Addressing USDA Meal and Reporting Requirement: *Making It Count* a Unique Training Tool for School Nutrition Professionals

An impressive 30,500,000 (yes, million!) lunches were served in school every day in 2015! That’s a lot of Shepherd’s pie, apples, carrots and milk. What would over 30 million lunches look like? If all trays were lined up end to end, they would stretch 7,220 miles or from the Statue of Liberty over the Atlantic Ocean to the Great Wall of China! That’s an enormous amount of meals that have to be reported correctly.

Accurate planning of this massive number of meals, and then reporting back to State Agencies for reimbursement funds is crucial, but it was not happening accurately or consistently in Massachusetts or other states, based on the Access Participation Eligibility and Certification (APEC) study conducted by the United States Department of Agriculture.

The APEC study found that the errors fell into 2 categories: administrative errors by school districts in processing applications; and errors by cashiers in counting reimbursable meals. In 2009, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (MA ESE) received an Administrative and Review Training (ART) grant from USDA to help them work on
these issues. Coordinated then by Rita Brennan Olson, Nutrition Education & Training Coordinator, at MA ESE teamed with Judy Flohr and Miyoung Jeong, UMass Department of Hospitality & Tourism and Lynne Thompson, designer with the UMass Extension Nutrition Education Program (NEP) to tackle this problem through the School Meals Accountability and Responsibility Training Tools (SMARTTs) initiative.

Changes in the School Nutrition Program

Think back to when you were in school. What did you have for lunch? Some students lined up, grabbed a tray and accepted whatever the meal of the day happened to be. Your only choices may have been between whole milk or chocolate milk. The complexity from the beginning of the National School Lunch Program in the 1900’s to today is staggering. In 1900, children took what was served—if it was served at all. Many children went home for lunch each day. By 1960, only a few schools offered breakfast. By 2016, schools must take into account students with special dietary needs and those with special dietary regulations. Wellness policies and professional standards for school nutrition personnel are now part of school decisions.

Making It Count to the rescue

Through SMARTTs, Lynne Thompson, as Principal Investigator for the project recruited Béné Naudin, content developer and video producer, and, more recently, Catherine Wickham, Project Assistant and doctoral candidate in Nutrition, to help tap the expertise of many school nutrition professionals in Massachusetts including Linda Fischer and other MA ESE Educational Specialists. Together they are working to make a difference in improving knowledge of USDA meal pattern requirements for Child Nutrition Programs and the reporting of school meals in the Commonwealth. The two partner organizations have worked steadfastly since 2009. MA ESE awarded grant funding totaling $1,144,000 to UMass over nine years to create this easy-to-use online program called Making It Count (MIC). [embed www.makingitcount.info]

Making It Count is designed to:

- Improve understanding of the meal pattern requirements for the National School Lunch Program, Breakfast Program, and Afterschool Snack Program
- Reduce errors and improve accountability in these school nutrition programs
- Build skills and empower staff to run efficiently operated school nutrition programs

Making It Count is divided into five core sections: Understanding USDA meal pattern requirements for Breakfast, Lunch and Afterschool Snack; Special Dietary Needs; Accountability; Access; and the up-coming Food Production in Schools.

One of the challenges in creating this program was that Federal regulations continued to change over the past five years affecting which foods and meals qualify for reimbursement. With this in mind, designers needed to reflect up-to-date requirements and address the new
professional standard requirement implemented in 2015. MIC is now approved for over a dozen learning objectives set by USDA for meeting these standards. (embed https://professionalstandards.fns.usda.gov/content/making-it-count ) Making It Count has been successful in acknowledging and recognizing the complexity of child nutrition programs, and showing respect for the hard work and dedication of the people in/who choose this unique profession.

MIC was created for group presentations as well as self-directed study for all school nutrition personnel. This web-based professional development resource includes videos, online interactive activities, facts sheets, key word lists, review questions, and useful links. With renewed support from USDA, Lisa Jackson, MA ESE’s SMARTTs Coordinator has promoted the development of additional teaching tools such as a facilitator's guide, site-based activities and accompanying work sheets. All videos and print materials are available in English and Spanish. Closed-captioning is available for all the videos in English, Spanish, Haitian Creole, Mandarin, and Portuguese.

“This training is vital because school nutrition personnel are so important to the health and well-being of millions of children, not just in Massachusetts, but across the country. They need tools and resources to help them build the skills they need to correctly prepare, ring up, and record reimbursable meals,” says Wickham.

Thompson’s team has traveled across the state to videotape school kitchens, cafeterias and school nutrition personnel, and interview subject matter experts. In the last two years, they have presented at conferences across the country in an effort to introduce and promote this valuable training program. MIC has been well received, as demonstrated by online tracking. “We see that thousands of visitors have come to the site and can determine which training topics are the most popular. We are thrilled that every state in the USA and many countries have tapped into this resource,” says Thompson.

One user in a western state said, “I found this course extremely helpful especially since I could do it at my own pace and go back to an item or refer to my handout in conjunction with the video.” A nutrition worker from New Jersey shared, “It helps to know that if we follow guidelines and read labels we can be proud to give a child a nutritional and healthy meal.”

Since we are dealing with mostly rules and regulations, “It was important to ground ourselves in reality, while creating something that was “easy to digest” for all learners, “ said Naudin. With documentary-style videos of actual school nutrition personnel in schools, accompanied by an array of supporting materials has become a blue print for training and is now being promoted by the USDA around the country.