

Successful. Expanding. Profitable. In difficult economic times, it's rare to hear a business described in such a way. However, the revamped food services program of the Hillsboro Independent School District (HISD) is all of these things.

In March, HISD Superintendent Dr. Buck Gilcrease hired food industry consulting company Walker Quality Services (WQS) to improve food services at the district's five school cafeterias. That same month, gross income increased by approximately \$20,000 over March 2008. April revenue saw a boost of about \$12,000 over last year.

These numbers are significant when you consider that the district supplemented the food service budget by about \$50,000 during the 07-08 school year. HISD Director of Finance Jimmy Adams says this additional income reduces the amount the district has to spend on food services, and frees up money to support other areas that need it.

WQS owner Alfred Walker has spent more than 20 years in the food service business, and experience has taught him that making the most of your assets is a big key to success.

For example, government programs like the National School Lunch Program (which began during the Great Depression) provide schools with free food. Some of these items may not always be the most popular with kids, but Walker points out that clever incorporation into recipes and appetizing presentation can make the most of these commodities — and really stretch a cafeteria budget. The addition of a la carte areas, where students can choose items like personal pan pizzas that the district can charge a premium for, contributes to the bottom line as well.

But perhaps the most surprising result is that this new program has resulted in higher consumption of fruits and vegetables. Walker believes that involving the students in choosing healthier options (by making these items self-serve, creating a salad bar and improving presentation) encourages them to try new foods.

Walker is already looking forward to helping HISD improve their food services program next year. He says HISD staff has applied for economic stimulus grants, hoping to add new equipment, upgrade the current system so parents can pay for meals online and improve the look and feel of the dining rooms. He sees a lot of potential and is excited about continuing to work with HISD staff.

"Dr. Gilcrease is about team building and really has a great vision for the district," Walker says. "I'm just delighted to be a part [of it]."