

Chef Ann Foundation | Cohort 4

# Evaluation of the Get Schools Cooking Program Executive Summary

2020 - 2024



*Prepared for the  
Chef Ann Foundation*

CENTER FOR  
Nutrition &  
Health Impact



## Introduction

The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) is a federally assisted meal program that provides nutritionally balanced daily meals to students at low-cost or no-cost to students in K-12 schools, feeding 28.6 million students in 2023. To support growth and development, it is crucial for school meals to contribute to a high-quality diet for children and adolescents, especially considering school meals often contribute one-third to one-half of a child's daily caloric intake. Scratch cooking, or the practice of cooking school meals while incorporating fresh/whole ingredients, is one strategy to improve the health and quality of meals offered to students. Ensuring school food professionals have the resources, funding and support they need to provide fresh, healthy, delicious, cook-from-scratch meals that support the health of children and our planet is the mission of the Chef Ann Foundation (CAF). The Get Schools Cooking (GSC) program is one way CAF has been helping school districts from across the country achieve this goal.

Since 2016, CAF has been implementing GSC, providing selected districts with comprehensive Assessments of their program, strategic planning support, technical assistance (TA), and a Systems Assistance Grant (SAG) to guide them through a transition from a heat-and-serve model to one that is centered around scratch cooking. GSC is framed within CAF's 5 key areas of school food and the knowledge that these are the building blocks for a successful scratch-cooked program: **Food, Finance, Facilities, Human Resources** and **Marketing**.

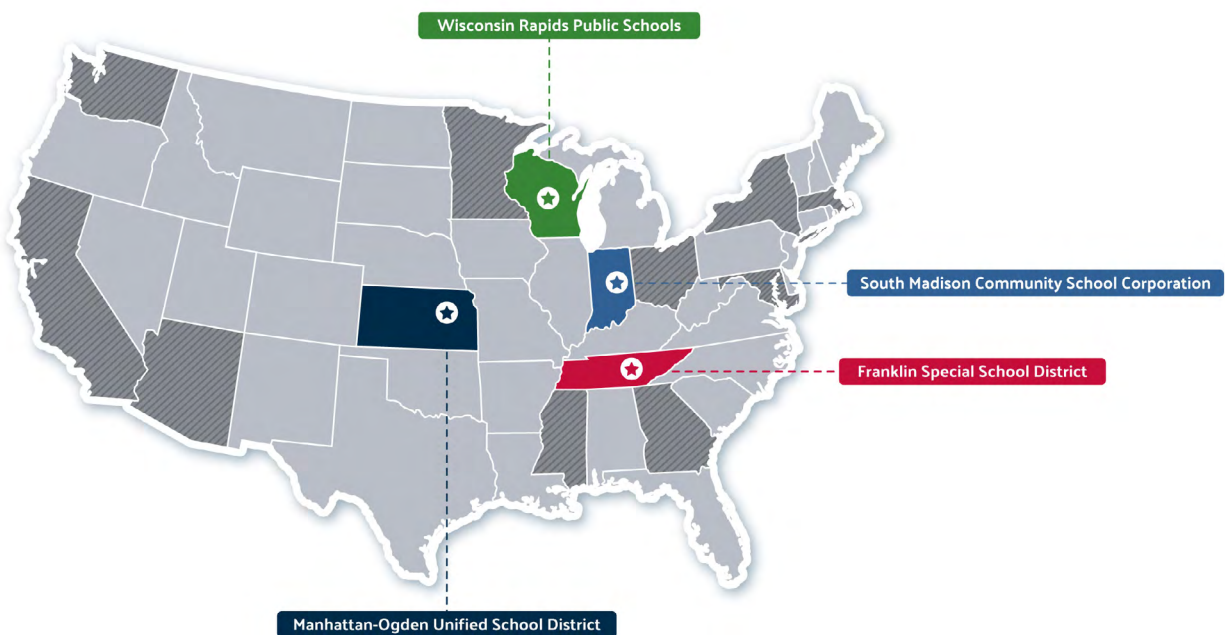
In 2019, CAF engaged the Center for Nutrition & Health Impact to design an evaluation of the GSC program to answer the following evaluation questions:

- 1 To what extent have districts implemented Assessment recommendations?
- 2 What are the facilitators and barriers to implementation of the recommendations?
- 3 What impact has implementing the Assessment recommendations had on changes to operations and the healthy school meal environment?
- 4 What impact did the Systems Assistance Grant have on the food service department's ability to meet Assessment recommendations?





The purpose of this report is to present key findings from the four districts that participated in Cohort 4 of GSC from 2020-2024: **Franklin Special School District (FSSD)**, **South Madison Community School Corporation (SMCSC)**, **Manhattan-Ogden Unified School District (MOUSD)**, and **Wisconsin Rapids Public Schools (WRPS)**.



## Methods

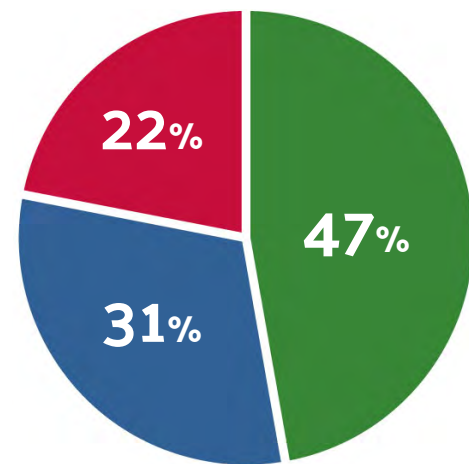
The evaluation used a mixed-methods approach, which included qualitative interviews with school food program (SFP) Directors and CAF Operators, as well as the collection of key procurement and operational quantitative data. Qualitative data were examined descriptively so the completeness of the Assessment recommendations could be reported and analyzed thematically to provide context for implementation successes, challenges, and future directions. A newly developed and tested measurement strategy, called the Healthy Meal Score (HMS), was also utilized to assess the healthy school meal environment for each district using procurement data, production records, recipes and product labels at pre/post time points, complementing the other data elements of the GSC evaluation.



## Key Findings

**Implementation Scores.** In total, CAF provided 301 recommendations across the categories of Food (n=110), Finance (n=74), Facilities (n=43), Human Resources (n=50), and Marketing (n=24) to the four participating SFPs. Across all SFPs, 142 (47%) recommendations have been completed, 94 (31%) were in progress, and 65 (22%) were incomplete at follow-up. Of the 65 incomplete recommendations, 48 were planned for the future and 17 were deemed by the SFPs to be either not applicable or infeasible.

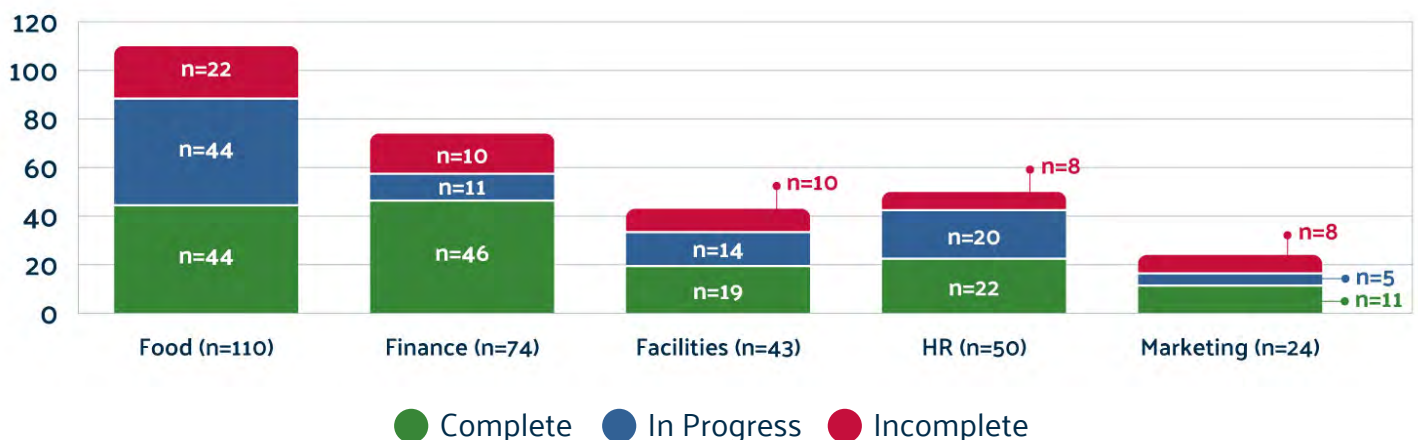
**Figure 1: Combined Recommendation Progress**



● Complete ● In Progress ● Incomplete

- The most recommendations were made in the Food category (n=110, 37%) and 44 (40%) of these recommendations were completed at follow-up.
- The most progress was made in the Finance category, with 46 of 74 recommendation completed (64%).
- The Food and Human Resources categories had the greatest percentage of recommendations still in progress at follow-up (40% each).
- The Marketing category had the largest percentage of incomplete recommendations at 8 of 24 (33%). Although all were planned for future completion.

**Figure 2: Implementation Progress by Category at Follow-up**



## Successes and Facilitators

Progress on the Assessment recommendations resulted in several wins across the 5 key areas of school food, as described below by both SFP Directors and CAF Operators. This qualitative data was further supported by the improvements in each of the three types of operational data that were collected: average daily participation (ADP), meals per labor hour (MPLH), and profit and loss.



**Food.** The SFPs developed menu cycles, eliminated heat-and-serve items, and introduced new scratch-cooked recipes, some of which became permanent components of those cycles. Breakfast programs were also strengthened through the elimination of sugary options and the incorporation of scratch-cooked recipes. SFPs implemented salad bars and reduced juice and flavored milk offerings.

**Finance.** Food service software is being purchased and/or better utilized to track inventory, scale standardized recipes, and analyze financial data. The Directors also reported an increase in the collaboration with district administration, resulting in their inclusion in budget development efforts and other related decision-making. Student meal participation and overall financial health of the SFPs increased.

**Facilities.** SFPs purchased new equipment, remodeled kitchens and one transitioned to a central kitchen model. Directors also worked to increase their department's sustainability efforts, such as eliminating cupping, offering condiments in bulk, and investing in reusable utensils and trays. These efforts were supported in part by the Systems Assistance Grant opportunity, which provided SFPs with \$35,000 each to purchase equipment and other items to support their strategic plan.

**Human Resources.** SFPs developed new culinary-focused positions, updated job descriptions and strengthened hiring processes by incorporating skills trainings. They also increased the amount of professional development available, including trainings focused on culinary skills, food safety, and equipment use. Directors examined their current labor structure, focused on increasing staff efficiency and made staffing adjustments accordingly. As a result, meals per labor hour (MPLH) increased across the cohort.

**Marketing.** SFPs updated their mission and vision statements and developed new logos. They increased their social media presence and built websites to highlight their new logos and cycle menus. Community engagement increased through marketing campaigns, and one SFP received local media coverage for their sustainability efforts.



## Challenges and Barriers

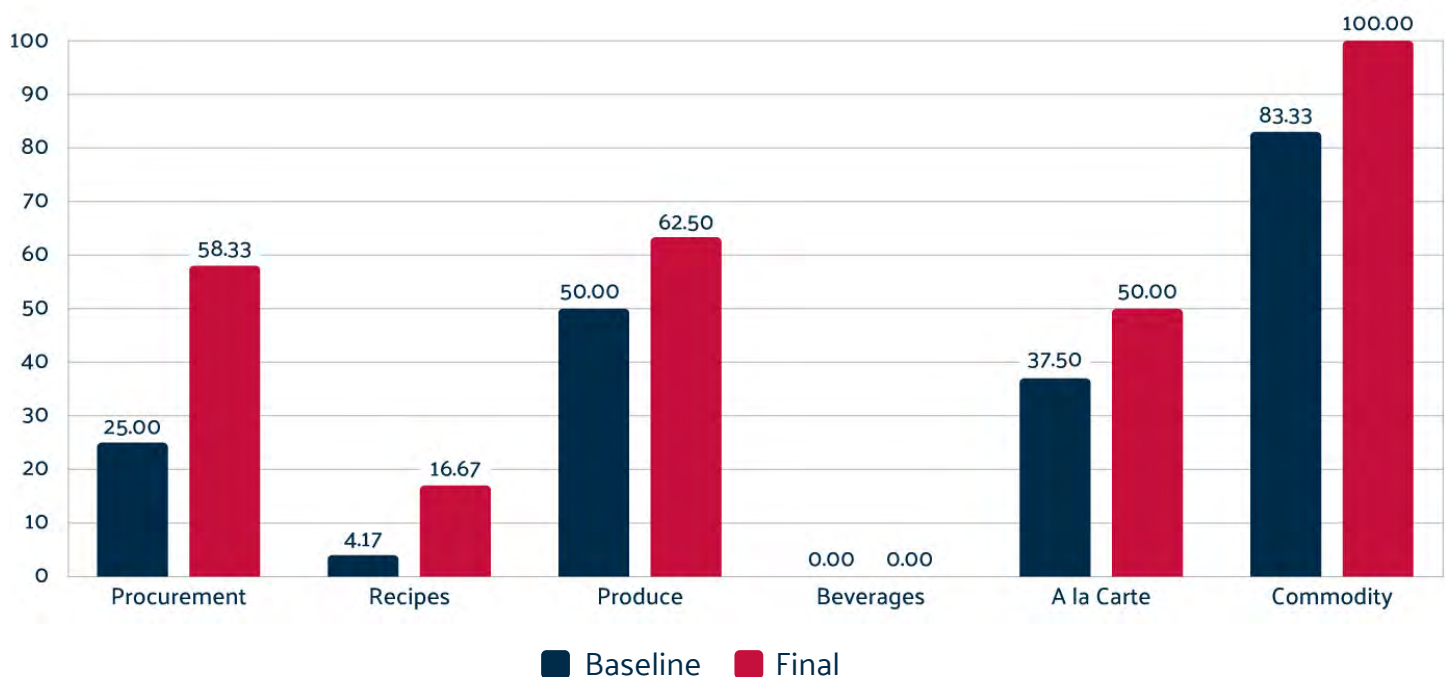
Directors shared the challenges they experienced during the GSC grant period, which prevented or delayed progress on the Assessment recommendations and reversed previous actions. An example included reverting to ingredients they had previously replaced due to the high cost or unavailability of alternate fresh/whole ingredients during COVID. Additional COVID-related difficulties involved staffing shortages, which made accomplishing recommendations such as increasing site-level supervision and training, scratch production, and strengthening the hiring process with skills testing very challenging. Other challenges were related to the amount of time needed to accomplish a recommendation, such as fully implementing new software. Budgetary limitations were also cited as a common barrier to completing some recommendations, specifically with regard to hiring and facilities updates.

## Healthy Meal Score (HMS)

All four of the SFPs showed increases in their scores, averaging 31.53 at baseline and 46.32 at follow-up, for an overall HMS percent increase of 47% over the 5-year program. A higher HMS score at follow-up indicates the districts have made improvements to their healthy school meal environment and increased scratch cooking practices. SFPs increased scores across all of the variables, except beverages, which remained zero at both time points, since no SFP eliminated flavored milk completely. The greatest percent increase in score was in recipes (300%), followed by the procurement variable (133%).

**14.79** POINT INCREASE  
from baseline  
HMS score increase of **47%**

**Figure 3: Cohort-Level HMS Pre/Post Scores by Variable**





## Discussion and Conclusion

The Assessment report and strategic plan provided the SFP's with a guide for how to strengthen their operation and prepare for a transition to scratch cooking. They received expert TA along the way and completed 142 of the 301 recommendations, resulting in a combined implementation score of 47%. This implementation score is slightly less than past GSC cohorts, which ranged from 55% to 59%. Although similar, it is reasonable to assume pandemic-related challenges contributed to the lower completion rate for Cohort 4.

Working through the Assessment recommendations resulted in several wins across the 5 key area of school food, such as a procurement strategy more focused on fresh/whole products, improved financial health of the department, new equipment to support scratch production, a more efficient labor structure, and new communication tools for building awareness of program achievements. These successes were further supported by HMS findings, which showed an increase in 5 of the 6 HMS variables, demonstrating improvement in the healthy school meal environment. From baseline to follow-up, HMS scores improved by 14.79 points to reach 46.32, a percent change of 47%. It will be interesting in the next Cohort evaluation to see if implementation and HMS scores align as they did for Cohort 4.

Throughout the five-year program, these SFPs experienced great successes across the 5 key areas of school food service, were armed with the tools to troubleshoot challenges that emerged and progressed steadily while keeping long-term goals in mind. Additionally, they navigated an ever-changing school food environment due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the residual implications since, while continuing to serve students nutritious meals.

Directors conveyed their satisfaction and appreciation for the technical assistance and grant funding they received through GSC, and emphasized how critical it was to the success of their transition toward a scratch-cook model.

