

THE DAKOTA 10: SCHOOL NUTRITION SUCCESS WITH SHARED SERVICES

Ten school districts in rural South Dakota came together with the vision and commitment to strengthen their school nutrition programs through a shared services model. They proudly call themselves The Dakota 10. This is their story.



Picture of South Dakota FNS professionals at area conference.

A Vision Becomes Reality

Gay Anderson, the former Child Nutrition Director at Brandon Valley School District in South Dakota, had an idea. Her vision was to bring together neighboring districts in the broader Brandon Valley area to increase access to nutritious school meals through mentorship and cooperative group strategies.

Over the course of a few years, Gay spoke with superintendents, business officials, school nutrition staff, and school board members to gather input and gauge interest in establishing a shared services model. Conversations focused on estimated cost savings for annual food procurement, which helped ease their initial concerns about affording the costs associated with sustaining the shared services model.

Conversations evolved as the realization that added benefits, like shared assistance with training and menu planning, would provide more resources to improve the quality of their school nutrition programs. With support from those local district leaders and No Kid Hungry, Gay's vision became a reality.

In May 2020, No Kid Hungry awarded a 3-year grant to Brandon Valley School District to assist in building the infrastructure to support longer-term sustainability and success. The funding allowed Brandon Valley School District to hire a Registered Dietician to support the soon to be launched shared services model. Andrea Kruse was hired as the Registered Dietician to lead menu planning, provide technical assistance, conduct school site visits, and offer professional development for participating districts.

The initial plan was to have 5-6 participating districts, but twice as many districts expressed interest. To respect the integrity of the program, ultimately 10 districts were invited to join. They became known as The Dakota 10.

Outside of The Dakota 10, two other neighboring districts have been working together to support each other using similar strategies and have also achieved positive results. Read on to learn about the measurable success of this shared services model.

The Dakota 10

The Dakota 10 is comprised of 10 school districts in neighboring communities in southeastern South Dakota. The districts are all located in rural areas and have small student enrollments– the 10 districts collectively serve 3,374 students. *Student enrollment numbers were sourced from the South Dakota Department of Education.*

District	Location	2021 Student Enrollment
Chester Area School District	Chester, SD	567
Colman-Egan Area School District	Colman, SD	281
Deubrook Area School District	White, SD	415
Howard School District	Howard, SD	348
Lake Preston School District	Lake Preston, SD	184
Menno School District	Menno, SD	285
Montrose School District	Montrose, SD	254
Oldham Ramona School District	Ramona, SD	156
Rutland School District	Rutland, SD	194
Sioux Valley School District	Volga, SD	690

“This initiative has been a tremendous benefit to me in my role and to our district. It has freed up some time previously spent on menu planning and ensuring we were following all the guidelines. I was new to the position and trying to learn it all. For our district, we have gained the advantage of the group buying, ensuring the menus meet the requirements, and allowing me to use my time previously spent on menus for other duties. The knowledge of Gay and Andrea has been a huge benefit!”

Dawn Timmons, Kitchen Manager,
Deubrook Area School District,

Opportunities and Challenges in Rural Districts

Our region is unique and special because of its ‘hometown feel.’ Communities are often more familiar with their residents in the sense that they know their neighbors. They also tend to look out for each other and help each other out.

Some of the challenges that rural districts and areas face include a lack of resources and support and an overall lack of understanding from people outside the community. Residents in rural areas often pay higher costs than people in more populated areas for the same exact services such as gasoline prices and other methods of transportation. When ordering food products, school nutrition departments often pay more due to their rural location (and volume as individual districts). Higher wages and opportunities for economic advancement are not as prevalent in rural areas. Change is always hard and suggesting efficiencies, in certain areas, was difficult for some staff.



At the onset of the Dakota 10 shared services model, Gay Anderson (left) was the Child Nutrition Director for Brandon Valley School District; she is now the Child Nutrition Coordinator for Sioux Falls School District. Andrea Kruse (right) was initially hired as a Registered Dietician to support The Dakota 10 shared services model; she is now the Child Nutrition Director for Brandon Valley School District.

Strengths identified in rural Dakota 10 districts by leaders

- **Community** – Community members tend to help each other when someone needs a favor and often come together to solve local problems.
- **Grit** – The school leadership will do whatever it takes to get things done; sometimes this means “wearing many hats”.
- **Training** – Through group training, the districts learned best practices from each other in preparation techniques and ways to help increase revenue with added ala carte items.
- **Networking** – Knowing others struggle with the same or similar issues can relieve emotional stress and great camaraderie for finding solutions.

Opportunities for growth identified in rural districts by Dakota 10 leaders

- **Resources** – There may be a lack of specific repair services nearby and/or a multiple-day wait for services needed.
- **New Roles** – Bringing food service management in house leads to some learning opportunities such as ensuring meal patterns are met and portion sizes are followed.
- **Change** – Ensuring schools are utilizing the “[market basket](#)” in order to get better pricing. Some schools prefer not to stray away from items that they are familiar with and typically order, even when pricing is better on the market basket.
- **Technology** – Transitioning schools to utilize the Nutrislice was difficult due to technology challenges and training.

“We are grateful for the support of No Kid Hungry. We have found that using the food buying group/SSM has led to significant benefits for our entire school community, including in areas such as procurement, professional development, registered Dietitian menu planning and district collaboration. Through this initiative, we can better support our students in receiving healthy meals while also providing the resources to build healthy lifestyles.”

Heath Larson, Ed.S, Superintendent,
Chester Area School District

Planning for Sustainability

From the beginning, The Dakota 10’s vision included a sustainability plan so that districts could continue to reap the benefits of shared services support for years to come.

- **Funds** – To support longer-term sustainability, the infrastructure of The Dakota 10 shared services model included an annual payment “buy-in” from each district to support this work. The payment amount was set at approximately \$2,000/district and is set to increase to \$8,000/district after the grant period ends. This funding is intended to cover the Registered Dietitian salary plus travel stipends, professional development, training materials, and more.
- **Knowledge** – Annual professional development and technical training provided for district food & nutrition services staff over the last three years has helped build a knowledge base they can use in their districts for years to come.
- **Technical Training** – The Dakota 10 has also received training specifically about online food and nutrition services equipment, like Nutrislice, and other platforms to assist districts with marketing, special diets, and menu planning.

Shared Service Successes

The Dakota 10 districts have had many quantifiable successes including with procurement pricing and equipment savings in addition successes with peer-to-peer support and resource sharing.

They have been able to meet both virtually and in-person to share ideas, develop strategies and build valuable relationships with one another and with suppliers and distributors. One highlight was being able to assist districts in navigating waivers during the pandemic to be able to serve meals for free to all students.

Some of the quantifiable successes include:

- **Cost Savings** – In just the first year, the average total cost savings was over \$8,000/district.
- **Procurement Audit** – In the first year, the districts participated in a procurement audit of school food items. This is a best practice in school nutrition, but it was new practice to all of The Dakota 10 districts. The audit revealed that five districts were inadvertently overcharged \$7,000 each due to a computing error. That led to a complete audit of all items those schools purchased. A total of \$35,000 (\$7,000 x 5 districts) was credited back to their accounts.
- **Market Basket** – They saved 3.2% on food costs and 14% using “[market basket](#)”.
- **Equipment Replacement** – One of the districts had an oven breakdown. They saved over \$1,500 (compared to the other quotes that they received) and now have a vendor for equipment through a supplier they previously had no relationship with. Another district saved \$5,500 on a new oven. Brandon Valley had a problem with their microwave steamer, an item new to their team; Sioux Falls had the same problem. In sharing information for suppliers and researching the item, the quote they were provided versus buying off the internet saved them \$150.
- **Registered Dietician** – Hiring a Registered Dietician allowed for the completion of nutrient analysis and approval, special diet technical assistance, and menu development across the 10 districts, which was a savings of over \$2,500 annually per district.
- **Pricing** – A la carte revenue has increased up to 15% for some districts per year based on suggested pricing with added pricing to produce a profit margin. This area can make or break a nutrition budget.
- **Technology** – Nutrislice was purchased for all 10 districts, and they received a group discount with savings of over \$12,630. Nutrislice has helped with maintaining menu and nutrition data, special diets and more.



“Market basket analysis allows a program operator to review bids using an established, representative sample of goods and use this subset of prices to award a contract as long as the published solicitation includes language that allows for this type of an evaluation.”

Source: USDA, Food and Nutrition Service

JavaTPoint, 05, January, 2021. Market basket analysis.
<https://www.javatpoint.com/market-basket-analysis-in-data-mining>

Establishing Your Own Shared Services Model

The strategy of shared services has been used in the workplace for many years. In the school food & nutrition arena, however, it is a newer method being used across districts. Learn how you can establish a [shared services model](#). For more resources visit us at <http://bestpractices.nokidhungry.org/>