminated with a "Chopped" challenge, modeled after the TV reality cooking show competition of the same name. "Judging that event was tough," she exclaims. "Everything was really good!"

At another Minnesota training session Coulter enjoyed, the participants were challenged to compete in a "create your own blender-less smoothie" recipe contest at the end of the day. "Even though the 'grand prize' was hardly a big ticket item—maybe oven mitts—they were still very competitive," Coulter recalls. "There was a lot of celebrating and whoops of joy when the winning team was announced."

Coulter urges other trainers to remember the value of training that is an enjoyable experience. "I think when people are having fun, learning is effortless and the information tends to stick with people."

Your "Commanding Officers"

» » Kate Adamick and Andrea Martin
Chefs and Co-founders
Lunch Teachers®
Culinary Boot Camp
Cook for America
www.cookforamerica.com

» » Monica Coulter
Corporate Chef
General Mills
Minneapolis, Minn.
www.generalmillscf.com

» » Nathan Dirnberger, CEC
Executive Chef/
Assistant Director
Colorado Springs (Colo.)
School District 11
www.d11.org

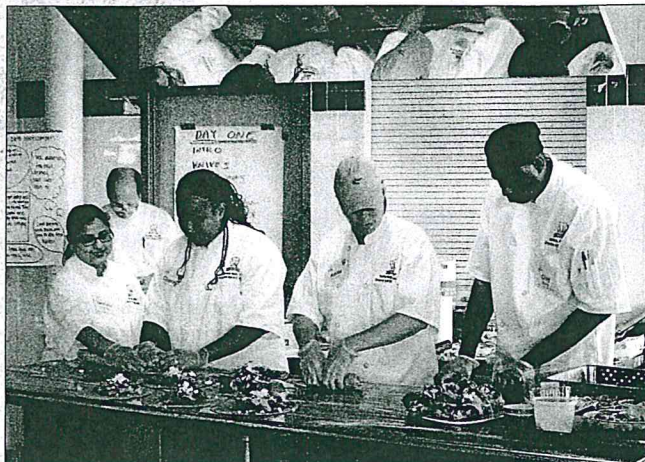
» » David Edgar, CEC
Chef-Manager,
Nutrition Services
Sacramento City (Calif.)
Unified School District
www.scusd.edu

» » Stewart Eidel
Chief, Professional Development
and Technical Assistance
Maryland State Department of
Education, Office of School &
Community Nutrition Programs
Baltimore, Md.
www.marylandpublicschools.org

» » Travis Pearce, CEC
District Chef
Rochester (Minn.) School
District 535
www.rochester.k12.mn.us

» » Jessica Wright, CEC
Certified Trainer and
Implementation Specialist
PCS Revenue Control Systems
Englewood Cliffs, N.J.
www.pcsrccs.com

Food Focus



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ity," says Eidel, noting the impact food quality has on participation. "The goal is to have the child eat the meals we prepare, and by maximizing the quality, presentation and promotion of that nutritious meal, we are fulfilling the goal."

ENTERPRISING PARTNERS. As the challenges confronting K-12 school foodservice have made headlines, some foodservice experts see a business potential in filling a niche. One of these is Cook for America, established nearly a decade ago, when Chef Kate Adamick visited 23 school districts to learn more about the equipment needs that impeded progress in serving more fresh-prep foods. Instead, the directors told her that while equipment was important, it wasn't as essential as culinary training. As a result, Adamick and her partners went to work. Today, Cook for America Lunch Teachers® Culinary Boot Camps last five days, training 24 to 32 participants per session in local school kitchens. Curriculum components include

not only cooking basics and food safety, but also culinary math, time management and sauce and breakfast production.

LACE UP YOUR BOOTS!

Just the *idea* of organizing (or even participating in) a culinary boot camp likely seems about as daunting as an Army basic training obstacle course. It's a project that deserves careful thought and consideration, and a lot of planning will be involved. Check in with one or more of the "commanding officers" listed in the box on page 69 for advice about getting started. You may opt to take on just one or two elements of a boot camp session as a trial—consider the weekly "blitzes" described by Travis Pearce in the box on page 64.

When you're ready to commit to turning your team into a top-notch culinary corps, rest assured that the results will be worthwhile—and you might even learn a thing or two yourself! "The best memories I have of teaching are of seeing that light bulb

illuminate over their heads," Pearce ruminates. "It's when you know you really reached [someone] and what you are teaching is helping them become a better person. Someone always has a different way of doing things, and I am constantly learning and love it every day." At ease, school chefs. SN

Kelsey Casselbury is a School Nutrition contributing editor and its former managing editor. Photos courtesy of Cook for America and the Maryland Department of Education Office of School and Community Nutrition Programs.

BONUS WEB CONTENT

Food Focus

There's no need to reinvent the boot-camp wheel! Colorado Springs (Colo.) School District 11's Nathan Dirnberger graciously shares the two-day agenda of his district's culinary skills training event. Check it out as part of this month's online extras at www.schoolnutrition.org/snmagazinebonus.

Visit www.schoolnutrition.org/snmagazinebonus to access.