



## An Interview with Carlee Wells

Director of Child Nutrition, Petersburg City School District, Alaska

You might think that school nutrition directors in Alaska have an easy time with seafood, but we know from experience that they face many of the same challenges as their colleagues across the country. Carlee Wells has been particularly proactive in her efforts to include more healthy seafood options in her school menus. Our interview with Carlee passes along some of the wisdom she’s gained.

### What are some of the types of seafood dishes that you started with?

We do a lot of seafood tacos as the kids love it that way. We have done rockfish, salmon, shrimp, and we were lucky enough to get some halibut donated one time, as well as Alaska pollock. We would bake the fish on sheet pans with seasonings or boil the shrimp.

### Are you targeting a specific age group for seafood introduction?

We are K-12 and find our younger kids eat more fish than our older groups.

### Which GAPP recipes are you using?

Surfer’s Pizza, Alaska Baja Salad, Oriental Fish Express, Alaska Pollock Tacos.

### Please tell us some of your strategies for introducing seafood.

We have decreased the amount of time traditional pizza is served and thus added Surfer’s Pizza to our first Friday menu. I eliminated unhealthy popular items, such as chicken nuggets, pizza sticks, hot pockets, pre-made burritos, and pizza every week. The students were not happy at first, but now they are opening up to new ideas. I have been focusing on items such as Alaska pollock, and other local farm-to-school menu items. I really try to push our local products.

Some districts do sampling with students ahead of time, but we do not. We menu the item and we see that each time it is served a few more children will try it. Many just thought it was chicken on their pizza and ate it. They were shocked to find out it was fish. The students love the Alaska pollock fish sticks and will ask for them often.

Our district only offers one entrée a day. We have multiple fruits and vegetables for choices with the entrée. For incentives if we know who provided the fish we will make a sign such as “Thank your local fisherman for your lunch today!”

I focus on whole foods – foods where they can tell what they are. I make carrots recognizable in their soups, give them roasted purple potatoes, and roasted vegetables rather than steamed. Whatever I can do to keep the item looking natural – I will do. This is why I love the Alaska pollock items so much. Even though they are breaded you break them open and they look like real fish not a compressed nugget that has been grinded and formed.

I also emphasize where the product came from. We post on Facebook that we have Alaskan fish, and we let other students know that someone’s Dad caught the food they are eating.

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**Carlee Wells**  
Director of  
Child Nutrition,  
Petersburg City  
School District





# Genuine Alaska Pollock

## How receptive has your staff been to trying new recipes - whether they are seafood recipes or other recipes?

We continue to try new recipes so my staff is used to me bringing in new ideas. I have encouraged them to explore as well and we have all added something new to the menus.

Give your staff ownership of their ideas. They may have thought of something that you didn't. They may do something at home for their own children that will work in the school. It is all about being receptive of new and ever-changing ideas.

## What does success with seafood look like to you?

I honestly look at the garbage can. If the students liked the meal, then the garbage cans will be light; if they didn't like the meal, the garbage cans will be heavier. I found on pizza day many students picked off the veggies but ate the rest (and they ate the fish).

So I just need to either cut the veggies smaller so they blend in well or put less on.

What I feel is really important is the feedback that we get. Often we are so busy that we just do not have time to ask; but every once in awhile I will get a parent asking me, "Hey, how did you cook that salmon the other day? My kid said it was better than mine," or "How did you make that pizza?" I have even directed some parents to the GAPP website!

When I go to the grocery store because we ran out of an entire case of lettuce and the cashier tells me that someone was talking about our lunch program the other day and how well it is doing, then I know we are heading in the right direction.

**THANK YOU Carlee!** *What a great example in showing how creativity, teamwork, and perseverance can lead to success with seafood!*

*A Petersburg City School District lunch tray showing one of their meals including locally sourced baked unbreaded Alaska fish, brown rice, and locally grown salad.*

