

LCSD1 schools receive national awards



Nutrition Services Administrator Shannon Thompson-Emslie, left, Central High Kitchen Manager Sonya Cook, Deming Head Cashier Sharon Sara and Deming/Miller Principal Tony Crecelius recently gathered for a special presentation of the school's bronze award from the USDA. —Photo by Cindy Keen Reynders

Laramie County School District 1 is taking a whole-school approach when it comes to student diet and exercise. In return, all of the district's elementary schools participating in the National School Lunch Program were recently honored with a bronze award from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA).

Shannon Thompson-Emslie, who started her duties in early January as LCSD1's nutrition services administrator, has had the privilege of presenting these awards to school principals, kitchen managers and head cashiers.

"It has been a very exciting time," she said. "When I present the awards, everyone at the school is very proud. Our nutrition services staff has worked hard to implement this program and they are very dedicated to it. We are hoping this enthusiasm spreads to students and parents as well."

The awards were presented in conjunction with the HealthierUS School Challenge, which is part of a voluntary

national certification initiative. The program falls in line with First Lady Michelle Obama's Let's Move campaign since it recognizes schools that are creating healthier environments by promoting good nutrition and physical activity.

"The main reason for the program is to really get schools and districts to look at the entire school day for students," Thompson-Emslie said. "It's not just about the meals; it's about the school environment. For example, we're talking about limiting extra calories, getting kids to eat healthy breakfast and lunch, eliminating empty calories, nutrition education and increasing physical activity. We're looking at whole-child wellness and not just the food part."

To be considered for the award, LCSD1 schools had to meet certain criteria, which included serving meals meeting USDA nutrition standards. Thompson-Emslie said these meal guidelines were established by the

Institute of Medicine and the Dietetics Association.

"They've all worked together to create our new meal regulations to make sure they're at very high standards," she said. "This includes whole grains and making sure our meats are lean, dairy is reduced fat or fat free, the sodium levels are lowered over time and fresh fruits and vegetables are available to kids every day."

Thompson-Emslie said her predecessor, former nutrition administrator Lena Harris-Wilson, worked hard to ensure our schools are in compliance with the guidelines. She filled out and submitted applications for schools to receive the award, which requires a commitment to meet the criteria through a four-year certification period. In addition, the schools each received a plaque signed by a USDA official, a banner to display at school and their school name listed on the Team Nutrition Web site.

Thompson-Emslie said sometimes parents are concerned about having their kids eat breakfast and lunch at school. Awards like this can help ease those concerns so they know students are guaranteed to receive a healthy meal every day. While many of the items are kid-friendly they are also nutritious. For example, she said pizza will have whole grains in the crust and sandwiches are all on whole-grain bread.

"We want to make sure the kids are going to actually consume the meals so we want to make it friendly for them," she said, "but, it's our job to make sure it's also healthy for them."

She added: "It's really important to recognize schools and all their work because it takes the whole school to provide wellness for a student. For us to change obesity in the nation we have to work together and provide students with the skills so they have the best chance at being a healthy adult."

—Text by Mary Quast