



SPECIAL NEWS EDITION

Finding Success in the Kitchen

Brian Albertson's food service company, SLA Management of Orlando, can be considered the perfect American company.

Albertson was a CEO with a food and beverage firm when, in the early 2000s, he volunteered to serve on a committee to examine the food service program in Orlando's Orange County school district. The food services budget of the nation's 10th largest school district was continually running in the red.

As chair of the committee that helped turn Orange County's program from losing money to breaking even, Albertson saw an opportunity: He could create a team of experts who could go into a troubled district and by controlling costs and using effective management practices, they could improve food quality, increase student participation and return a small profit.

"I decided this was something I could do to make a difference," Albertson says. "Our mission statement is simple: We want to give kids the best 30 minutes of their day."

SLA will work with any school - public, private or charter. As of the start of the 2014-15 school year, it is serving meals to 125,000 students each week in five states: Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, Delaware and Connecticut. Albertson believes they could be in as many as 15 states within the next three years.

SLA assumes all costs and risk, Albertson says, and charges no fees. When they come in to a district with a poor-performing meal program, they set a budget for food and labor and administration and a small profit while meeting all government regulations.

The key to the company's success - besides adhering to sound management practices - is to custom-design the meal program for each district.

"It's a boutique approach," Albertson said. "We approach each district on a case-by-case basis."

When SLA wins a bid to manage a district's food services, they will often use existing facilities and equipment. Albertson is also careful to retain employees. "The lunch ladies have been part of the community forever and we don't want to run them off," he says.

They also work with local food producers as much as possible. "Everyone's prices are similar," Albertson says, adding that while SLA will contract with a national company for, say, chicken, they'll go local for bread and produce and packing. "It's not all about the price," he says.

The end goal is breakfasts, lunches, snacks and dinners that the students want to eat. SLA offers multiple entrees and side items every day so students can get meals that exceed government standards while still having a choice in what they eat.

"When a child or young adult is empowered to make their own decisions, they choose to eat," Albertson says. "In almost all cases, we've doubled or tripled student meal participation."

Doreen Marvin is a believer. Marvin is the development director at LEARN, a regional educational service center in Old Lyme, Connecticut, that serves 53,000 students in 24 districts.

In the fall of 2013, one of LEARN's magnet schools had a serious problem. The 2,000-student high school on a college campus was switching buildings but the college neglected to follow up on a contract for a food service provider. LEARN had to find a food service provider right away.

"SLA was marvelous. They jumped in and had the food program up and running with kids eating on the first day back from summer break," Marvin said.

Marvin likes the fact that SLA does more on-site cooking than other companies which instead cook off-site and ship to the schools.

She also likes that SLA empowers on-site staff to provide personalized service to students and staff, then holds them accountable. The results have been good: "There's not a lot of turnover with the staff, which is important for us,"

she says.

Marvin encouraged SLA to bid on new contracts among LEARN districts as they came open. SLA met with the staff, principals and students to decide what food should be served, decided what equipment was needed, and then put in their contract bids with the state.

"That's their niche - personalized service," Marvin said, and this year SLA has increased its presence with LEARN and will continue to bid on food service contracts as they become available.

"These are the main points about SLA," Marvin says: "One, they're stand-up people who do what they say; two, they helped us out in a pinch and did quality work in a short time; three, in one year, we're satisfied with their work and service."

"Our offerings are exciting and diverse and kids seem to love what we do," Albertson says.

It's as American a success story as any other.

SLA Management is a business partner with AESA, one of several business partners that AESA has fully vetted and is proud to stand behind.

To contact Brian Albertson or SLA Management, call 407-740-7677 or go to www.slamgmt.com

John Fitzgerald
Education Reporter