



IMPROVING HIGH SCHOOL CAFETERIAS USING TECHNOLOGY

WRITTEN BY:

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While my stomach was demonstrating its ability to mimic whale mating calls during fourth period, my mind was vexed. Maybe it was just the hangriness, but I despised lunchtime. The thought of being shoved around like a piñata in the overflowing cafeteria made me want to strap a bed of nails to my shoulders. Fortunately, I had some ideas for improvement in my head.

Having grown up in the public school system for 12 years, I realize how undervalued lunchtime is at my high school. Students who have school obligations, such as retaking tests, are forced to skip lunch due to long lines. Without adequate energy, student performance can be greatly diminished. This scene isn't new and some might say "it's always been like this," but last year, I decided to use my knowledge in computer science to boldly modernize this typical — and unacceptable — high school scene.

First, to make sure I wasn't exaggerating the situation, I ran a survey at my school to see what others thought about lunchtime. I found that 92% of students were uninformed of the menu, leading to unwanted and wasted food. Forty percent had been denied lunch due to low account balance. The situation was even worse than I had thought, but I was also excited; I saw an opportunity to make a positive change in my community. Taking on this mission to improve our food service allowed me to move beyond everyday life at school, and has led to some of my most exciting experiences so far.

I called my solution — a mobile app based on my ideas and many suggestions from staff and students — "Pizzajoy," evoking the joy of eating pizza (without the long lines). When enabled, Pizzajoy will send push-notifications for the lunch menu and a low account balance. To better the cafeteria's sustainability, a database with students' food orders will be accessible to the staff. This way, cafeteria staff can better estimate the amount of food to prepare. The app will also decrease lines by alerting students when their food is ready, instead of having the entire school come down to the lunchroom simultaneously.

I wanted to implement Pizzajoy not only to make my school more efficient but, more importantly, to foster an atmosphere of creativity for my peers. I wanted to prove that students were not just test scores. Armed with my evidence, I was ready to let school district officials in on my idea. After much pestering and many unanswered emails, I got a response from the sustainability director of my school district who invited me to the next committee meeting to present Pizzajoy. Eager to share my idea, I got straight to work and spent way too long making sure my slides had the perfect transitions and animations, and were aesthetically pleasing.

After the meeting, many of the teachers and students voiced their excitement and looked forward to using it. But I wanted to establish Pizzajoy as an organization aimed at making food-service more efficient and sustainable everywhere. And that is when I came across the HERlead program as I was scrolling through my Facebook feed on a bus ride back from school. I added the application to my to-do list (and definitely did not end up turning in my application 20 minutes before the deadline). I was beyond excited when I was both accepted and awarded a \$2,000 grant to implement my application.

Connecting with peers and mentors at the 2019 HERlead Forum in NYC was an incredible experience that made me feel supported, and enthusiastic for the future. But things didn't stop there. Feeling recharged and empowered by my HERlead sisters, I spent most of my summer following YouTube tutorials for Android Studio and developing the app. In the next 5 years, I plan to fully implement Pizzajoy in all the high schools in my district and work to broaden its reach to hospitals and company workplaces.

Looking back, I realize the importance of taking bold initiatives in our everyday lives. Founding Pizzajoy has led to some of my most thrilling experiences, such as becoming a 2019 HERlead Fellow, being featured on a podcast from Project Lead the Way (PLTW), and serving as emcee at the National PLTW Summit in California. I hope my story empowers others to let their creative selves live freely and unapologetically. I've found that taking bold actions gives me a sense of confidence, determination and, most importantly, is fun.