



ELEVATING THE PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOL FOOD PROFESSIONALS IN CALIFORNIA



A CASE STUDY IN
PARTNERSHIP WITH:



California
Community
Colleges



FOOD FOR
CLIMATE
LEAGUE

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION 3

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY 6

Data, research, and campaign approach	7
Campaign measurement and key outcomes	8
Campaign impact on SFPs and beyond	10

PART 1 How Perceptions of School Food Professionals Influence California's School Food Movement 11

How Californians see school food careers	13
Creating a dialogue around SFPs	14
Exploring which perceptions to shift first	15
How K-12 parents became the primary campaign audience	16

PART 2 Designing an Evidence-Based Campaign to Shift Perceptions 17

Understanding existing perceptions of School Food Professionals	19
Segmenting the audience	22
Gathering segment-specific insights from California's K-12 parents	23
Key findings that shaped the next steps	25

PART 3 Crafting Research-Informed Messaging 26

Designing narratives for perception change	28
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PART 4 Shaping the Perception-Change Campaign 29

Placing skill at the center of the campaign	30
Building the campaign's brand	31
Bringing the creative campaign to life	32
Reaching non-English-speaking parents	36

PART 5 Rolling Out the Campaign 37

Campaign overview	38
The campaign up close	41

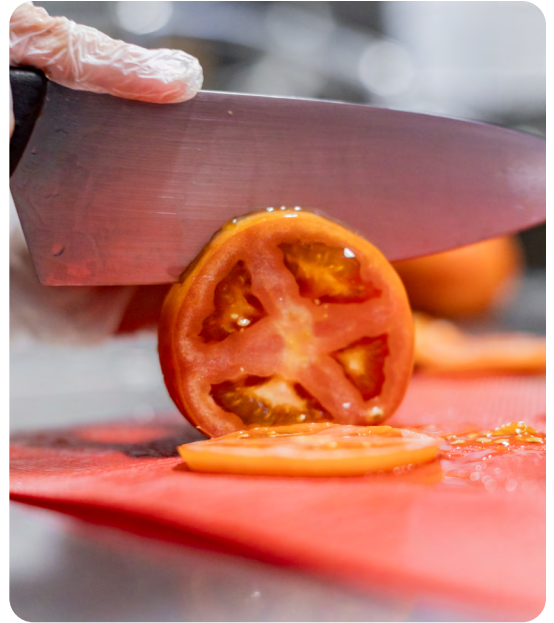
PART 6 Measuring Perception Change 46

How K-12 parents were surveyed	48
Survey findings: The campaign increased positive perceptions of skill	50
Other key findings	53
Impact beyond the campaign	54
Lessons from the campaign	55

CONCLUSION Advancing the School Food Movement 57



Introduction and Executive Summary



California is undergoing a significant school food transformation.

This movement, driven by initiatives like School Meals for All and the California Farm to School Program, aims to improve the quality of school meals — and therefore students' health, overall well-being, and academic performance. This includes serving more scratch-cooked food, offering free meals to all students, incorporating more locally-sourced and sustainable foods into school menus, and investing in school kitchen infrastructure.

At the center of this movement are **School Food Professionals (SFPs)** — the people who plan, prepare, and cook millions of meals for California's public school students every day.

SFPs bring a unique set of skills to their work and play a critical role in schools and communities. Those outside of the school food setting, including parents, teachers, students, administrators, and community members, often lack an understanding of the SFP role and its requirements and responsibilities. This group often views SFP's work as unskilled.

This persistent misperception perpetuates disparities and holds back salaries, funding, and professional resources that would elevate school food service as a valued career path. And a lack of investment in the professionals behind school food in turn, holds back the overall impact of school food.

Therefore, the Powered by School Food Professionals campaign, managed by the Chef Ann Foundation (CAF) and supported by the State of California, aimed to shift public perceptions of SFPs in California, particularly among parents. And it worked. This first-of-its-kind campaign highlighted SFPs' skill and creativity while also piloting a research-backed messaging model others can adapt to make a wider case for change.

Many voices across California, including CAF, are speaking up about the importance and value of school food — a movement that falls in line with a general statewide commitment to health, sustainability, and economic development. Since 2009, CAF has helped more than 16,000 schools and 4.4 million kids across the United States enjoy healthier, fresher school meals. Those efforts include the Healthy School Food Pathway program, a job-training initiative that helps SFPs gain the skills to create, work in, and manage K-12 scratch-cook meal operations.

INTRODUCTION

CAF designed the Powered by School Food Professionals campaign to redefine the value of school food careers within California communities. CAF is sharing this report to demonstrate the impact of backing up a public-awareness campaign with data-driven research and personal perspectives from SFPs. CAF hopes others looking to launch a similar campaign in their district, county, region, or state find valuable insights and a roadmap to success.

The Powered by School Food Professionals campaign was made possible through a grant from the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, in partnership with the State of California. California's scale and funding created opportunities specific to the state. But the campaign's success truly hinged on collaboration — with media, influencers, strategic and creative partners, and most importantly, with SFPs. Others can build on existing relationships and forge new ones with mission-aligned individuals and organizations to adapt and replicate this model — and help elevate school food careers in their own communities.

About the advisory committee

The campaign team relied on the insights, knowledge, and leadership of an advisory committee made up of California-based leaders across school food, labor, education, agriculture, nonprofits, and philanthropy. This advisory committee — specifically assembled to assist with the perception-change campaign — generously shared its expertise to ensure the work accurately represented California's school food movement and reached target audiences with resonant messaging.

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Uplifting California's School Food Movement: The Powered by School Food Professionals Campaign

BACKGROUND

California's school food movement strives to provide students with the nutritious and delicious meals they need for their health, well-being, and ability to learn.

California was the first state to implement a universal school meal program, requiring K-12 public and charter schools to provide free breakfast and lunch to all students, regardless of household income. Now, more students benefit from free school meals, and districts across the state are focused on providing healthier meals that incorporate fresher ingredients and more scratch cooking.

School Food Professionals (SFPs) — the people responsible for planning, cooking, and serving these free, nourishing meals — are at the heart of the school food movement. But school food careers face a public perception issue: Campaign research shows California's general public views these roles as lacking skill and expertise.

Without firsthand knowledge of school food, including the variety of roles in the school food workforce, people are less inclined to understand and thus advocate for SFPs. This advocacy opens the door to higher wages and more training, both of which increase the number of SFPs who are skilled at providing healthy school meals. Advocacy also elevates SFPs' prominence in their districts and communities, helping them connect with farmers and distributors to source local, nutritious ingredients.

Extensive research has shown that healthy, nutritious school meals improve children's health, well-being, and academic performance. But schools can't provide those meals without the help of SFPs. So, without investing in SFPs, the state's school food movement falls short of its life-changing potential for millions of California kids.

The Chef Ann Foundation (CAF) recognized the state of California as a national leader in transforming school food, and saw **an opportunity to accelerate the movement with a first-of-its-kind, statewide perception-change campaign. The research-based Powered by School Food Professionals campaign set out to:**

1 PRIMARY OBJECTIVE

Shift the perception of SFPs so Californians, particularly the main target audience of K-12 parents (including caregivers), sufficiently understand and value school food work.

2 SECONDARY OBJECTIVE

Galvanize interest in SFPs' career paths to attract talent and drive advocacy for higher wages and funding to support school food careers and departments.



Campaign audience

Nearly 6 million K-12 students are enrolled in California's public schools, and their parents are deeply invested, vocal advocates for their children's future. Pre-campaign research showed this large audience of parents — who represent a variety of regions, household incomes and types, racial and ethnic groups, and native languages — presented the greatest opportunity to shift Californians' perception to reflect a more accurate, positive understanding of School Food Professionals.

Data, research, and campaign approach

The Powered by School Food Professionals campaign required a deep, data-driven understanding of K-12 parents' existing perceptions of SFPs — and the “why” behind those perceptions.

During the rigorous pre-campaign research phase, CAF and its expert partners gathered insights through first- and second-hand research, including online surveys and focus groups. This work sought to understand:

- Existing perceptions of SFPs and how personal experiences with school food might inform these perceptions
- Which campaign name and message themes, when paired with stories and images of SFPs, would resonate most with K-12 parents

The campaign's messages were delivered at a high weekly frequency to parents across the state to shift audience perceptions, using the following mediums:

- Digital media (e.g., social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn, TikTok, and online media platforms like Vox and Edible Communities)
- Out-of-home environments (e.g., billboards, radio, and podcasts)
- An influencer program, prioritizing creators who develop content for K-12 parents
- In-platform targeting through broadcast television (e.g., Nickelodeon, HGTV, Univision, and CNN)
- An email marketing campaign
- Print stories and advertising in local publications
- A dedicated campaign website and blog at schoolfoodpros.org
- A school food recipe competition and in-person awards ceremony honoring SFPs from across the state





Key findings from the pre-campaign research

- **Californians hold disparate opinions about school food work.** They believe School Food Professionals are hardworking people who make a positive difference, but they also relate school food work to low skill, social status, and value.
- **Many people are simply unaware of what SFPs do.** This lack of knowledge reinforces stereotypes and inaccurate perceptions of the role.
- **SFPs are proud of their roles, but say they feel underappreciated.** Campaign research showed SFPs feel overlooked within their school communities, despite the immense skill and care they put into their work.
- **Messages about SFPs' skill resonate with the general public and K-12 parents in particular.** Participants' positive perceptions of SFPs were most likely to be shifted by statements that referred to SFPs as "skilled culinarians."



Key messaging principles

The research provided important clarification for shaping these message themes:

- **Changing the way Californians talk about people working in school food** by using the term "School Food Professionals" and connecting it to more familiar phrases like "school food workers" and "cafeteria workers."
- **Emphasizing the skill of SFPs** by using first-person storytelling to introduce audiences to SFPs and showcase their various skills, like planning and cooking fresh, scratch-made food, while also highlighting innovative school meals.
- **Making an emotional connection to SFPs** by reinforcing how they contribute to students' health, well-being, and academic performance.

Campaign measurement and key outcomes

The perception-change campaign was delivered in three flights — periods of advertising, each with its own unique, research-informed strategy. This approach allowed the team to **increase the campaign's impact** during key moments, take a **cost-effective approach** to budgeting, and **avoid ad fatigue**.

CAF measured the campaign's success and resonance with the target audience to inform adjustments after each flight, focusing on metrics like the number of times an ad was shown across all platforms (**impressions**), how often a viewer likely saw an ad per week (**frequency**), and the number of unique viewers of the digital content (**reach**). It also measured **parents' perceptions of SFPs** through a series of surveys before and throughout the campaign.

The result: The campaign achieved its primary objective — increasing parents’ positive perceptions of SFPs.

FINDING 1:

The Powered by School Food Professionals campaign was very successful in reaching California’s K-12 parents.

The campaign reached more than 24 million Californians — each exposed to at least one digital advertisement.

This figure doesn’t include the millions of Californians who also encountered the campaign through paid channels like billboards and radio ads. Advertising in Flight 1 alone created 98.3 million total impressions, surpassing the entire campaign goal (98 million impressions) in less than two months.

60%

of Californians exposed to campaign

**98.3
MILLION**

total ads shown in flight 1

FINDING 2:

More K-12 parents now see the skills SFPs bring to their work. After the campaign launched, more parents believed SFPs are professional and skilled; influence menus; and have culinary training and nutritional expertise, an increase of 10 percentage points, from 49% to 59%, among a random sample of K-12 parents. **Statewide, this 10 percentage-point increase represents a potential boost in perceptions by 1.1 million California K-12 parents (based on the state’s estimated population of 11 million parents).**

Table 0.1

BEFORE CAMPAIGN	AFTER CAMPAIGN
49% of K-12 parents believe SFPs are skilled	59% of K-12 parents believe SFPs are skilled

This 10 percentage-point increase represents a potential boost in perceptions by 1.1 MILLION California K-12 parents

FINDING 3:

Parents recognize the positive impact SFPs have on students' moods, health, and academic performance. This belief proved strong before and after the campaign.

At the end of the campaign,

85%

of K-12 Parents strongly or somewhat agree that SFPs support the social and emotional health and well-being of students.



Campaign impact on SFPs and beyond

By all qualitative measures, the campaign saw positive, impactful reactions from both the general public and from SFPs. And while the effects of these moments weren't quantitatively measured, they undoubtedly will play a long-term role in recruiting and retaining SFPs.

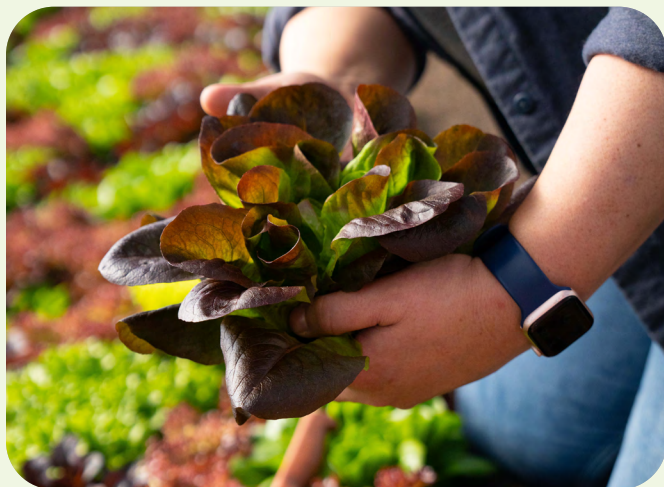
CAF hopes this campaign inspires more districts, regions, and states to take on similar projects that enhance perceptions of the school food profession and advance the goals of a larger school food movement. Greater awareness and appreciation for SFPs opens the door to higher wages, more training, and increased prominence within their districts and communities, all leading to better food for students.

Lasting change begins with conversations between neighbors, at PTA meetings, and with policymakers and your district's food service director.

And it builds over time, as more and more people value and commit to advocating for SFPs.

Everyone has a stake in school food. Everyone has a reason to take action: improving students' futures, local economic growth, and professional fulfillment in school food, to name just a few. CAF hopes others with an interest in improving school food find valuable insights for forging their own campaigns.

Together, we can all achieve a better state for school food – starting with valued School Food Professionals.



01

How Perceptions of School Food Professionals Influence California's School Food Movement



School food is at the heart of California's effort to improve the health of K-12 students and their potential to learn. California was the first state to require K-12 public and charter schools to provide free breakfast and lunch to all students, regardless of household income. Today, districts across the state are engaged in a school food movement focused on providing free, nutritious meals to all students; increasing scratch cooking; procuring local ingredients; and reducing ultra-processed foods.

The success of California's school food movement hinges on School Food Professionals (SFPs). Every day, SFPs source fresh ingredients; develop healthier, tastier recipes that kids enjoy; and cook and serve hundreds or thousands of meals. This workforce includes cooks, dishwashers, nutritionists, dietitians, chefs, and food service directors who oversee food operations for the entire school or district.

SFPs' work is inherently important: They cook and serve high-quality food that supports students' health and academics. These meals are a key source of nutrients for many students.

But unless someone works in school food — or knows a person who does — they see very little of the hard work and resourcefulness that goes into feeding California's K-12 students. The public commonly misunderstands the SFP role and the skill involved.

Californians' misperception of SFPs is reflected in low wages, staffing shortages, and an overall lack of investment in developing the school food workforce. Gender and racial inequities also contribute to the devaluation of these jobs. Across the United States, 93% of SFPs are female, 22% are Latino, and 17% are Black; California's ratio of Latino SFPs is significantly larger.¹

Without firsthand knowledge of school food, including the variety of roles in the school food workforce, people are less inclined to understand and thus advocate for SFPs. This advocacy opens the door to higher wages and more training, both of which increase the number of SFPs who are skilled at providing healthy school meals. Advocacy also elevates SFPs' prominence in their districts and communities, helping them connect with farmers and distributors to source local, nutritious ingredients.

By providing fresh, healthy school meals, SFPs help students feel better and succeed in and beyond the classroom. That's why it's vital that we invest in and uplift the members of our school food workforce.

The Chef Ann Foundation (CAF) set out to shift public perceptions of California's SFPs by more accurately portraying their work and value. This first-of-its-kind statewide perception-change campaign introduced Californians to the people behind school food to foster firsthand knowledge and personal investment in SFPs.

**Across the U.S.,
School Food
Professionals
are:**

93%
FEMALE

22%
LATINO

17%
BLACK

¹ "Hungry for Good Jobs: Food Service Workers in Public Schools," UC Berkeley Labor Center (Sept. 2024)

How Californians see school food careers

SFPs take great pride in their careers and feel responsible for the students they serve. But the general public — even those within the school community, are often unaware of the time, skills, and complexity school meal planning, preparation, and service require, including:

- Understanding and following U.S. Department of Agriculture nutrition standards for school meals as well as state and local regulations
- Sourcing and distributing local ingredients to school kitchens
- Creating culturally diverse recipes that can be cooked at scale each day
- Preparing meals on a tight budget
- Ensuring students' meals are both healthy *and* appetizing

SFPs are also constant figures throughout students' school days. "The school cafeteria staff are probably one of the only employees who see a student every single day for the entire duration of their career at school," says Parisa Shukla, Director of Child Nutrition at Cypress School District in Cypress, CA.²

Many people hold fond memories of the SFPs who delivered a warm welcome and filled their lunch trays. At the same time, they remember SFPs as churning out unappetizing, unhealthy food — perceptions that follow them into parenthood. For example, **most parents of K-12 students in the pre-campaign focus group believed SFPs did little to no cooking, and linked the quality of the food to a lack of culinary skills.**

Such misperceptions, including a lack of understanding and respect, hold back the growth and monetary value placed on SFP roles. In 2022, more than two-thirds of SFPs in California made less than \$20 per hour, significantly below a family-sustaining wage in the state.⁴

Working in school food is often seen merely as a job, not a career, which doesn't entice culinary students, restaurant-industry alumni, and other food service professionals to take their skills down this impactful path. Recruitment and retention challenges will persist if school food careers are continuously devalued, further placing investments in school food at risk.



“

When I think of our school food workers, I think of just preparing [heating prepackaged food] that they've been given, as opposed to actually making the food from scratch.”

Female Survey Respondent (Pre-Campaign)

19, Mission Viejo

² Interview: Parisa Shukla

³ Interview: Esther Huizar

⁴ “Hungry for Good Jobs: Food Service Workers in Public Schools,” UC Berkeley Labor Center (Sept. 2024)



Creating a dialogue around SFPs

Shifting Californians' perceptions around school food careers requires a host of solutions. This campaign is one of many important actions to invest in the futures of SFPs.

CAF is committed to ensuring SFPs have the resources, funding, and support they need to provide fresh, delicious, cooked-from-scratch meals that support the health of children and our planet. This campaign was an opportunity to:



Educate Californians on the current state of school food and innovations to improve K-12 students' health and potential to learn.



Demonstrate the inherent value and skillset of SFPs, including their impact on kids' health and academics, communities, and the natural environment.

CAF recognized the state of California as a national leader in school food transformation, and saw an opportunity to **accelerate the state's work by launching a first-of-its-kind statewide campaign aimed at changing public perceptions of SFPs.**

The campaign's objectives:

Launch and measure the impact of a statewide campaign to:

PRIMARY OBJECTIVE

Shift the perception of School Food Professionals so Californians, particularly the main target audience of parents of K-12 students, sufficiently understand and value school food work

SECONDARY OBJECTIVE

Galvanize interest in SFPs' career paths to attract talent and drive advocacy for higher wages and funding to support school food careers and departments

Exploring which perceptions to shift first

Everyone has a stake in school food: Nourished kids do better in school⁵, miss fewer days of school⁶, have higher self-esteem⁷, and have better mental health.⁸ Nonetheless, CAF aimed to elevate SFPs by reaching the most influential and invested audiences.

The campaign team began exploring target audiences by breaking down potential school food “influencers” into three categories:

- **Decision makers** are groups and individuals in leadership roles who have the power to influence policy and regulations around SFPs.
- **Potential advocates** are groups and individuals that are positioned to advocate for SFPs, as they may provide direction, goals, and priorities for a school district and have more power than teachers/parents alone.
- **Public school community** members are individuals who influence the everyday experience of SFPs. For instance, their perceptions of school food influences participation in school food programs.

Table 1.1: Campaign Target Audiences

DECISION MAKERS	POTENTIAL ADVOCATES	PUBLIC SCHOOL COMMUNITY
• State legislators • State agencies • Local government officials • USDA	• School district board members • School district administrators, principals, and superintendents • Labor unions and associations • Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs) • School food service directors	• Parents of children in K-12 public schools • K-12 public school teachers • K-12 public school students • K-12 school staff

After comprehensive research, the campaign team narrowed down this list to the audiences who, with a more positive perception of SFPs, could make the greatest impact. Ultimately, that included those who:

- Have the highest emotional investment in positive school outcomes.
- Are directly impacted by the quality of school meals.
- Can influence change—for example, by advocating for funding.
- Are individuals to whom decision makers will listen.

⁵ “Diet Quality and Academic Performance,” *Journal of School Health* (March 2008)

⁶ *Food Research & Action Center*

⁷ “Bidirectional associations between psychosocial well-being and adherence to healthy dietary guidelines in European children: prospective findings from the IDEFICS study,” *National Library of Medicine* (Dec. 2017)

⁸ “Bidirectional associations between psychosocial well-being and adherence to healthy dietary guidelines in European children: prospective findings from the IDEFICS study,” *National Library of Medicine* (Dec. 2017)

How K-12 parents became the primary campaign audience

Nearly 6 million K-12 students are enrolled in California's public schools,⁹ and their parents are deeply invested, vocal advocates for their children's futures. This large audience of individuals, representing a variety of household types; racial and ethnic groups; and native languages, presented the greatest opportunity to make a positive impact on California's perception of SFPs.

Beyond this primary audience, the campaign also targeted current and prospective SFPs and the wider school community of teachers, administrators, and students. These groups are deeply connected to school food and school food careers, but have less potential to influence measurable perception change as it relates to this campaign.

“

We need to do more to invest in our school food workers. [If School Food Professionals] are better trained, they can be paid better, so we can have more people working at school.”

Female survey participant (pre-campaign)

Los Angeles



Creating a similar perception-change campaign

Parents of K-12 students are an important audience for a perception-change campaign like this in any community. But other groups may be appropriate in your region or state. Start by defining what success looks like for your campaign, then focus on potential audiences where you can see the most impact.

⁹ [Largest & Smallest Public School Districts, California Department of Education](#)



02 Designing an Evidence-Based Campaign to Shift Perceptions

The Chef Ann Foundation (CAF) partnered with Fenton, a national strategic communications firm, to develop and implement a campaign to engage parents to see the value and importance of School Food Professionals (SFPs). Fenton's deep expertise, including end-to-end campaign strategy and mapping; audience and messaging development; media buying; and knowledge of regional California markets, ensured the campaign could make the largest possible impact among California's K-12 parents.

CAF also collaborated with two additional organizations, Food for Climate League (FCL) and EVITARUS, to:

- Establish the primary campaign audience of California's parents of K-12 students.
- Understand existing perceptions of SFPs.
- Measure the primary audience's thoughts on school food and SFPs.
- Determine effective message themes.

It was essential that the campaign be rooted in research from the beginning and that current perceptions of parents were at the center of campaign implementation.

Telling an uplifting story about SFPs might have inspired warm feelings among parents of K-12 students. However, to effectively shift perceptions, **the campaign required a deep, data-driven understanding of how these parents currently perceived SFPs and the factors driving those views.**

Gathering first-person data led to essential insights about what types of messages and imagery would most resonate with parents to effectively shift their perceptions of SFPs. Grounding the campaign in data also meant the results would serve as a valuable tool for advocates and justify investment in future campaigns for California's school food movement.

About the partners

The Chef Ann Foundation worked with the following organizations throughout the perception-change campaign:

FENTON: A California-based communications agency focused on social impact. The Fenton team led campaign strategy, design, message development, creative execution, paid advertising, website development, and campaign measurement.

FOOD FOR CLIMATE LEAGUE: A nonprofit organization connecting the dots between sustainable food choices and people's diverse needs, values, and cultures. The FCL team gathered an overall picture of how individuals think about School Food Professionals; analyzed and narrowed down the most influential audience groups; and developed and tested key messages to shift perceptions.

EVITARUS: A public-opinion research and strategic consulting firm in California. The EVITARUS team conducted segmented focus groups before the campaign launch to understand K-12 parents' nuanced perceptions and test potential messages. EVITARUS conducted measurement surveys of K-12 parents surrounding the launch of the advertising campaign as part of a Randomized Control Trial. Surveys conducted at the beginning, middle, and end of the campaign assessed the effectiveness of campaign advertisements on shifting parents' perspectives relating to SFPs.

Understanding existing perceptions of School Food Professionals

Campaign research, led by CAF, Fenton, and FCL, identified K-12 parents as the most impactful audience. Next, the team needed to understand what K-12 parents, and California's general public, thought of SFPs. The research partners sought to answer two key questions:

- What were the audience's baseline perceptions of SFPs, and how might the audience's personal experiences with school food inform these perceptions?
- What message themes, when paired with stories and images of SFPs, would resonate most with our audience of K-12 parents?

FCL began with a three-part research phase to inform the campaign narratives.

STEP 1:

Interview school food experts and analyze the media and research landscape surrounding school food and SFPs

The FCL team interviewed SFPs and other leaders of school food programs, as well as child nutrition experts to understand the nuts and bolts of school food careers; motives and barriers to joining the profession; and the qualities of a successful SFP.

FCL also explored a wide range of media: from news stories to job listings; from school district websites to TikTok videos to Adam Sandler's notorious "Lunch Lady Land" song, to understand:

- Existing general perceptions of the school food profession.
- Visual and verbal narratives of school food and the profession.
- How these narratives might pose barriers or enable an aspirational view of school food careers.

PRIMARY TAKEAWAYS

- **A lack of awareness surrounds school food professions.** California's culinary programs tout careers in restaurants, tourism, and hospitality, but largely ignore school food. And many SFPs "fell into" their careers through being members of the school community.
- **Two stereotypes prevail.** Media and popular culture portray SFPs as either "unfriendly malevolent women¹⁰" who serve unappealing food, or empathetic, altruistic "heroes" who serve kindness along with appetizing meals.
- **SFPs are proud of their work, but feel underappreciated.** Expert interviews showcased the immense skill and care SFPs put into their work and their relationships with students. But SFPs feel overlooked within their school communities.

¹⁰ [Lunch Ladies in Popular Culture, Wikipedia](#)

STEP 2:

Survey and interview key audiences to understand their perceptions of SFPs and inform message development

This research phase, led by FCL, sought to uncover how Californians, including parents of K-12 students, saw SFPs and school food; what they valued and which voices they trusted; and what terminology, ideas, or storytelling might change their perceptions.

The sample audiences — 43 in-depth survey and video respondents and 883 short survey respondents — included people with and without culinary experience; parents and non-parents; school district employees and non-employees; and Californians from a range of racial and ethnic backgrounds.

PRIMARY TAKEAWAYS

- **Californians hold disparate opinions about school food work.** They believe SFPs are hardworking people who make positive differences, but also relate school food work to low skill, social status, and value.
- **Many people are simply unaware of what SFPs do.** This lack of knowledge reinforces stereotypes and low appreciation.
- **People agree that SFPs help students succeed.** Messages highlighting SFPs' role in providing food security and healthy meals to support academic performance and mental health were rated highest in accuracy. Messages about SFPs' work supporting local farmers and sustainability were believed to be least accurate.
- **People express a desire for more diversity.** Respondents sought a more varied, culturally diverse school food experience, both in dishes served and within the workforce.

71%

of Californians were **either not at all familiar or slightly familiar** with the daily work experiences of School Food Professionals (from a sample of 1,053 people in pre-campaign research)



“

I feel that cafeteria workers are an important part of the school; they interact with the children on a daily basis, often out of the classroom.”

Study participant

46, Livermore, CA

STEP 3:**Test key messages that can positively shift perceptions of SFPs, such as their level of skill and professionalism**

FCL created and tested eight messages with **1,053 people**, based on six key themes from the research. The messages highlighted SFPs as:

- Skilled culinarians
- Allies to parents
- Demonstrating creativity, commitment, and nutritional expertise
- Supporting children's mental health and overall well-being
- Providing a variety of fresh, nutritious, diverse, and delicious food
- Bringing communities together

Experimental procedure

- 1 Brief questions about awareness and familiarity with SFPs
- 2 Definition of SFPs
- 3 Random assignment to one of nine messages or no message at all
- 4 Participants rated SFPs on nine social attributes (randomized order)
- 5 Participants rated SFPs impact on academic, change in perception from study, and interest in learning about SFPs work

PRIMARY TAKEAWAYS

- **All six themes were effective for increasing perceptions of SFPs.** Participants agreed the messages were good, accurate, informative, and trustworthy.
- **Two messages rose to the top.** Participants' perceptions were most likely to be shifted by these statements:
 - "School Food Professionals are skilled culinarians, who demonstrate creativity, commitment, and nutritional expertise, bringing communities together."
 - "School Food Professionals are skilled culinarians, who provide a variety of fresh, nutritious, diverse, and delicious food, nourishing children's mental health and overall well-being."
- **Messages about SFPs as allies resonated less than others.** Parents perceived SFPs more positively when referred to as "skilled culinarians" compared to "allies to parents."

Partner perspective

Senior Researcher Julie Delose, Ph.D., led Food for Climate League's measurement of audiences' baseline perceptions of School Food Professionals and message testing.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PRE-CAMPAIGN RESEARCH

The campaign team needed to understand the current perceptions of SFPs to pin down the specific positive perceptions to increase. Then, we set out to show that a short message about SFPs could shift these perceptions. Showing this cause-and-effect link between message and perception change was crucial to building an evidence-based campaign.

BRINGING THE RIGHT MINDSET TO RESEARCH

Sometimes we want to skip over trying to empathize with and understand the people we're studying. But without this crucial step, it's easy to miss important details and risk creating campaign materials that do not authentically portray SFPs and/or resonate with your audience. Highlighting the voices of SFPs and parents was central to planning this campaign.

Segmenting the audience

CAF aimed to elevate SFPs by reaching the most influential and invested audiences. After comprehensive research (detailed in Part 1), the campaign team determined that **K-12 parents were the audience who, with a more positive perception of SFPs, could make the greatest impact.**

This group of parents included millions of people across California. They lived in large cities and small, rural communities; spoke a variety of native languages; spanned generations; and represented a wide range of ages; racial and ethnic identities; and educational and lived experiences.

The team needed to understand how these demographics affected a parent's potential to be persuaded by the perception-change campaign. This insight would inform resonant campaign messages, as well as the types of parents to target.

Fenton partnered with two digital advertising and research firms, DS Political and INTRVL. These partners used custom surveys and advanced modeling to identify the likely beliefs and characteristics of parents in two groups representing approximately 12.7% of K-12 parents in California:

- 1** Parents who are already advocates of SFPs — they believe the role itself requires skill, and that cooking quality meals requires skill. These parents were most likely to share campaign messages with their networks; targeting this group increased the campaign's sphere of influence thanks to their advocacy.
- 2** Parents whose perceptions of SFPs likely could improve if they learned more about the role and the skill involved.

While K-12 parents outside these groups were also targeted, focusing on the two groups above increased the likelihood of successful perception change.

Target audience characteristics

The surveys and models conducted by DS Political and INTRVL showed which characteristics (e.g., age, gender, political ideology) would predict K-12 parents most likely to think School Food Professionals are skilled (Group 1), and those most likely to be persuaded to change their perception (Group 2).

Typical characteristics of Group 1

Parent advocates of SFPs

Ages 35-54

Nearly two-thirds are Hispanic

Nearly two-thirds are female

Lean conservative

Likely did not attend college

Typical characteristics of Group 2

Parents most likely to improve positive perceptions of SFPs

Ages 35-54

Nearly half are Hispanic

Split between male and female

Lean conservative

Spread across education levels

Gathering segment-specific insights from California's K-12 parents

Next, EVITARUS applied the insights about existing perceptions of SFPs to dig deeper into the opinions of K-12 parents in both audience segments.

EVITARUS led a series of two-hour focus group discussions about parents' viewpoints and understanding of school food and the school food workforce. The parents also offered feedback on sample campaign messages and advertisements.



Sample focus group questions

- What two words come to mind when you think of how school food actually is? What are two words for how school food should be?
- What are the different things that go into preparing, cooking, and serving school meals? What are these jobs like?
- How would you describe the existing workforce that is responsible for preparing, cooking, and serving school meals?



One hundred California parents of K-12 students were divided into 16 total virtual focus groups in both English and Spanish, segmented by race and ethnicity (Black, Latino, etc.) and region (Los Angeles, San Francisco Bay Area, etc.). **This segmentation allowed the team to analyze patterns of responses about school food and SFPs within racial and ethnic groups, native languages, and regions. The team also assessed reactions to sample campaign messages, words, and images.**

California is an exceptionally diverse state, so it was important to understand where perceptions differed and where commonalities lay. “The campaign team didn’t want to assume parents in L.A. thought of school food the same as the Central Valley or Northern California or San Diego,” says Paul Hernandez, chief strategy officer at Fenton.

PRIMARY TAKEAWAYS

- Overall, parents' perceptions of SFPs **replicated the perceptions** uncovered by FCL's research. While parents understood SFPs to be undervalued and overworked, they did not believe skill was involved in school food.
- A **strong correlation exists between parents' view of SFPs and their beliefs about food quality**; many parents believed food quality was poor, leading to negative perceptions of SFPs. This interconnectedness also came up in discussions about the value of workers, as well as their pay and effort.
- Parents were more supportive of **aspirational messaging** about what should be happening in schools, due to their negative views of the current state of school food.
- Parents strongly preferred messages that **connected school food to positive physical and mental health benefits** for their children, as many believe current school food does not provide enough nutritional support.
- The tagline "We Cook for CA Kids" resonated most across groups due to its **emphasis on SFPs cooking**, rather than reheating, meals.
- Parents preferred images featuring **colorful, nutritious meals**, and **smiling SFPs or students**.



Partner perspective

EVITARUS Managing Partner Shakari Byerly, Ph.D., led the focus group research to gain a deeper understanding of K-12 parents' views and priorities regarding school food and School Food Professionals.

WHY FOCUS GROUPS ARE A CRUCIAL RESEARCH METHOD

Focus groups provide nuanced insights that couldn't otherwise be captured, and allow us to see how one person's opinions affect another's. While the insights we gathered are not necessarily applicable to every K-12 parent in California, they do reflect the perceptions and attitudes of this group.

A MAJOR CHALLENGE FACING THE CAMPAIGN

Since opinions about SFPs can be fairly hardened over time, and thoughts about school food are often based on experience, it makes it more difficult for a campaign of this type to really shift opinions. This underscores the importance of repeated exposure to campaign messaging through a variety of mediums to make the ideas stick with California's K-12 parents.

A COMMON SENTIMENT AMONG MOST FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS

Parents generally want their children to eat healthy food, and they want school food that's appealing to kids and tastes good. Other aspects, like scratch cooking, sustainably sourced ingredients, and organic ingredients, were lower priorities.

Key findings that shaped the next steps

Initially, California's general public viewed SFPs as lacking culinary skills. But many focus group participants **shifted to more positive attitudes toward SFPs over the course of their groups' discussion**. And, during FCL's message-testing research, audience perceptions of SFPs **improved after reading just a one-sentence message about SFPs being skilled, professional, and valuable**.

The relative ease in shifting perceptions about skill during the testing period gave the campaign team confidence that **emphasizing SFPs' skills was central to helping K-12 parents appropriately understand and value their work**.

Social psychology shows one-to-one interactions are an effective tool for shifting perceptions.¹¹ This dynamic also played out in focus groups; parents who initially held negative perceptions were persuaded by one parent who worked at a school cafeteria as she described her daily tasks in detail. Therefore, **telling the stories of real SFPs and their work** was a strong approach for the perception-change campaign.



Creating a similar perception-change campaign

Ensure the sample of participants in your campaign's research phase is similar to the people the campaign will reach. Random sampling is the gold standard and should be used whenever possible to ensure your research audience accurately represents the broader population.

¹¹ "A meta-analytic test of intergroup contact theory," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (2006)



03

Crafting Research-Informed Messaging

The research clarified that, to elevate parents' perceptions of School Food Professionals, the perception-change campaign's messaging would need to:

- **Demonstrate how SFPs were leading efforts** to improve and transform school meals.
- **Showcase real examples of innovative school meals** to shatter existing stereotypes.
- **Build greater awareness and understanding of SFPs' complex work.** Parents were largely unaware of the culinary skills, responsibilities, and resourcefulness required to work in school food.
- **Position SFPs as skilled employees.** Parents saw school food work as a low-value, hourly role requiring minimal skill, rather than as a career.
- **Capitalize on existing positive views of people working in school food.** Respondents agreed already that School Food Professionals are hardworking and make a positive difference.
- **Acknowledge that while more work was required to continue improvements of school food across California,** growing momentum demonstrated such transformation was feasible.

While the campaign would primarily target California's K-12 parents, it **also needed to accurately represent SFPs' own identities and real-world experiences** — reflecting the pride they have in their work and the care they provide each day, and conveying that they do much more than simply serve meals.

“

I tell my staff that we're all educators. Our classroom is our kitchen. Students are still learning every time they go through that line. And so that's what's really important, we are really the ones who build their future tastes and preferences.”

Anonymous California School Food Professional

Speaking during pre-campaign research



What to call people working in school food

The term “lunch lady” has taken hold over the years, and many women in these roles wear the name with pride. But this gendered, reductive label doesn't convey the intricacies of the role.

While the research uncovered potential job titles, including School Food/Food Service Worker, Frontline Cafeteria Worker, and Child Nutrition Professional, the campaign team ultimately **landed on School Food Professional to anchor the campaign messaging.** This title encompasses a variety of school food roles and conveys expertise.

Designing narratives for perception change

The themes below proved most instrumental in guiding the campaign's key messages and imagery.



Reframing what people working in school food are called

Research showed: Many people didn't use or recognize the term School Food Professional.

The solution: Incorporating creative assets and messaging that also connected the term with familiar phrases like "School Food Workers" and "Cafeteria Workers."



Emphasizing the skill of SFPs

Research showed: Most parents felt School Food Professionals (SFPs) were responsible for unskilled tasks; however, they preferred messages that connected SFPs with skill over messages that described SFPs as "allies to parents." Those who learned details about SFPs' work or heard directly from a person working in school food were more likely to change their minds.

The solution: Use first-person storytelling to introduce audiences to real SFPs and showcase key skills like cooking, recipe development, sourcing ingredients, and adherence to nutritional guidelines.



Making an emotional connection to SFPs

Research showed: Parents connected nutritious food to their children's physical and mental well-being. They also recognized the role SFPs play in supporting their children's mental health and academic performance.

The solution: Reinforce how SFPs are improving the quality and nutrition of school meals and therefore contributing to student health and well-being.



Showing fresh, high-quality school meals

Research showed: Most parents had generally negative perceptions of school food, using words like bland, cheap, fast, stale, and preserved. The majority also felt school meals came prepackaged and lacked fresh ingredients.

The solution: Build storytelling and creative assets that show real SFPs planning recipes, cooking scratch-made food with fresh produce, and talking about specific meals kids enjoy.



Evoking a brighter future for school food

Research showed: Parents didn't believe SFPs were transforming California's school food. However, all parents were on board with the aspiration of better food — that school meals could be scratch-made, healthy, and tasty.

The solution: Demonstrate progress in how school food is getting better, without claiming that scratch-cooked meals are currently being served all the time. Show how SFPs are responsible for this progress.



04

Shaping the Perception-Change Campaign

Busy California parents are focused on making the best decisions for their families. Grabbing and holding their attention to shift their perceptions of School Food Professionals meant applying learnings from the pre-campaign research to:

- Build creative assets that balance data and narratives to tell a compelling story.
- Decide where and how to use those creative assets to reach millions of K-12 parents in California.



What's in a name: Powered by School Food Professionals

The campaign team wanted to avoid confusion with campaigns like School Meals for All, Made With School Lunch, and School Food Matters. These campaigns focus on school food; in contrast, this perception-change campaign centered on the people behind that food.

Real SFPs evaluated potential campaign names, and preferred options that included the word “professionals,” humanized their work, and avoided the term “lunch ladies.” **The eventual winner, Powered by School Food Professionals, elevated people in school food careers while introducing audiences to new ways to describe this workforce.**

Placing skill at the center of the campaign

As the campaign team learned during the research phase, **California's K-12 parents were open to changing their minds about SFPs and willing to see them as skilled culinarians.** Skill proved to be the perception most likely to be positively shifted by the campaign. The pre-campaign research showed perception change further increased when K-12 parents heard directly from SFPs.

The campaign team set out to **capture and share the stories of real SFPs**, including their passion and skill; reasons for starting and continuing their school food careers; and their relationships with students, families, schools, and entire communities.

“

I think working in school food is the best possible option. You get to be around kids every day. You're working with a team of professionals that really care about what they're doing, and they want the best for our kids.”

Christina Lawson

Food Service Director, Western Placer Unified School District in Lincoln, CA¹²

¹² “A meta-analytic test of intergroup contact theory,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (2006)

Building the campaign's brand

The Powered by School Food Professionals campaign was rooted in an accessible, trustworthy brand framework to ensure consistency across every creative touchpoint.



Messaging

Building trust with the audience meant grounding the messages in reality. Campaign messaging couldn't overstate the current quality of school food. But K-12 parents could believe school food was getting better, and that SFPs deserve credit for this improvement.

Early messages positioned SFPs as the secret ingredient in school food and positioned them as the reason school food is getting better. **The initial messages don't focus on the benefits of better school food; it was most important to associate SFPs with cooking and improving school food.**



Design

The visual identity was designed to attach professionalism to SFPs' roles: reinforcing school food as a career and not merely an undervalued, hourly gig. **The campaign's color scheme was anchored by blue and green** with a garden of supporting colors and modern, vibrant typography.



Photography and videography

Video and photography gathered in school kitchens throughout the campaign **documented the process of sourcing, cooking, and serving real school meals.** Pre-campaign research showed the importance of featuring real SFPs engaged in and talking about their work.

The campaign team drew on its existing relationships with California school districts and reached out to others across the state to ensure the campaign featured a variety of regions, district sizes, and student demographics.



Bringing the creative campaign to life

Parents of K-12 students needed to frequently and repeatedly encounter the campaign's messages for perceptions to shift. The campaign was delivered in a variety of digital media (e.g., social media and online media platforms like Vox and Edible Communities); out-of-home environments (e.g., billboards and radio); an influencer program that expanded reach and engagement; and in-platform targeting through broadcast television (e.g., Nickelodeon, HGTV, Univision, and CNN). Other tactics included an email marketing campaign, print stories and advertising, and a dedicated campaign website and blog.

Three unique creative approaches helped broaden the campaign's reach to diverse K-12 parents across California:

1

Using **video** to tell first-person stories of SFPs, incorporating these stories across all campaign assets.



2

Working with **content creators** to diversify the campaign content and audience.



3

Launching the **Powered by School Food Professionals Awards** to build greater visibility around the skill and contributions of individual SFPs and their teams.



CREATIVE APPROACH 1

Video: Telling first-person stories of SFPs

California school districts graciously welcomed the campaign's creative team into their kitchens to record SFPs in action. Over the course of the campaign, as the messaging focused more on the complexities of the role of SFPs, these videos took audiences behind the scenes to hear from SFPs and witness their skills firsthand.

Elements of this creative medium

Video and photography captured in school kitchens appeared in ads on **streaming services** and **broadcast TV**; online through **native ads** and **YouTube**; and on the campaign **website** and **social media** channels.

How the creative emphasized skill

At Azusa Unified School District (USD), located northeast of L.A., Director of Nutrition Services Stella Ndahura shared how specially skilled SFPs, such as registered dietitians, nutrition services supervisors, and chefs, work together to run a successful meal program.

The Azusa USD video **shows SFPs cutting up local fruit, planning meal schedules, blending sauces, and more, creating a visual connection** between healthy cooking and skill.

"We've been really fortunate to have team members who really know how to cook, and we've been given the opportunity to teach our students the value of healthy eating," Ndahura says in the video.



**6,000
DAILY MEALS**

Azusa Unified School District's central kitchen serves 4,000 lunches and 2,000 breakfasts every day, including scratch-made BBQ chicken with cornbread, summer cucumber salad, and local citrus.

CREATIVE APPROACH 2

Content creators: Diversifying the campaign content

Telling the real stories of real SFPs was a crucial tactic across the entire campaign. The campaign team partnered with SFPs, parents, public school teachers, students, and athletes, who created and distributed their own content on social media. This strategy allowed the campaign to tell diverse perspectives and stories through an unfiltered lens while capitalizing on the creators' existing audiences.

Elements of this creative medium

The campaign's creator-partners filmed and posted videos to **Meta (Facebook/Instagram), Snapchat, TikTok, and YouTube**. Some spoke directly to the camera using an **interview-style** approach; others took a **behind-the-scenes** look at a school kitchen, or filmed recipes that aligned with healthy school meals.

How the creative emphasized skill

Every creator had a unique story to tell about school food. Latina mother Nayeli Cardenas (@mamamilestones_) told her 16,000 Instagram followers how her mother-in-law's experience as an SFP gave Cardenas confidence in the food her kids now enjoy. Middle school teacher Linda Garcia (@fearless_mrs) shared with her 65,000 TikTok followers how grabbing balanced school meals helped her kids concentrate in the classroom.

These stories and others didn't explicitly emphasize the word "skill." Instead, they connected with parents using themes that resonated with pre-campaign focus groups: SFPs as dedicated change-makers who cook and serve food that helps kids do better in school.



69%

Of comments on creators' campaign posts were overwhelmingly positive; these comments included enthusiastic messages about the importance of healthy school food and praise for School Food Professionals.

CREATIVE APPROACH 3

The Powered by School Food Professionals Awards: Honoring SFPs' skill and contributions

The Powered by School Food Professionals Awards were a fresh idea to draw media attention and coverage toward the end of the campaign and to celebrate the excellence and skill of California's SFPs.

SFPs from districts throughout California submitted 70 of their students' favorite recipes in six categories that elevate skill:

- Best Original Recipe
- Best Scratch-Cooked Adaptation
- Best Farm to School Recipe
- Best Take on a Culinary Trend
- Best Culturally Relevant Recipe
- Community Choice Recipe, chosen through a public vote

Winning recipes in the first five categories were selected by a panel of school food experts and Kim Frinzell, director of the Nutrition Services Division of the California Department of Education. The winners were honored at an exclusive awards event.



Elements of this creative medium

SFPs and program partners across California submitted school recipes that meet nutritional standards and are popular with students. **Digital advertising, blog posts, emails, and social media posts** created awareness of the awards and invited California parents, students, school staff, and school food advocates to vote for their favorite Community Choice Recipe. CAF also connected with members of the media through **press releases** and **exclusive invitations** to the awards event.

The event at Jar Restaurant in L.A. featured celebrity chef Suzanne Trach, who recreated the winning recipes. Members of the media also learned about California's school food movement and the work of SFPs.

How the creative emphasized skill

While the Powered by School Food Professionals Awards were intended as a media event, the awards and ceremony also **recognized the skill, innovation, and creativity** of SFPs across California. Experiencing school food for themselves, and hearing directly from SFPs about the thought and care put into school food, gave the media an enticing story to share.

“

All of us in the kitchen at NCSA [Nevada City School of the Arts] are so gratified by the Powered by School Food Professionals campaign. **Its important messaging elevates our crew and school teams everywhere working hard to nourish students.**”

Dre Maher

Food Services Coordinator at Nevada City School of the Arts in Nevada City, CA, winner for Best Farm to School Recipe



Reaching non-English-speaking parents

A statewide survey early in the campaign showed a need for more Spanish content — unsurprising, considering more than 30% of Californians speak Spanish at home.¹³ The campaign team partnered with Univision as part of this effort to produce a multi-pronged paid campaign, including broadcast ads, videos on Univision’s digital platform, and integrated interview segments with Nancy Gonzalez, a California School Food Professional from Santa Cruz’s Live Oak School District.

The Univision partnership was an opportunity to focus on culturally relevant messaging. Pre-campaign research and conversations with Univision Creative Director Salvador García, showed that Latino families define **“skill” as the love and care** that goes into quality school food that kids want to eat, rather than focusing on specific culinary skills needed for the role.

The Univision team created TV segments that helped Spanish-speaking K-12 parents feel like SFPs were an extension of their own parenting. Gonzalez’s “Despierta Los Angeles” interviews emphasized her relationships with students and the care that went into her meals.



¹³ State Immigration Data Profiles, California (2023)



05

Rolling Out the Campaign

The perception-change campaign was broken up into flights — periods of advertising, each with its own unique, research-informed strategy. This approach allowed the team to **increase the campaign's impact** during key moments (like the run-up to the Powered by School Food Professionals Awards), take a **cost-effective approach** to budgeting, and **avoid ad fatigue**.

Table 5.1: Campaign overview

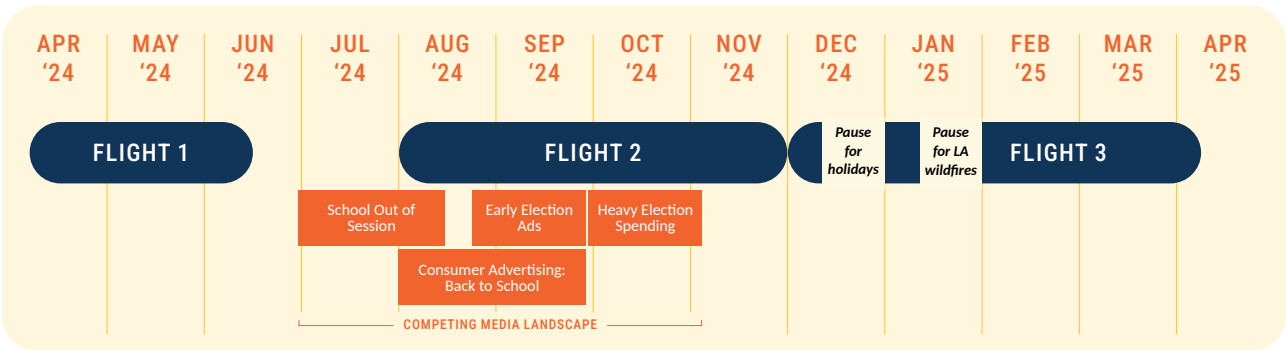
FLIGHT 1 April – June 2024	FOCUS Establishing general, broad awareness of the School Food Professional (SFP) role, identifying persuadable audiences for digital content, and delivering high digital frequency. • Introducing the term “School Food Professional” • Messaging about SFPs’ impact on better food quality • Modeling and testing audiences to target and deliver digital media on their most frequented platforms
FLIGHT 2 Aug – Nov 2024	FOCUS Narrowing campaign messages to show how SFPs use skill in their roles. • Ramping up content delivery during back-to-school season, decreasing during the 2024 presidential election and holidays • Building on successful early messages by focusing on video, creator endorsements, and broadcast TV to reach a wider audience of parents in key designated market areas (DMAs)
FLIGHT 3 Dec 2024 – April 2025	FOCUS Highlighting SFPs’ impact with long-form stories • Increasing video deployment and digital media at high frequencies to drive perception change • Leveraging external validators through media and creators to expand content and reach • Using paid media to amplify key events, such as the Powered by School Food Professionals Awards, and boost community engagement

Four key goals drove the campaign rollout to help ensure successful perception change:

GOAL 1:
Avoid competing messages

The campaign team paused advertisements during specific periods to avoid competition for parents' attention, including during events like the 2024 presidential election and the Los Angeles wildfires in January 2025. This approach positioned the campaign to persuade as many parents as possible.

Figure 5.2: Campaign Timeline



GOAL 2:
Deliver high-frequency messaging

The campaign needed to deliver digital content regularly to maximize K-12 parents' engagement and shift their perceptions of SFPs. Repetitive messaging like this is important for changing perceptions.¹⁴

All three flights aimed to deliver digital media with a high average weekly frequency (the rate at which individuals are exposed to the advertisements per week). The Marketing Rule of 7 suggests people need to be reached **five to seven times per week for an effective shift in attitude**.¹⁵ Each flight lasted eight to 12 weeks, similar to other effective national attitude-change campaigns.¹⁶

While the campaign's minimum average weekly frequency was set at five ads per week for each flight, the actual frequency surpassed this benchmark. **Campaign messages connected with California's K-12 parents across multiple touchpoints** — on Facebook, news sites, and CTV — ensuring the message reached them more frequently. A successful perception-change campaign delivers messages both often and across a variety of channels.

Table 5.3: Digital ad frequency

	AD FLIGHT 1 April 8 - June 15, 2024	AD FLIGHT 2 Aug 1 - Nov 30, 2024	AD FLIGHT 3 Dec 2, 2024 - April 4, 2025
Benchmark for average weekly rate of ads sent to shift perceptions: at least 5 times per week			
Average weekly frequency during the campaign	10.7 times per week	6 times per week	8 times per week

Note: Average weekly frequency reflects the specific strategy for each flight; for example, decreased frequency during the 2024 presidential election and the 2025 wildfires. Impressions for Flights 2 and 3 were lower than Flight 1 for this reason, and because billboards were only prioritized in Flight 1 to increase broad awareness of the school food profession.

¹⁴ "Advertising Repetition: A Meta-Analysis on Effective Frequency in Advertising." Susanne Schmidt and Martin Eisend, 2015

¹⁵ "The Key to Maximizing Sales: How Frequently Should You Run Ads?," Brand XR

¹⁶ "Tips From Former Smokers About the Campaign," CDC

GOAL 3:**Meet parents where they are**

The campaign team carefully chose placements that ensured messages about School Food Professionals were likely to reach parents of K-12 students. For example:

- **Radio ads** on NPR and popular stations in key regional markets to reach parents during their commutes.
- **Out-of-home billboards** to reach parents during their commutes. These billboards were used to support and expand messaging to a broad audience of parents in key designated market areas (DMAs), specifically in Los Angeles, San Francisco, and San Diego.
- **Broadcast TV ads** on channels selected for their strong reach among households with K-12 students. Univision broadcast stations in particular helped the campaign connect with a large audience of Spanish-speaking parents in key regional markets like Los Angeles.
- **Display ads** across social media and YouTube, and featured on Vox Media's extended network, including placements on popular sites for parents
- **Partnering with content creators** with followings among California parents. This group included fellow California parents, SFPs, and local educators or members of the school community.
- **Print ads** in magazines like Edible Los Angeles, a popular food and lifestyle magazine.

GOAL 4:**Prioritize ads in audiences' preferred languages**

The campaign delivered digital ads in the seven languages most commonly spoken by California parents — English, Spanish, Chinese (traditional and Mandarin), Korean, Vietnamese, and Tagalog. During Flight 1, ads were shown based on language settings in a user's browser. **The campaign team applied new data about the target audience in Flights 2 and 3 to reach more non-English speakers in their preferred languages.** This tactic increased ad delivery in languages other than English by 300% and 400% in Flights 2 and 3, respectively.

How success was measured

The campaign team calculated these key performance indicators (KPIs) to measure the campaign's success and resonance with the target audience, and to make adjustments after each flight to reach more parents.

PRIMARY METRICS

- **Frequency:** How often a unique viewer is shown an ad every week
- **Impressions:** The number of unique times an ad was shown to target audiences across all advertising platforms
- **Reach:** The number of unique viewers who see digital content
- **Video completion rate (VCR):** The percentage of people who watch a video in full



**24
MILLION**

Number of people reached by the Powered by School Food Professionals Campaign, which includes the majority of California parents

The campaign up close

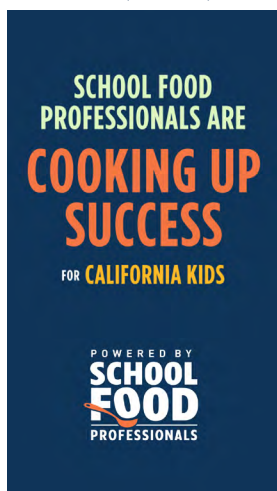
FLIGHT 1 (APRIL THROUGH MID-JUNE 2024)

The campaign kicked off with the goal of reaching the broadest possible audience of California's K-12 parents. The approach included:

- **Programmatic ads** — automated digital ads bought and placed through platforms like Google. Programmatic ads adjust in real time to appear where K-12 parents were most likely to see them.
- **Online content creators** on social media
- **Radio, podcast audio, YouTube, and billboard ads**

Ads directed audiences to the [Powered by School Food Professionals website](#). There, they could watch videos featuring SFPs, find recipes from California schools, and explore a blog and partner toolkit that helped advocates teach others about SFPs.

DIGITAL AD (TIK TOK)



CREATOR VIDEO



CREATOR POST



DIGITAL AD (ENGLISH)



DIGITAL AD (SPANISH)

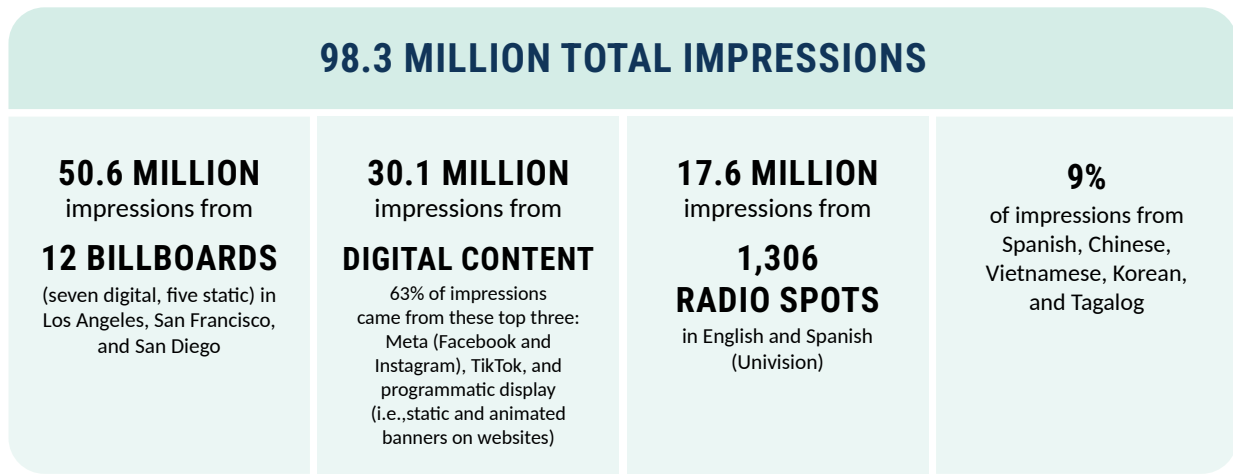


BILLBOARD AD

The ads in Flight 1 created **98.3 million total impressions**, surpassing the entire campaign goal (98 million impressions) in less than two months. Strategic and additional negotiated placements added value in Flight 1, resulting in this surge of impressions.

Table 5.4: By the numbers - Flight 1

Breakdown of impressions by media type

**Lessons learned**

- The campaign team **relied on users' browser settings** (manually adjusted to display their preferred language) to determine how many digital ads to buy in each of seven languages. But this technique didn't accurately reflect California's large Spanish-speaking population. So for Flight 2, the team **invested in a statewide survey that showed a need for significantly more Spanish content**.
- Measuring how often videos are watched to completion shows whether audiences find digital content compelling. **The campaign's average targeted video completion rate in Flight 1 was 82%, exceeding the benchmark of 70-80% needed for perception change.**¹⁷ This overperformance established videos as a successful medium, and showed audiences were interested in the videos' message and content. The team included even more videos in Flights 2 and 3.

¹⁷ "Video Completion Rate" Agency Analytics

FLIGHT 2 (AUGUST THROUGH NOVEMBER 2024)

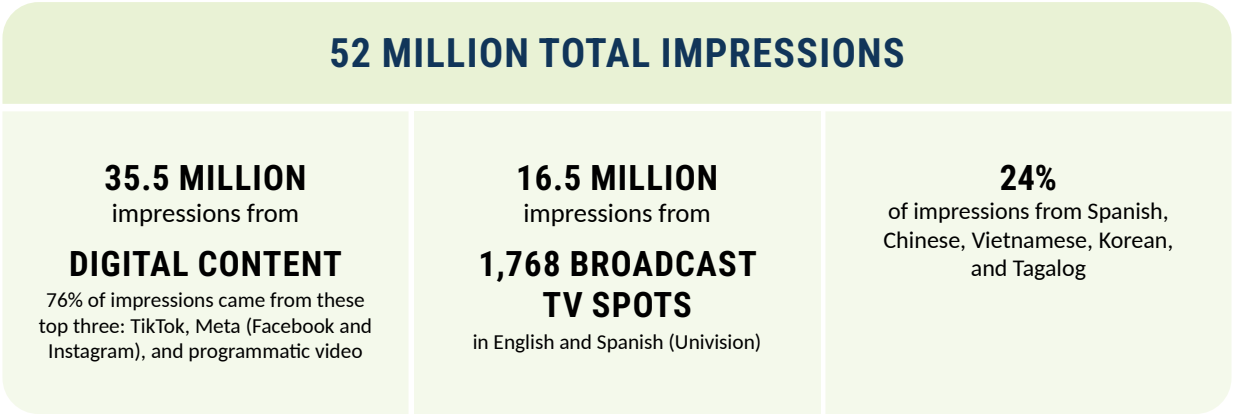
This stretch of the campaign coincided with the back-to-school season and the 2024 presidential election — major events that competed for K-12 parents’ attention. The campaign team **strategically adjusted ad spending** during these periods to avoid getting lost in the shuffle. Other changes included:

- **Broadcast TV placements**, including Univision morning show segments.
- The team prioritized **video-forward media** as the leading proven mechanism for perception change — particularly, non-skippable video — allowing for greater storytelling and message retention among audiences.

While Flight 1 focused on increasing broad awareness of school food professions, Flight 2 **showcased the complexity of the SFP role** and the skill required to do it. Video and broadcast TV placements were particularly useful for accomplishing this goal.

Table 5.5: By the numbers - Flight 2

Breakdown of impressions by media type



While the campaign leaned into video storytelling in Flight 2, the team also **strategically pulled back on ad spending during high-competition periods** like the 2024 presidential election. This reduction in spend accounts for the reduction in impressions compared to Flight 1.

Lessons learned

- The increase in videos during Flight 2 paid off; the campaign team continued this strategy in Flight 3 with **more detailed, long-form stories from real SFPs**.

FLIGHT 3
(DECEMBER 2024 THROUGH EARLY-APRIL 2025)

The campaign’s final flight also marked the culmination of the Powered by School Food Professionals Awards. In mid-March, SFPs, social media creators, and members of the media gathered in Los Angeles to honor the six winning school districts and recipes.



DIGITAL AD



SOCIAL MEDIA GRAPHIC



CUSTOM AWARDS RECIEVED BY WINNING SCHOOL DISTRICTS

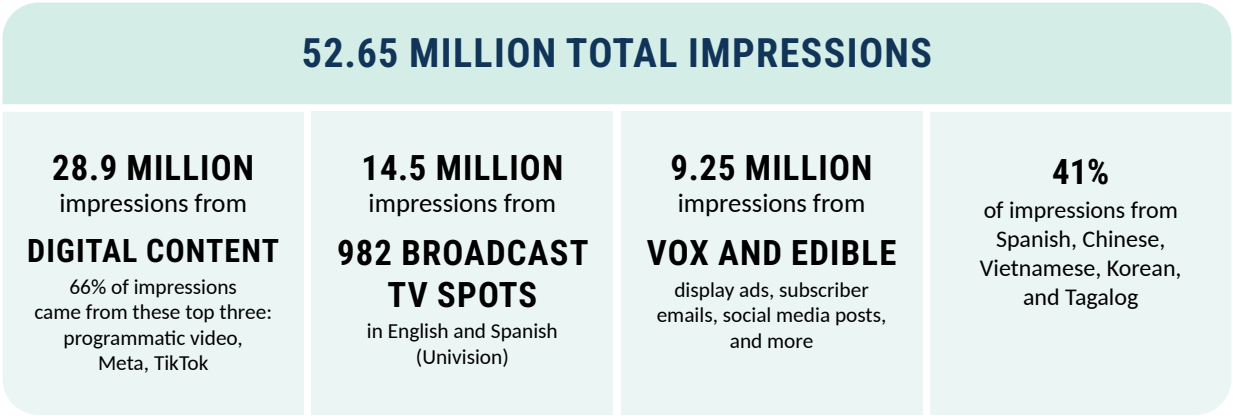


“
Our vision is to create
a school food culture
where every student is
nourished, respected and
excited to eat.”

Chef Cory Bidwell
Central Kitchen Supervisor at San
Luis Coastal Unified School District
in San Luis Obispo, CA. Bidwell and
his team won the Best Original
Recipe award for their Thai Basil
Lentil Burger.

Table 5.6: By the numbers - Flight 3

Breakdown of impressions by media type



The value of premium placements

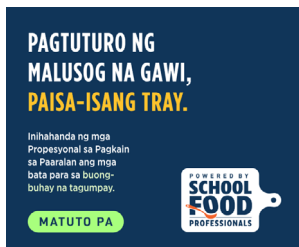
While much of the campaign's social media content relied on individual creators, paid partnerships with media brands like Eater and Vox opened the door to people with a more general interest in food.

In one Instagram video posted by Eater San Francisco, San Francisco Unified School District Chef Josh Davidson shares how his team at McAteer Culinary Center works with local producers to source fresh ingredients for dishes like Singapore noodles and tofu, and chicken tikka masala. **The video earned nearly 31,000 likes and high visibility among Eater San Francisco's 139,000 followers.**



Creating a similar perception-change campaign

The perception-change campaign communicated with intention in the top languages across California. Messages in languages other than English were transcreated — adapted to reflect the culture and conversational norms of native speakers — rather than directly translated. This practice created deeper trust and inclusion for all audiences, and should be used whenever possible.





06

Measuring Perception Change

Data like campaign reach, frequency, and video completion rate are useful measurements of campaign success. But the campaign team needed to **hear from parents of K-12 students before, during, and after the campaign** to scientifically measure perception change. The goal: to determine **how successfully the Powered by School Food Professionals campaign positively shifted parents' perceptions of School Food Professionals (SFPs)**, especially related to skill.

Designing a field experiment to measure the impact of certain high-reach, effective campaign tactics, like billboard advertising, would be infeasible. These billboards were used to support and expand messaging to a broad audience of parents in key designated market areas (DMAs), specifically in Los Angeles, San Francisco, and San Diego.

But the campaign team could measure the effectiveness of digital advertising among California's K-12 parents through a randomized field experiment. This rigorous research method compares at least two groups in a real world setting and allowed the campaign team to accurately quantify the impact of digital advertising.

The findings show The Powered by School Food Professionals campaign **successfully increased parents' positive perceptions of SFPs**. These results, explained in detail on the right, highlight the **potential to positively impact more than 1 million K-12 parents**.



Figure 6.1: Survey timeline

1,902 parents of K-12 students were surveyed before, during, and after the Powered by School Food Professionals campaign.

SURVEY 1: Before the Campaign

March 2024

1,046 parents of K-12 students

Response rate: 0.33%¹⁸

CAMPAIGN FLIGHT 1

April - June 2024

SURVEY 2: During the Campaign

June 2024

857 parents of K-12 students

Response rate: 45.5%¹⁸

CAMPAIGN FLIGHT 2

Aug - Nov 2024

CAMPAIGN FLIGHT 3

Dec 2024 - April 2025

SURVEY 3: After the Campaign

April 2025

617 parents of K-12 students

Response rate: 33%¹⁸

¹⁸ Survey 1 (baseline) response rate is much lower than those of Surveys 2 and 3, because Survey 1 was distributed to the entire sample, whereas Surveys 2 and 3 were only distributed to baseline respondents. The response rate in Survey 2 is similar to the average response rate of the Gallup Poll (45%), a trusted source of public opinion research. Response rate in Survey 3 is lower, as participation drop-off in longitudinal research studies is common, especially in longer term studies, with Survey 3 occurring about 9 months after Survey 2. Still, the data was weighted which reduces lower response rate concerns and increases the generalizability of the results from Survey 3, and the key analyses compare responses from Survey 1 to responses on Surveys 2 and 3 combined.

How K-12 parents were surveyed

Fenton and EVITARUS randomly selected a sample of K-12 parents¹⁹ for a series of phone and online surveys to **track perceptions of school food and SFPs before, during, and after the campaign's digital ads appeared**. Gathering a random sample of K-12 parents created more confidence in applying the study results to all California parents of K-12 children — an estimated 11 million people.²⁰

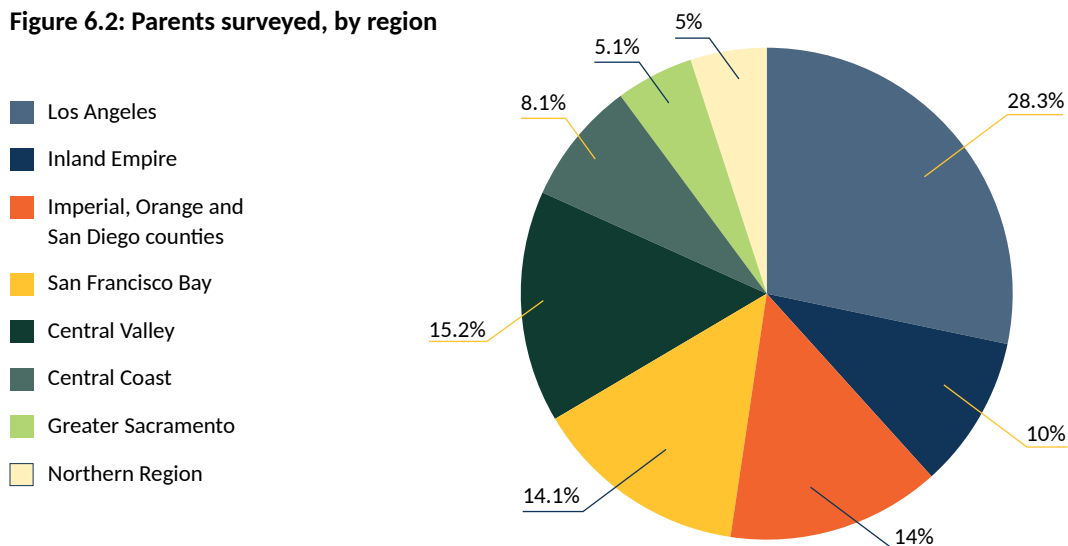
Survey 1, the baseline survey, measured the perception of K-12 parents (with at least one child enrolled in a California public school) before the launch of campaign ads. After completing this survey, parents were randomly assigned to one of two groups:

- **Group A** (429 parents), which received targeted digital campaign advertising via online searches and streaming television
- **Group B** (428 parents), which was not sent targeted digital content (This audience may have seen campaign advertising on broadcast TV and billboards and was not considered a perfect control group.)

Parents needed to participate in at least two surveys: Survey 1 plus Survey 2 and/or Survey 3, for the team to assess perception change before and after the campaign launch. Some parents (428) completed all three surveys, while others completed Surveys 1 and 2 (857 parents) or Surveys 1 and 3 (617 parents).

Surveys were conducted in both English and Spanish, and the survey groups were balanced across region, gender, child's grade level, ethnicity/race, and other characteristics that might relate to differences in opinion. Sample data was weighted so survey responses accurately represented the demographic makeup of California's K-12 parents, including region, gender identity, age, ethnicity, party affiliation, and income level.

Figure 6.2: Parents surveyed, by region



80%

of K-12 parents who participated in Survey 1 said their children eat school meals.

¹⁹ A random sample of parents with public school aged children (ages 5-17) was gathered using address-based sampling (ABS), matched against commercial databases and the California voter file to capture email addresses and cell phone numbers associated with households in the sample. Gathering a random sample ensured parent perceptions were appropriately measured throughout the state of California.

²⁰ Extrapolation based on ["Fingertip Facts on Education in California,"](#) which shows 5.8 million K-12 students were enrolled in California's public schools in the 2024-25 school year.

Key perception-change campaign survey questions

QUESTION 1

How much skill do you believe is required to cook quality school meals? *A lot of skill, Some skill, Not very much skill, No skill, Don't know*

QUESTION 2

How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement: Being a School Food Worker [School Food Professional] requires skill? *Strongly agree, Somewhat agree, Somewhat disagree, Strongly disagree, Don't know*

QUESTION 3-8

How well would you say each of the following describes the workers who plan, cook, and serve school meals? *Extremely well, Very well, Somewhat well, Not very well, Not very well at all, Don't know*

- Skilled, Trained, Professional, Strongly influence the menu and meals offered in schools, Possess culinary skills, Possess nutritional expertise

While the campaign's success was measured using the eight questions above, parents also were asked about:

- Their attitudes and top priorities regarding school food
- SFPs' impacts on students
- Their interest in increased funding for School Food Professionals
- Demographic information

QUESTION

Thinking about the food offered at your child's school, how important are the following? *Extremely important, Very important, Somewhat important, Not too important, Don't know*

- Food cooked from scratch, Food that is healthy, Food that tastes good, Food that kids want, Organic ingredients, Sustainably sourced local ingredients

QUESTION

In general, how much of an impact would you say school food professionals have on each of the following? *Major impact, Minor impact, Not much impact, No impact at all, Don't know*

- A student's mood, Student learning outcomes, Overall well-being of children

QUESTION

Would you support or oppose increased funding for school food professionals in your local area? *Strongly support, Somewhat support, Somewhat oppose, Strongly oppose, Don't know, Prefer not to answer*

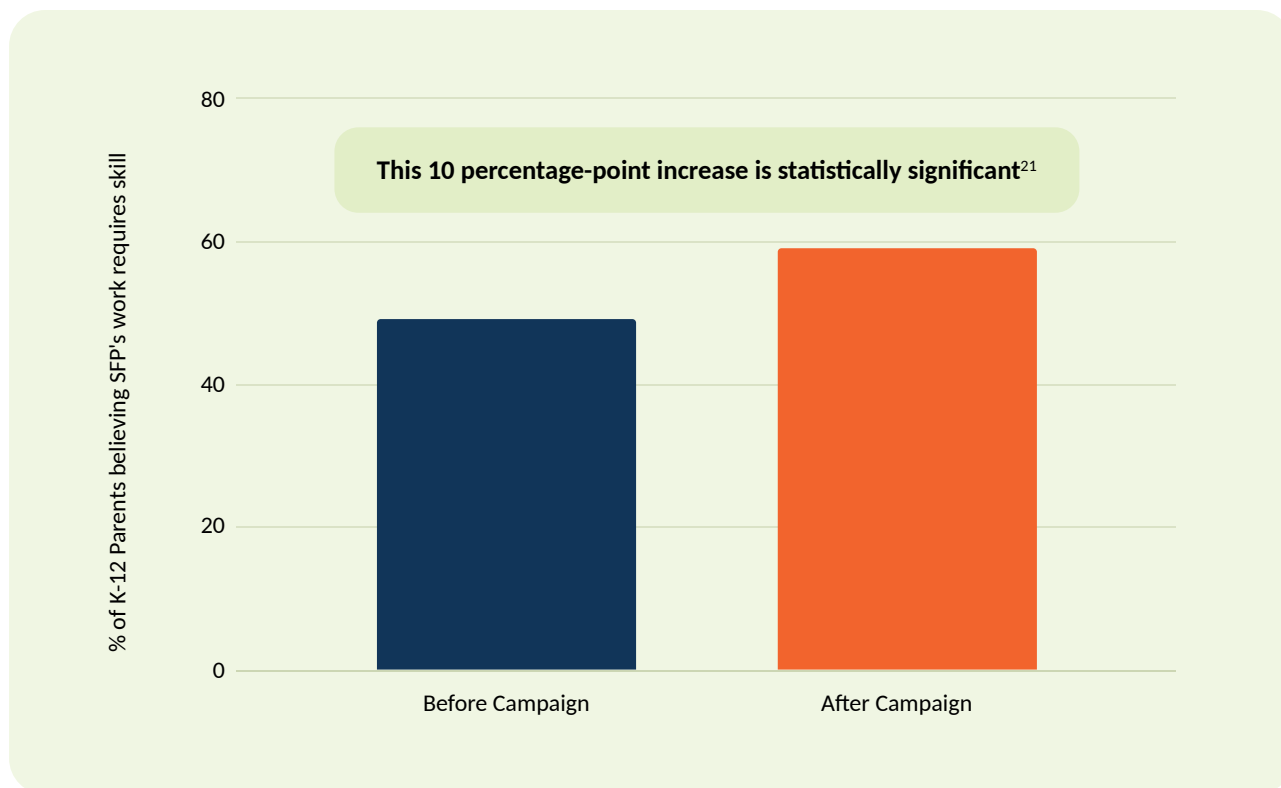
Survey findings: The campaign increased positive perceptions of skill

The Powered by School Food Professionals campaign **successfully increased parents' positive perceptions of SFPs**; these results highlight the potential to positively impact more than 1 million K-12 parents.

The campaign team averaged each respondent's answers to the eight survey questions measuring skill into an individual perception score for each survey, with scores ranging from 1 (low perception of skill) to 5 (high perception of skill). This score helped the campaign team understand the overall perception change regarding skill. Average weighted perception scores from the pre-campaign survey (Survey 1, 1,039 participants) were compared to average weighted perception scores from either Survey 2, 3, or the average of both, depending on the surveys completed by each parent (1,041 total participants).

Comparing perception scores before and after the campaign showed a statistically significant increase in perceptions of SFPs' skill among parents who both were and were not targeted by digital advertising.²¹

Figure 6.3



²¹ The increase was statistically significant at the $p < .01$ level. The increase in perceptions is likely not random and is due to a real perception change of parents. Perceptions increased in both Groups A and B. To understand this more, we examined responses from questions measuring whether participants recalled content from the campaign (i.e., manipulation check). Participants rated "At any point in the last few months, do you recall seeing, hearing, or reading any advertisements about efforts to improve school meals?" selecting "no," "yes," or "unsure." Responses to this question were similar across participants in both Group A and B, suggesting the campaign was recalled as being seen equally across both groups.

Before the campaign, 49% of parents scored above a 3 on the 1 to 5 scale, suggesting just under half of parents believed the SFP role required skill. After the campaign launched, that percentage increased to 59% of parents — a 10 percentage-point increase in the number of parents who now believe the SFP role requires skill.

Therefore, compared to before the campaign, more K-12 parents surveyed believed SFPs are skilled and culinarily trained, and that they influence menus and have nutritional expertise.

This increase results in a powerful impact on the perception of California parents. When extrapolated across the entire state, this 10 percentage-point increase becomes a **potential perception increase among 1.1 million California K-12 parents** (based on the estimated population of 11 million parents). **Even a seemingly small shift can create enormous change.**²²

BEFORE THE CAMPAIGN

49%

of parents scored **above a 3** on the 1 to 5 scale, suggesting just **under half of parents** believed the SFP role required skill.

AFTER THE CAMPAIGN

59%

of parents scored **above a 3** on the 1 to 5 scale, a **10 percentage-point increase in the number of parents who now believe the SFP role requires skill.**

This 10 percentage-point increase represents a potential boost in perceptions by 1.1 MILLION California K-12 parents

The effectiveness of the Powered by School Food Professionals campaign becomes even more clear when compared to other perception-change campaigns:

- Researchers **regarded just a 1-percentage-point increase from baseline as impactful** in perception-change campaigns targeting COVID-19 vaccine attitudes.²³ These social media campaigns were measured across 800 randomized controlled trials, **a research method also employed by Powered by School Food Professionals, which achieved a 10 percentage-point increase in positive perceptions.**
- A social media campaign focused on inspiring positive attitudes of unbiased love showed a **14-percentage-point increase in positive attitudes over a six-year period.**²⁴ The Powered by School Food Professionals campaign **achieved a similar impact on parents of K-12 students in only a year.**

²² "When is a 'small effect' actually large and impactful?" Carey et al (January 2023)

²³ "Digital public health interventions at scale: The impact of social media advertising on beliefs and outcomes related to COVID vaccines." Athey et al (Nov. 2022)

²⁴ "The Ad Council and Amazon Aim to Inspire Acts of Love and Create a More Inclusive World in New Love Has No Labels Campaign," Ad Council (Feb. 2022)

The results below further highlight other ways the campaign changed K-12 parents' perceptions:

Comparing perceptions before and after Campaign Flight 1*

- **47% of parents surveyed at baseline said they “strongly agree”** that being a School Food Professional requires skill.
- **After the first flight of advertising, 53% of parents** in Group A (who received targeted digital campaign ads) **said they “strongly agree,”** while agreement among parents in Group B (not targeted with campaign ads) trended down from the baseline of 42%.
- Therefore, **perceptions increased 6 percentage points** after the first flight **among K-12 parents who were sent digital campaign content.**

***Note:** See Table 5.1 for details on what each campaign flight included.

Comparing perceptions before the campaign to after its full run

(i.e., before Flight 1 to after Flight 3)

- **51% of all parents** surveyed before the campaign believed that workers who plan, cook, and serve school meals **possess culinary training.**
- **After the campaign, 60% of parents who received targeted campaign ads believed that school food professionals possess culinary training,** compared to 52% who weren't targeted with ads.
- **This 8 percentage-point difference** in perceptions between Group A and Group B during Flight 3 is statistically significant, and is a **signal that the campaign shifted parents' perceptions of SFPs to be more akin to chefs than unskilled cafeteria workers.**

Other key findings

Parents see the positive impact of SFPs on students.

Before the campaign, parents responded that they felt SFPs have a positive effect on students' moods, physical well-being, and academic success. This belief remained high after the campaign. The campaign didn't change how strongly parents felt about the positive effects of school food on their children — they already saw these as important.

Parents want increased funding for SFPs.

Across all three surveys, K-12 parents said they want more financial support for SFPs. Nearly all parents (87%) strongly or somewhat support an increase in local funding.

The name “School Food Professional” has intrinsic persuasive value.

The survey questions used “School Food Worker” and “School Food Professional” to describe individuals who plan, cook, and serve school meals. Questions that referred to “School Food Professionals” saw a 10 percentage-point increase in perceptions of skill compared to the same question referring to “School Food Workers.”

The campaign's success was particularly impressive given the volatile media landscape, which included the 2024 presidential election and 2025 California wildfires. Positive perceptions also either held firm or increased.



Impact beyond the campaign

The Powered by School Food Professionals campaign successfully reached its primary goal: Shift how the California public, particularly the target audience of K-12 parents, views SFPs and appropriately understands, values, and supports SFPs' work.

The campaign's creative elements also helped participating SFPs themselves feel seen and empowered. They heard campaign ads on the radio and reached out to the campaign team to share their excitement. They proudly showed off their teams, kitchens, and meals during video shoots. And they stood on stage and accepted awards for their recipes. Influencer content featuring SFPs at work generated thousands of views per social media clip and exceedingly high engagement rates, as well.

This sense of pride and empowerment is particularly important given high job vacancy and turnover rates for SFPs. Three times as many California school food roles than teaching roles remained vacant during the 2022–23 school year; 13% of school food roles turned over in the same period.²⁵ Uplifting these roles carries the potential to reduce this turnover and decrease vacancies.

By all qualitative measures, the campaign saw great, positive reactions from both the public and SFPs. And while the perception change effects of these moments weren't quantitatively measured, they undoubtedly will play a long-term role in recruiting and retaining SFPs.



“

I am truly humbled to be part of a great cause and an important campaign for our state and community. **The message is sweet and short, yet it sums up the contribution of school meals to the overall well-being of students.”**

Stella Ndahura

Director of Nutrition Services
Azusa Unified School District

²⁵ “Gaps in California’s School Nutrition Services Staffing: Findings from the California School Nutrition Services Department Vacancy and Turnover Rates Survey, School Year 2022–2023,” Chef Ann Foundation et al (January 2024)

Lessons from the campaign

In May 2025, the Powered by School Food Professionals campaign came to a close. Members of the campaign team shared some important takeaways from this extensive collaboration.



Message consistency and repetition are key.

The campaign stayed grounded in a **primary message** across a range of media and channels: California School Food Professionals use their skill and creativity to improve student meals. While the message was creatively adapted to each platform to maximize impact, a consistent message and brand identity helped boost recall and credibility and reduce ad fatigue, especially for audiences who encountered the campaign multiple times.



Authenticity builds trust.

Pre-campaign research confirmed that **hearing directly from SFPs was the most effective way to shift perception**. The campaign prioritized real voices, using a documentary-style approach to pull back the curtain, let SFPs speak for themselves, and show parents the skilled work behind recipe development, menu planning, and cooking. The creative leaned on showing, not telling, as the most powerful validator of the message through videos, static visuals, or radio interviews.



Candor establishes credibility.

The campaign resisted any messages that risked overselling school food or suggesting every meal was scratch-cooked or locally sourced. Instead, the **campaign spoke truthfully about the current state of school food**, while showcasing examples of SFPs driving improvement. That transparency built credibility among K-12 parents, especially those whose kids might not yet receive the best meals. The campaign invited belief in a better future for school food, led by SFPs, by balancing realism with aspiration.



Invest financially *and* invest in relationships.

Budgets dictated how much the campaign team could spend on pre-campaign research, campaign assets, and overall campaign measurement. But **relationships**, such as the Chef Ann Foundation's relationships with SFPs and the Campaign Advisory Committee, and Fenton's relationship with the Univision TV network, **were just as important to the campaign's success**. This existing trust inspired school districts to open their kitchens to filming and fueled more successful content collaborations.



Video makes the messages real.

A desire for authentic messengers and a show-not-tell approach meant video was essential to validating the campaign's core message. Platforms like streaming television delivered video ads in non-skippable formats, capturing audiences' attention for stories of real SFPs using their full range of skills to make real meals for kids.



Influencers add reach and relatability.

Influencer advertising extended the campaign into organic networks often unreachable with traditional advertising. **These voices added new visibility and a grassroots dimension** that complemented the agency-produced creative. Their authenticity mirrored the campaign's broader strategy — to let trusted, relatable voices shift perception — and flipped the script by allowing parents to speak on behalf of SFPs as influencers of fellow parents.



Target additional audiences who may care about school food.

While the campaign specifically targeted parents of K-12 students, **it also resonated with people who were generally enthusiastic about food.** Farm-to-table fans and those who follow restaurant news engaged with the campaign's influencer content and paid ad placements on sites like Eater. Future campaigns should consider broadening the net to further target these audiences.



Use multiple methods of campaign measurement.

While the campaign team measured the effectiveness of digital advertising through a random sampling field experiment, the campaign also included non-measurable tactics that broaden the reach of the campaign efforts, like broadcast TV and creator partnerships or print articles.





Conclusion: Advancing the School Food Movement

CONCLUSION

School food operates in a vast ecosystem of interconnected systems and relationships that must work in lock-step to achieve the common goal of improving school meals. California's school food movement challenges districts to improve this ecosystem by serving more nutritious food, increasing scratch cooking, and incorporating more locally sourced and fresh ingredients into school meals.

These improvements are made possible by School Food Professionals (SFPs) — the people feeding millions of K-12 students every day. And change is much more difficult when parents and other stakeholders undervalue and misperceive the role of SFPs.

Projects like the Powered by School Food Professionals campaign are a crucial intervention in both workforce development and the larger school food movement. This campaign showed positive perception change about SFPs is achievable and necessary among K-12 parents, the audience with the most at stake. Campaign analysis revealed 1.1 million California parents potentially increased their positive perceptions of SFPs — 1.1 million people with the power to create change.

Greater awareness and appreciation for SFPs opens the door to higher wages, more training, and increased prominence for SFPs within their districts and communities. These changes require dedicated action — conversations between neighbors and at PTA meetings; introducing and passing tax levies and bonds; and lobbying local and national governments. Many happen over years, not days.

Everyone has a stake in school food and a reason to take action. Today's students are tomorrow's leaders, and school food gives them equitable access to nutrition that shapes their potential to learn and grow. Communities are direct beneficiaries, because school food supports local economies through relationships with farmers and distributors. And culinary schools and students who consider school food as a skilled, viable, and respectable career path gain the opportunity for professional fulfillment and deep community impact.

The campaign team thanks the state of California for this opportunity to uplift SFPs and play a part in the state's school food movement. While the Powered by School Food Professionals campaign has come to a close, work continues to support SFPs and advance national efforts to improve school nutrition. We hope others with an interest in improving school food find valuable insights here for forging their own campaigns, and invite any reader interested in partnering to reach out.

Improving school food starts with recognizing who makes it better — the skilled SFPs who plan, prepare, and cook school meals every day. We unlock broader change for the next generations of students, schools, and communities by elevating their role.

Together, we can all achieve a better state for school food — starting with skilled School Food Professionals.



“

When somebody ... asks me why they can't have in their school district what we have in our school district, **I typically say it's worth advocating, because there's change coming.**”

RJ Lane

District Chef at West Contra Costa Unified School District in Richmond, CA²⁶

²⁶ Interview, RJ Lane



California
Community
Colleges



FOOD FOR
CLIMATE
LEAGUE