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## Eat up, kids!

*Schools' food service director gets regional award*

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Perhaps school cafeteria food has improved a lot since the days when students would squirm about “mystery meat.”

After years of working in the West New York school district, Sal Valenza was recently named the regional Outstanding Director of The Year by the national, non-profit School Nutrition Association.



Valenza oversees food service for the middle schools and high school of West New York. He is an employee of NuWay Concessionaire, a food vendor hired by the school district a few years ago.

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‘We have the kids involved in menu planning.’ – Sal Valenza

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Twelve years ago, Valenza noticed that a piece of land next to the cafeteria at Memorial High School was not being utilized. So he cleaned it up with the help of the cafeteria staff. To this day the students and staff are heavily involved in the gardening, so they learn the process their fruits and vegetables undergo before being picked at a farm.

“We get a lot of support from the district so we have been able to do a lot of things,” said Valenza. “We have been able to work with the students, the teachers, and administration to make sure food services is not separate but part of the school.”

### Eating and learning

“A lot of the things we do, we make sure curriculum is tied into it to make sure kids are learning about [healthy] foods,” said Valenza. “We brought in kids from

across the district to taste the different foods we were bringing to the schools. And we did not bill it as healthy foods, but healthier foods, because everyone's perception of healthy is different."

He said the district follows a U.S. Department of Agriculture program promoting fresh fruits and vegetables.

"We give the kids every day a different fruit or vegetable after the lunch period," he said. "What we have done in West New York that is unique in that from September to November and from about March to June we make that a fresh fruit and vegetable program, so everything we [will] get is from the state of New Jersey. And we buy direct from farms, so we know who grew our stuff and know when it was picked. [We] teach the kids how it was grown and we let the farmers speak to the kids. Any vegetable you can think of, these kids have gotten to try in the last three years."

The garden that he helped build has branched out to many of the schools in the district.

"We have received grants from City Green, Target, Home Depot, Lowes and a Michael Jordan grant one year ago," he said. "So we have received a [variety] of grants to build the gardens at the schools. We were able to take this little urban district and do a lot of cool things with it like build [a few] gardens."

The students at Memorial High School have begun the process of drafting a business plan and creating logos for a future solar-powered taco restaurant. The restaurant program would create work-study jobs for students as well as offer better alternative lunch options for kids who prefer to eat at local businesses during lunch.

### **Honored for his efforts**

According to the association, Valenza received the regional award for his countless efforts in and out of the school. He was recognized for his introduction of the fruits and vegetables program, for more student involvement, providing dinners and food pantries for needy families during the holidays, and encouraging more parent involvement.

"I didn't win this award without the support of the staff, my assistance, the board, and the people I've worked with in the alliance," said Valenza. He also was thankful for the support he gets from his wife and kids.

Memorial High School in 2010 was recognized by The Alliance for a Healthier Generation, founded by The American Heart Association and the William J. Clinton Foundation, for promoting increased physical activities and healthy eating in the school.

The alliance works with over 9,000 schools in the country to help advocate healthy lifestyle choices and reduce childhood obesity by 2015.

Valenza will receive the award in July during a special presentation at the National School Nutrition Association Annual National Conference in Nashville, Tenn.

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