



Imagination and Determination: The Secret Sauce for Better Services

by Emmalie Dropkin



Erin Trenbeath-Murray recently acquired a farm. Or rather, Salt Lake Community Action Program (CAP) and Head Start, where she's the CEO, acquired a farm. The farm appears to be the culmination of years of efforts to better serve the Salt Lake community, but it would be wrong to imagine that the work of the team at Salt Lake CAP is ever done.

About six years ago, Trenbeath-Murray realized that her program met an acceptable minimum threshold for one of the required Head Start standards, but she and her staff believed they could do even better. In her case, the issue at hand was what they were feeding children.



Emmalie Dropkin
 2015 Exchange Emerging Leader
www.ChildCareExchange.com/leadership



Emmalie Dropkin is the Director of Policy, Data, and Research at the National Head Start Association. She previously taught elementary special education in the Baltimore City Public Schools. Emmalie earned a Master's

degree in teaching from the College of Notre Dame of Maryland and a Certificate of Mind, Brain, and Teaching from Johns Hopkins University School of Education.



NATIONAL HEAD START ASSOCIATION

While the food at Salt Lake Head Start met children's nutritional needs, Trenbeath-Murray had a vision for what she knew was the best and healthiest her program could be offering: food prepared in-house at a central kitchen from locally-sourced ingredients, always whole grain, organic when they could afford it, and no canned fruits. She also wanted the food prepared and kept hot, and served on reusable dishes to reduce waste.

When she brought the vision to companies that delivered bulk, reheated, individually packaged meals, they told her she was crazy. But Trenbeath-Murray had worked hard to build a team of program leaders who could not only execute her vision, but share her entrepreneurial spirit. So in spring 2010 Salt Lake CAP started a pilot effort to prepare and serve 300 meals a day in the kitchen space of a nearby Greek Orthodox church.

Within a year it was clear they had a success on their hands — and a new opportunity. As Trenbeath-Murray puts it, "Every parent wants their child to have healthy, nutritious food they'll actually eat. We felt compelled to provide food service to our partners

in the community — and it also started to make money for the agency." In the 2014-2015 school year, the Head Start Central Kitchen prepared and sent out over 597,000 meals, 25% of them delivered to child care centers, preschools, Boys and Girls Clubs, and other community organizations that share Trenbeath-Murray's vision of what healthy food for children should look like. Profits from those meals go back into Salt Lake Head Start and add to their capacity to serve children and families. Of course, this is still a long way from buying a farm.

As a Community Action Program, Salt Lake CAP offers a range of programs that is broader than early childhood and includes supports for low-income families like adult education, job training, weatherization of homes, housing assistance, and more. Once the Central Kitchen was launched, one of the Salt Lake CAP staff presented another idea: the kitchen would make a great training ground for Head Start parents and other adults in the community who wanted to develop job skills in the culinary industry.

The Sauté Culinary Skills Program began in 2011 and to date has prepared over 178 trainees with food preparation

skills, ServSafe Certification from the National Restaurant Association, and support for the interview and job placement process; 82% of program graduates are now employed. Yet as successful as Sauté was, staff in the program brought forward another concern. Trainees who had criminal records were having trouble finding work because they had credentials but no work history. Bringing awareness of the issue led to a solution. In 2013 Salt Lake CAP began hiring some of their trainees on a short-term basis as caterers when the Central Kitchen catered private events as part of fundraising efforts for the organization. Not only did these events provide the experience Sauté graduates needed to find permanent jobs, they created more opportunities for Trenbeath-Murray to raise awareness and funds for other new projects on the horizon, like the farm.

Some of the children in Salt Lake Head Start had older siblings who were part of a population called 'opportunity youth': older teenagers who are at risk of dropping out of school. As important as early childhood opportunities are for setting children on a pathway to success, Trenbeath-Murray and her team recognized that intervention with older children is also necessary. To them, there was one obvious way to support both the empowerment of the teens and the organization's efforts as a whole. And so Erin Trenbeath-Murray acquired a farm. Beginning this spring, Salt Lake CAP's Real Food Rising program will hire teenagers ages 14-17 years to learn about sustainable agriculture and gain work experience. The food grown on the farm will make its way back into the Head Start Central Kitchen — a farm-to-table concept.

The mission of Head Start has always been to improve the lives of children, families, and communities. Within the larger framework of Community Action, Trenbeath-Murray and her team are accomplishing that on every level. With

leadership, vision, and an entrepreneurial spirit that pervades Salt Lake CAP, every challenge and unexpected twist has led to a solution that not only solves the problem at hand, but strengthens the entire community.

So now that they're preparing over 4,000 healthy, nutritious, kid-friendly meals a day, what comes next? Trenbeath-Murray is turning her attention to how to support Head Start families in developing healthier eating habits at home and thinking about how Real Food Rising can help teenagers develop leadership skills and achieve their individual educational and vocational goals. And after that? Maybe a food truck. Whatever it is, it will be in service to brighter futures for Utah families.

