



On any given day, Detroit Betti Wiggins feeds approximately 55,000 children. As executive director of the Office of Food Services for Detroit Public Schools, Wiggins oversees an 800-person operation that ensures the food Detroit school children are eating is healthy – and setting them up for success in the classroom.

“It takes more than books for students to learn,” says Wiggins, who cites Maslow’s hierarchy of needs as a framework for the importance of proper child nutrition. “Learning can’t happen until children’s basic needs for a safe, clean school environment and a healthy nutritious meal are met.”

Wiggins has ample opportunity to introduce healthy fare to Detroit school children as the individual ultimately in charge of menu development for the district. Since 2011, DPS has been serving free breakfast, lunch and, in many cases, dinner to every child in the district as part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Community Eligibility Option program. Wiggins has made it her mission to show children a better way to eat, so that healthy eating habits become routine for them and, by extension, their families.

To that end, Wiggins and her team have turned the district’s deep fryers off for good, introduced locally grown produce to school menus, shifted food preparation to school grounds, cut the fat, sugar and salt content of menu items, and removed artificially sweetened drinks. In the fall, flavored milks will be a thing of the past – as will iceberg lettuce, which Wiggins points out is 65 percent water. Her team’s 2014 goal is to remove ranch dressing from the district menu.

As an example of what a typical DPS meal looks like under Wiggins’

FEEDING THE TROOPS

Detroit Public Schools’ ‘head lunch lady’ Betti Wiggins overhauls child nutrition one meal at a time

BY JACQUIE GOETZ BLUETHMANN /// PHOTO BY LAUREN JEZIORSKI

INSIGHTS FROM THE FOOD FRONTLINE

As mom of a now-grown son and a self-dubbed “head lunch lady,” Betti Wiggins has more than a little experience with picky eaters and the nuances of feeding children. She puts this experience to use daily in her role as executive director of the Office of Food Services for Detroit Public Schools.

“We serve pears to the little ones, not apples,” Wiggins says of one lesson learned the hard way. “Pears don’t require dental extractions.”

It’s her littlest customers that often require creative thinking. For example, Wiggins observed that when oranges were placed on the wobbly cafeteria trays of early learners, the fruit tended to roll right off. Now oranges are cut in half and placed flat-side down. Problem solved.

When food services introduced asparagus to the district, Wiggins’ young charges weren’t quite sure how to eat it. Her advice was simple.

“I told them to start at the branches and work down,” she recalls. “Top to trunk.” For teens?

Wiggins’ team hid the veggie in salads.

“High schoolers don’t think it’s cool to eat asparagus,” Wiggins explains. “So we found another way to get it to them.” In that same spirit, teens now get salads in cups – not trays like younger students. Wiggins doesn’t mind, as long as the kids who rely on her team for healthy meals get the nutritious food they need to learn.

“I find personal satisfaction in introducing kids to foods like ugly fruit,” she says. “School kids have a wider a variety of food than they do at home.”

Wiggins notes that when kids try things at school they like, they often go home and ask for it.

“I had a mom call me once asking where she could buy sugar snap peas after her daughter brought home some from a school garden,” Wiggins says. “I witnessed a young girl with her mother at the grocery store telling her what an avocado is and what can be made from it. Putting good food on my kids’ trays is my life’s work.”

watch, the Office of Food Services recently served a lunch of bone-in barbecue chicken with collard greens, macaroni and cheese and a corn muffin.

“I wanted the kids to see that chicken doesn’t have to come in a nugget or a strip,” Wiggins says of the meal.

This particular lunch followed Wiggins’ standard meal template, whereby the center of the plate is made up of a minimally processed item surrounded by fresh produce. Exactly what those foods will be on any given day is determined well in advance by Wiggins’ team, including a district chef who uses the cafeteria at Douglass Middle School as a test kitchen.

spent her formative years tending to chickens, pigs and one cow while helping harvest vegetables including soybeans and corn. It was this early exposure that ignited Wiggins’ interest in food. She fueled that through coursework at Cass Technical High School and eventually Wayne State University, where she studied family and consumer resource – or, as Wiggins refers to it, “home ec.”

Upon graduation, Wiggins applied to and earned acceptance to law school. She grappled with whether to pursue law or food, ultimately opting for the latter.

“Food services seemed like it would be more rewarding,” Wiggins recalls. “People remember their lunch lady.”

BEYOND THE CAFETERIA

Wiggins’ approach to child nutrition is multi-pronged. One crucial prong that she is especially enthusiastic about is school gardens. There are presently 51 in the district – but not for long. Wiggins says that the district will boast 75 by April. These gardens are yielding produce that, in many cases, will make its way to the lunch trays of the same students who planted and nurtured the seedlings. Wiggins likes to share the story of the close to 2,000 pounds of cucumbers grown in a hoop house by students at DPS’ Drew Transition Center for cognitively impaired individuals. These cucumbers graced the plates of students throughout the district.

“School gardens not only expose kids to new foods; they support education achievement by teaching students about science and gardening,” Wiggins explains.

When you consider that Wiggins was raised on a farm in southeast Washtenaw County, being a child nutrition specialist is a job she was seemingly born to hold. Wiggins

A CAREER IN CUISINE

Wiggins spent a number of years working in food services at Detroit-area hospitals and eventually went to work for Marriott Corporation’s food services arm. She worked as food services director in Ann Arbor and later Paterson, N.J. and Baltimore, Md. before accepting a position as chief of food service

It was during her tenure there that, under her supervision, the district introduced a school breakfast program – an experience that would prove useful upon her return to Detroit in 2000 when she joined DPS’ Office of Food Services and implemented a similar program.

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administration for public schools in Washington, D.C.

Never had Wiggins seen the level and magnitude of poverty that she did during her time in D.C.

Wiggins recalls. “One teacher said that a boy in her class quickly learned to spell after breakfast was introduced because he could stay

awake for the spelling lesson that started each day. Other teachers said that kids stopped fighting and jumping around because they wanted to eat their breakfast.”

Sixteen months after joining DPS, Wiggins learned that food services were to be outsourced to Aramark, where it remained until 2008. Wiggins used that time to consult on child nutrition around the country.

In 2008, she was hired by the school union to write a counter proposal against outsourcing food services. When it was passed, she was hired back as operations manager for the Office of Food Services. In that role, she began changing menus and implementing a farm-to-school program.

FOOD – THE GREAT EQUALIZER

By 2010, Wiggins had been named executive director of food services and earned the district national recognition for its dietary goals. Now yogurt parfaits, salads and fresh fruits are fixtures in DPS, the Education Achievement

Authority, Highland Park Schools and 18 charter schools served by Wiggins’ office.

The students she feeds can expect two meatless meals a week and frequent ethnic food offerings.

“I serve large Hillel and vegetarian populations,” Wiggins says. “So we include lots of beans, cheese and egg on the menu.”

The district’s Middle Eastern population has made its own requests, and now falafels are a regular on the district lunch menu.

“When we serve falafel, we serve it to every child in the district,” she says. “Food is an equalizer. I eat yours. You eat mine. I see black kids eating refried beans and falafels. It’s great.”

Wiggins says her department’s approach to child nutrition introduces a whole new paradigm.

“My title should be ‘executive director of food system change’ – not food services,” she laughs. “But the truth is that it doesn’t matter how you teach the ABCs; a child can’t learn if he or she is hungry. I help, so that they can enter the classroom ready to learn.” ■