



The Scratch Cooking in Schools Solution

**A Policy Roadmap for Boosting Children's Health,
Learning Outcomes, Environmental Sustainability,
and Local Economies**

Published April 2025

Roadmap Contributors

Authors: MJ Kepner, Kathleen Mueller, Meghan Robertson
Reviewers: Mara Fleishman, Laura Smith, Lori Nelson, Reece Lyerly
Editor: Melissa Cipollone
Layout: Danielle Russell Design

© Chef Ann Foundation. All rights reserved.

This roadmap is available on Chef Ann Foundation's website at
chefannfoundation.org/policy-roadmap-report

For more information about this roadmap,
contact policy@chefannfoundation.org.

The Chef Ann Foundation works to ensure that school food professionals 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.

Table of Contents

4 Overview

6 Policy Priorities in the Five Key Areas of School Food Operations

6 Food

- 7 Procuring more local, regional, and values-aligned ingredients
- 7 Using cleaner ingredients
- 7 Reducing ultra-processed foods
- 9 Serving more plant-forward meals
- 9 Diversifying and demystifying federal school food purchasing
- 9 Reducing food and packaging waste

10 Facilities

- 10 Updating kitchen infrastructure and equipment

11 Finances

- 11 Providing free meals to all students
- 12 Removing a barrier to participating in the
Community Eligibility Provision
- 12 Increasing school meal reimbursement rates

13 Human Resources

- 13 Expanding federally registered healthy school food
apprenticeship programs
- 14 Fairly compensating school food professionals
- 14 Recognize the lunch room as a space for learning

15 Marketing

- 15 Rebranding School Food Jobs

15 More Information

16 References

Overview

Today, nearly 70% of a typical child's diet is made up of ultra-processed foods, which are associated with more than 30 health conditions.^{1,2} Many of these foods come from K–12 schools, which serve more than 30 million children breakfast and lunch every school day through the [School Breakfast Program](#) and [National School Lunch Program](#).³

To protect and improve children's health — and to access cascading academic, environmental, and economic benefits — schools must serve students more minimally processed meals cooked from scratch. While most schools want to serve their students more scratch-made meals, their ability to do so is significantly limited by systemic labor, financial, and infrastructure barriers, as well as public perceptions that devalue the critical role school food professionals play in supporting the well-being of our nation's children.⁴

The [Chef Ann Foundation](#) works to build and promote solutions for overcoming these systemic barriers. In addition to [administering programs](#) that have reached more than 16,000 schools enrolling more than 4.4 million children in all 50 states since 2009, we advocate for federal and state policies that collectively ladder up to increasing scratch cooking in K-12 schools. We also advocate for policies that ensure all students have access to healthy school meals.

This roadmap outlines the Chef Ann Foundation's policy priorities for increasing scratch cooking in schools; expanding access to healthy school meals; and unlocking the academic, environmental, economic, and social benefits scratch cooking offers children and communities.

What are **ULTRA-PROCESSED** foods?

While there is not currently a single formal definition of ultra-processed foods, these foods often share the following characteristics:

- Made using industrial techniques involving extracting substances from foods (often commodity crops like corn, soy, and wheat); chemically manipulating the extracted substances; and adding natural and artificial ingredients to improve flavor, extend shelf life, and enhance the appearance of the product
- Include many added ingredients like sugar, sodium, fats, preservatives, artificial dyes, artificial flavors, chemical stabilizers, and/or fillers (fillers improve the texture or increase the volume of a food)
- Artificially fortified with synthetically produced nutrients because naturally occurring vitamins and minerals are not present or are no longer intact due to processing

BENEFITS of Scratch Cooking in Schools

Scratch cooking protects children's health

When foods are highly processed, they lose most of their nutritional value and need to be infused with synthetically manufactured nutrients to adhere to [USDA's dietary requirements](#) for K-12 schools.⁵ Cooking from scratch with minimally processed ingredients lets kids consume essential nutrients in their natural, more bioavailable form as part of a complex whole food; eat more fiber and protein; and consume fewer preservatives, fillers, food dyes, sodium, and added sugars.⁶ Further, by continuously exposing kids to fresh, scratch-made meals, schools can cultivate positive eating habits for life — improving long-term public health outcomes and decreasing health care costs associated with diet-related conditions and disease.

Scratch cooking improves student behavior and academic outcomes

Serving students scratch-made meals correlates with fewer tardies, absences, behavioral problems, and disciplinary suspensions.⁷⁻⁸ Research also shows that a healthy, balanced diet provides children the essential vitamins, minerals, fats, and proteins they need for optimal cognitive function.⁹ Scratch-made meals offer better-quality diets, which are linked to improved grades and test scores, increased work capacity, and longer attention spans.¹⁰⁻¹²

Scratch cooking bolsters local economies

School food in the U.S. is a \$23.5 billion industry.¹³ Because of its sheer scale, the school food sector has an outsized impact on shaping the nation's food system. When schools are equipped to serve scratch-made meals, they can source more whole products from local and regional farms and other food businesses. For every dollar spent on farm-to-school programs, an extra \$0.60 – \$2.16 is generated in regional economic activity.¹⁴ For farmers, fishers, and ranchers, selling to schools can provide a steady income stream, diversify their markets, and offer reliable sales and fair pay.¹⁵

Scratch cooking supports environmental sustainability

Schools can drastically reduce food and packaging waste by sourcing more whole ingredients instead of pre-packaged products.¹⁶ They can also procure more organic and sustainably grown or raised ingredients from farms that utilize best practices for protecting soil, air, and water quality. Schools can also incorporate more fruits, vegetables, legumes, and whole grains into meals, which are less environmentally intensive to produce and provide important health benefits.¹⁷ Further, when schools cook meals from scratch, they can source ingredients from local and regional farms, reducing transportation emissions.

Scratch cooking supports more student-inspired menus

Instead of limiting menu options to pre-packaged offerings, scratch cooking allows schools to cater menus to their student population. This can include using more traditional ingredients and recipes that reflect students' collective heritages, which can further enhance social learning and contribute to fostering a welcoming and integrated student community.¹⁸⁻¹⁹

Policy Priorities in the Five Key Areas of School Food Operations

Our policy priorities are organized according to the five key areas of school food operations: **food, facilities, finances, human resources, and marketing**. Policies should support school food programs in all of these five key areas to achieve lasting solutions to improving the quality of school food.

Food

Food Policy Priorities	
Procure more local, regional, and values-aligned ingredients	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Increase farm-to-school and local food for schools funding• Establish a permanent USDA local procurement program• Prioritize purchasing U.S.-sourced protein and produce• Remove requirements for awarding contracts to the lowest bidder• Pass the following federal bills: Farm to School Act; Local School Foods Expansion Act; and Local Procurement Act
Use cleaner ingredients	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Better regulate additives in school foods• Pass the federal Safe School Meals Act
Reduce ultra-processed foods	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Develop a formal definition for ultra-processed foods• Pass the Scratch Cooked Meals for Students Act
Serve more plant-forward meals	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Create a grant program that helps schools serve more plant-forward meals• Pass the federal Healthy Future Students and Earth Pilot Program Act
Diversify and demystify federal school food purchasing	Accurately track and publicly disclose comprehensive food supply chain data for USDA Foods and DoD Fresh
Reduce food and packaging waste	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Create a USDA grant program that helps schools implement food waste measurement, prevention, education, and reduction projects• Pass the School Food Recovery Act

Procure more local, regional, and values-aligned ingredients

Using more locally and regionally procured ingredients in school food has a variety of benefits. First, sourcing locally allows schools to use more fresh fruits, vegetables, meat, dairy, and other minimally processed food products in their meals, which improves the quality of meals and encourages scratch cooking.²⁰⁻²⁵ When schools source local or regional ingredients, they can also reduce the amount of ultra-processed foods they serve,²⁶⁻²⁹ use more culturally affirming ingredients,³⁰⁻³² and reduce the amount of food and packaging waste they generate.³³⁻³⁴

We advocate for funding that strengthens local supply chains through school-producer partnerships, such as the [Local Food for Schools Cooperative Agreement Program](#), and for federal legislation to increase local and regional procurement in schools. This includes the [Farm to School Act](#), which would increase farm to school funding; the [Local School Foods Expansion Act](#), which would direct the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to establish a permanent local produce procurement program for both states and school food programs; and the [Local Procurement Act](#), which would ensure that the USDA prioritizes purchasing U.S.-produced meat and poultry as well as locally grown fruits and vegetables, plus it would ensure contracts awarded by the USDA prioritize small and mid-sized farms by not only awarding contracts to the lowest bidder.

Beyond procuring ingredients from local or regional sources, schools can also seek to purchase *values-aligned* products and ingredients. Many schools would like to source ingredients from businesses or vendors that align with schools' expressed social, economic, and environmental values. For example, these values might include supporting animal welfare, increasing supply chain transparency, advancing fair labor practices, purchasing products from

small local businesses, supporting farmers who utilize organic and sustainable production methods, and so on. By sourcing values-aligned ingredients, school food programs can adhere to the values that are important to their students and their community. Schools' efforts to procure more values-aligned foods could further be supported through federal and state investment.

Use cleaner ingredients

Current Food and Drug Administration (FDA) guidelines allow businesses and farms to sell foods and products containing additives with proven health risks to both adults and children.³⁵ While the FDA has made incremental progress toward removing harmful additives from the U.S. food supply — such as by announcing it will [ban Red Dye 3](#) in January 2025 — we are advocating for food additives to be significantly better regulated.

At the federal level, the [Safe School Meals Act](#) would place limits on heavy metals, ban certain pesticide residues, trigger the safety reassessment of food additives — including artificial food dyes — that have been linked with health harms, and ban the use of certain chemicals in school meal food packaging. In line with these federal interventions, California recently passed the [California School Food Safety Act](#), which prohibits public schools from serving food that contains the synthetic food dyes Red 40, Yellow 5, Blue 1, Blue 2 and Green 3.

Reduce ultra-processed foods

There is currently no formal definition for ultra-processed foods. Without a formal definition, governments cannot create policies and guidelines to effectively regulate them, despite evidence that diets heavy in the characteristics typically attributed to ultra-processed foods lead to excess calorie consumption and weight gain when compared to diets that do not contain ultra-processed foods.³⁶

Because current USDA dietary guidelines are narrowly focused on the amount of nutrients in foods – without regard to whether or not foods contain nutrients in their naturally occurring form or are synthetically fortified – companies that sell products to schools are allowed to formulate food products that technically meet current nutritional requirements despite being ultra-processed.³⁷⁻³⁸ Currently, there is no consensus among experts for what ultra-processed food guidelines should look like, and the level of ultra-processed foods that make up the U.S. food system today is unknown.

We are advocating for the National Institutes of Health and the USDA to collaborate on more research into the effects of ultra-processed foods,

particularly on children; collaborate on research that will determine the prevalence of ultra-processed foods in school meals; and ultimately provide guidance on ultra-processed foods to school meal programs.

To reduce the amount of ultra-processed foods in school meals, school food programs will need to transition to an operational model that enables them to cook more meals from scratch. This is a complex process that can take years. We are therefore advocating for the [Scratch Cooked Meals for Students Act](#), which would launch a grant program under the USDA to help schools transition from primarily serving ultra-processed foods to serving more scratch-cooked meals.

Scratch Cooked Meals for Students ACT

In 2024, Congresswoman Jahana Hayes (CT-05), Congressman Brian Fitzpatrick (PA-01), and Congresswoman Julia Brownley (CA-26) reintroduced the [Scratch Cooked Meals for Students Act](#). The Act would establish a pilot grant program under the U.S. Department of Agriculture to help K–12 schools transition from serving students pre-packaged, ultra-processed foods to serving more meals cooked from scratch with fresh, whole, and minimally processed ingredients.

Schools that participate in the pilot grant program would be awarded funding for:

- Purchasing equipment and supplies needed for commercial-scale scratch cooking
- Providing culinary and school food operations training for school food professionals
- Developing menus that adhere to USDA nutritional requirements and utilize scratch-cooking techniques

This grant program is modeled after the Chef Ann Foundation's [Get Schools Cooking](#) program, which has helped 27 districts in 21 states serve more scratch-cooked meals to more than 180,000 students since 2019.

“School districts across the country should have the opportunity to be serving fresh and nutritious food to students, rather than pre-assembled and processed meals. I’m proud to co-sponsor the bipartisan Scratch Cooked Meals for Students Act to encourage school districts to expand scratch cooking practices. This approach would not only improve student health and wellness, but also increase economic activity by procuring fresh ingredients from local farms around participating schools.” – Congressman Brian Fitzpatrick

Serve more plant-forward meals

Plant-forward meals include more fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and legumes, but do not entirely eliminate animal proteins and other animal products. Plant-forward meals align with current U.S. dietary guidelines that recommend increasing fiber intake and diversifying sources of protein.³⁹⁻⁴⁰ Incorporating more plant-forward meals into school menu cycles offer a variety of preventative health benefits, including reducing the risk of coronary heart disease, preventing type 2 diabetes, and reducing cancer risk when compared with a diet that includes heavy consumption of red and processed meat.⁴¹⁻⁴⁵

Plant-forward diets are also more environmentally sustainable. These diets are associated with less water usage, less agricultural land requirements, and lower greenhouse gas emissions compared to animal-based diets – livestock farming accounts for nearly 60% of agricultural greenhouse gas emissions while providing only 18% of global calories.⁴⁶⁻⁴⁷ Shifting toward plant-based diets can free agricultural land for reforestation and biodiversity conservation.⁴⁸

Further, as more students favor plant-forward meals due to individual dietary preferences or needs, plant-forward meals can increase student participation in school lunch programs.⁴⁹⁻⁵⁰ We are advocating for increasing whole, plant-based proteins in school meals and for passing the [Healthy Future Students and Earth Pilot Program Act](#), which would create a grant program that would help school districts provide healthy, plant-based meals and plant-based milk options for students.

Diversify and demystify federal school food purchasing

The federal government spends approximately \$9 billion on food and beverages each year, with the USDA and the Department of Defense

(DoD) accounting for 90% of those purchases.⁵¹ This translates to immense economic power that could be utilized to advance social, health, and economic goals. Diversifying federal food contracts could provide schools more consistent access to local and organic foods and decrease federal purchases of ultra-processed foods, while bolstering regional economies and supporting students' access to healthy food.⁵²

We are advocating for the federal government to more accurately track and publicly disclose comprehensive food supply chain data. Schools should be able to see where they are getting their food from when they participate in federal school food purchasing programs, like [USDA Foods](#) or [DoD Fresh](#), so that they can adjust how they procure food to align with required wellness policies set by school food authorities. This could also be done on the state level similar to the partnership between the California Department of Education and [Friends of the Earth](#), which allowed California schools to procure organic produce through DoD Fresh.⁵³

Another solution to diversifying and demystifying federal school food purchasing is for USDA to create a values-aligned school meals incentive fund program (learn more about “values-aligned” meals on page 7), which would provide funds and technical assistance to help schools purchase more values-aligned products as outlined by the [Federal Good Food Purchasing Coalition](#). Ultimately, the federal government should be working with schools to leverage the economic power of federal food purchasing to meet federal public health and nutrition goals.

Reduce food and packaging waste

Approximately 530,000 tons of food are wasted by schools each year, generating large amounts of methane — a greenhouse gas with more global warming potential than carbon dioxide — and wasting the natural and non-renewable resources

that went into producing that food.⁵⁴ Further, when schools rely on serving pre-packaged food, more plastic and other packaging waste ends up in landfills.⁵⁵

Preparing more meals from scratch enables schools to significantly reduce food and packaging waste, using cooking techniques like batch cooking and using whole ingredients. Schools can also drastically cut down on the waste they generate by transitioning away from single-use disposables in cafeterias – including trays, cutlery, and servingware – to reusable alternatives. For example, many schools across the country have successfully switched from

serving milk in single-serve containers to serving it using bulk dispensers and reusable cups. (In 2023, the Chef Ann Foundation launched its [Bulk Milk](#) program, which provides equipment and technical assistance grants to help schools switch to serving milk in bulk.)

One piece of federal legislation that seeks to address food waste is the [School Food Recovery Act](#), which aims to reduce food waste in schools by creating a grant program under the USDA to help school districts implement food waste measurement, prevention, education, and reduction projects.

Facilities

Facility Policy Priorities

Update kitchen infrastructure and equipment

- Offer more kitchen infrastructure and equipment grants to schools
- Pass the [School Food Modernization Act](#)

Research shows that lacking proper kitchen infrastructure and equipment prevents schools from implementing healthy eating programs.⁵⁶⁻⁵⁷ Schools need a wide variety of production-scale kitchen tools and equipment, as well as appropriate kitchen facilities, to prepare, cook, and serve hundreds or thousands of fresh student meals a day. When schools do not have access to appropriate infrastructure and production cooking equipment, they are typically forced to rely on serving students pre-packaged, ultra-processed, “heat-and-serve” foods.

While infrastructure improvements are often needed before kitchen upgrades in schools — equipment is unusable if it doesn’t fit in the kitchen — both are key to increasing scratch

cooking.⁵⁸ With appropriate infrastructure and equipment, schools can prepare and cook the raw ingredients they procure, and can more easily source ingredients from local farms.⁵⁹

We are advocating for both federal and state agencies to offer more kitchen infrastructure and equipment grants to schools. At the federal level, the School Food Modernization Act would address the lack of infrastructure needed to help schools transition to cooking more scratch-made meals. The bill would also create financial incentives through loan guarantees and grant programs to help schools begin or expand scratch cooking, improve student health, and implement environmentally sustainable food practices.

Finances

Finances Policy Priorities	
Provide free meals to all students	Pass state and federal universal free school meals legislation (Healthy School Meals for All)
Remove a barrier to participating in the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP)	Increase the CEP multiplier from 1.6 to 2.5
Increase school meal reimbursement rates	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase school breakfast reimbursement by 28 cents • Increase school lunch reimbursement by 45 cents • Review and, if needed, adjust meal reimbursement rates annually

Provide free meals to all students

Federal and state governments can remedy child food insecurity and improve children’s health outcomes by passing universal free school meals – also known as [Healthy School Meals for All](#) – legislation, which would provide free, healthy meals for all students regardless of their households’ income level.⁶⁰

In addition to reducing food insecurity and improving children’s health, enacting universal school meals makes economic sense. Diet-related diseases impose a significant financial burden on the U.S. health care system – a 2019 study estimated that unhealthy diets account for approximately \$50 billion annually in health care costs associated with heart disease, stroke, and diabetes.⁶¹ Additionally, chronic diseases linked to poor diets, such as cardiovascular diseases, cancer, diabetes, and obesity, are prevalent and costly, accounting for a substantial portion of health care expenditures.⁶² Furthermore, the

economic impact of diet-related chronic diseases, including direct medical costs and indirect costs like lost productivity, has been estimated to be as high as \$1 trillion annually.⁶³ With the majority of U.S. children already receiving 50% of their daily caloric intake from school meals, many of these financial burdens can be mitigated by investing in universal healthy meals for all students.

Universal school meals would also reduce social stigma by putting an end to identifying students in cafeterias according to their households’ income level. It would further refute the idea among students that only students from low-income households receive free meals, which would in turn increase overall student participation in school meals, resulting in more meal reimbursement revenue to support improving the quality of meals.⁶⁴

Healthy School Meals for All (universal free meals) also eases administrative burdens for schools and eliminates the strain of school meal debt.⁶⁵ Under

these programs, every student is automatically enrolled in school meals, which means schools do not need to enact cumbersome and time-consuming financial procedures so they can focus on what's most important: feeding all students healthy meals.

We are advocating for Healthy School Meals for All legislation to be enacted in every state – and ultimately nationwide to ensure equity of access and efficiency with funding and standards – and for school food programs to have the resources they need to ensure that these meals are healthy and scratch cooked. This legislation has been introduced in both the U.S. [House](#) and [Senate](#), and we are working alongside our national partners on the Food Research and Action Center's [Healthy School Meals for All Coalition](#) to advance it.

Remove a barrier to participating in the Community Eligibility Provision

The [Community Eligibility Provision \(CEP\)](#), an existing federal option that allows qualifying schools and school districts to offer free meals to all students, can serve as a pathway toward enacting universal free school meals (Healthy School Meals for All). Schools participating in the federal CEP program saw increased meal participation, increased revenue from federal meal reimbursements, and increased average daily attendance among students.⁶⁶⁻⁶⁷ Participating schools also reported reduced stigma toward low-income students, a greater ability to provide healthy scratch-cooked meals for students, and eliminated school meal debt.⁶⁸⁻⁷⁰

Despite these benefits, only 85% of eligible school districts participate in the CEP program. This is largely because the program is not an affordable option for many schools due to the low “Identified Student Percentage (ISP) multiplier”.⁷¹⁻⁷³ ISP – the percentage of students

participating in social safety net programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) – is multiplied by 1.6 to determine the percentage of meals reimbursed at the federal rate for free meals. Increasing the multiplier would increase the percentage of meals reimbursed at the free rate, making CEP participation financially viable for more eligible schools and districts.⁷⁴

In line with several proposed pieces of legislation in the U.S. [House](#) and [Senate](#), we are advocating for increasing the CEP multiplier from 1.6 to 2.5 to make the program a financially viable option for more school food programs.

Increase school meal reimbursement rates

The current federal school meal reimbursement rate does not adequately cover food and labor operating costs for school meal programs, which can lead to issues such as the need to rely on more processed, pre-packaged food and more difficulty recruiting and retaining skilled school food professionals.⁷⁵ The federal school lunch reimbursement rate is around \$4.50, however, the cost of producing a school lunch can often rise above the reimbursement amount.⁷⁶ The average cost of producing a school breakfast is \$2.72, but the federal free breakfast subsidy is only \$1.88.⁷⁷

In line with proposed legislation in the U.S. House and Senate, we are advocating for at least a permanent 28-cent increase in breakfast reimbursement and a 45-cent increase in lunch reimbursement, that would be adjusted annually.

Human Resources

Human Resources Policy Priorities	
Expand federally registered healthy school food apprenticeship programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expand the federally registered Healthy School Food Pathway apprenticeship program to all states • Invest in school food workforce training
Fairly compensate school food professionals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase wages and benefits for school food professionals through a portion of proposed increases for federal meal reimbursement rates • Provide affordable health coverage for school food professionals • Offer stipends to school food professionals for completing comprehensive training programs and remaining in the school food workforce • Pass the federal SCHOOL Professionals Act
Recognize the lunchroom as a space for learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Designate meal time as curriculum time for learning positive eating habits for a healthy life • Recognize that school food professionals can be an integral part of the education system

Expand federally registered healthy school food apprenticeship programs

We must invest in comprehensively training new and existing school food professionals so this workforce possesses the knowledge, skills, and experience to transition from serving students primarily ultra-processed meals to serving fresher, healthier, scratch-cooked meals.

Government-registered apprenticeships are a tried-and-true approach to workforce training. The Chef Ann Foundation's [Healthy School Food Pathway](#) is the only state and federally registered apprenticeship program designed by

and for school food professionals. Consisting of a Pre-Apprenticeship, Apprenticeship, and Fellowship, Healthy School Food Pathway helps aspiring, beginner, and experienced school food professionals gain the skills they need to chart a successful career in K–12 scratch-cook meal operations through paid, on-the-job learning.

As of this roadmap's publication, the Healthy School Food Pathway program is currently active in California and Colorado, and is planned to launch in Arizona, New York, Virginia, and potentially other states within the next several years. We are advocating for federal and state funding to expand Healthy School Food Pathway to all states.

Fairly compensate school food professionals

Hiring and retaining staff is a persistent and significant challenge in school food.⁷⁸ Nearly 95% of school food directors cite challenges with labor, which in turn can cause barriers to school food programs having the resources to provide their students more freshly prepared meals.⁷⁹

To both address labor shortages and expand scratch cooking in schools, improving wages and benefits for school food professionals is essential.⁸⁰ While school food professionals play a vital role in shaping the health of children and our nation, they earn a median hourly wage of \$12.78, which has slightly declined since 2008-12. Their pay is lower than other food service workers (\$13.08) and significantly below classified staff (\$16.98) and institutional cafeteria workers (\$16.01).⁸¹ Additionally, full-time employment is often not made available to school food professionals in many school districts.⁸²⁻⁸³ A study researching Wisconsin's school food workforce revealed that because of their low annual wages, most of Wisconsin's school food workers are "cost-burdened," meaning they spend more than 30% of their income on rent or a mortgage payment. The study also shed light on how low pay creates a major imbalance in school food service staffing: with 58% of schools struggling to hire non-management food service employees, only 16% face similar challenges when hiring management positions, which are more likely to have full-time hours and comprehensive benefits. This level of staffing shortages and high turnover make it difficult to maintain meal quality.⁸⁴

Because of low wages and lack of benefits, school food professionals are more likely to rely on support from social safety net programs and work additional jobs at a higher rate than other workers.⁸⁵⁻⁸⁶ Many positions lack benefits because they are part-time or because they require schools to pay full price for insurance during the summer months, leading to many school food professionals

not having coverage or losing it between school years.⁸⁷ Investing in the school food workforce through improved wages and benefits will create more opportunities for upward career mobility, improve school meal quality and child nutrition, and put more dollars into local economies.⁸⁸

We are advocating for increasing compensation for school food professionals by increasing the federal school meal reimbursement rate and earmarking a portion of that increase for compensating school food professionals. At the federal level, the [SCHOOL Professionals Act](#) would fix a loophole preventing contracted school support staff — like school food professionals — from accessing affordable health care coverage. At the state level, the Chef Ann Foundation and partners like the [California School Employees Association](#) are advocating for creating a state Post-Apprenticeship Retention Program, which would provide applicants a \$25,000 incentive award paid over five years if they remain in the school food workforce as well as complete comprehensive training in scratch cooking and school food operations management.

Recognize the lunch room as a space for learning

Learning doesn't stop at the cafeteria doors. Children's dietary habits are cultivated in school cafeterias, and school food professionals play a critical role in shaping these habits for a lifetime. We are advocating for revising federal education legislation to define school meal time as curriculum time, which would both recognize the value of teaching students healthy eating habits and how school food professionals contribute to influencing dietary health and wellbeing.

Additionally, defining school meal time as curriculum time would better integrate cafeterias and classrooms while diversifying the role of school food professionals, making them an integral part of the education system.

Marketing

Marketing Policy Priorities

Rebrand school food jobs

Execute campaigns that seek to positively shift perceptions about the school food workforce and demonstrate the inherent value of these roles in shaping the health of our children and nation

Rebrand school food jobs

Innovative school food professionals across the country are skillfully and creatively reimagining what school food can and should be. Yet, long-held misconceptions about the people who work in school food continue to undervalue their inherently important contributions.

We partnered with the state of California to change this. In 2023, we conducted extensive audience research to lay the groundwork for our [Powered by School Food Professionals campaign](#), which seeks

to uplift the school food workforce and showcase the myriad of ways in which they are reimagining school food.

We are advocating for more states to conduct public education campaigns that seek to demonstrate the critical roles school food professionals hold, and how the career path can be mission-driven and rewarding. These efforts not only draw more people to the career and can help address industry labor shortages, they can shore up support for better compensation.

**More
information**

For more information about the Chef Ann Foundation's policy and advocacy work, visit our [website](#).

For more information about our policy priorities, contact policy@chefannfoundation.org.

References

1. Wang, L., Martínez Steele, E., Du, M., Pomeranz, J. L., O'Connor, L. E., Herrick, K. A., Luo, H., Zhang, X., Mozaffarian, D., & Zhang, F. F. (2021). Trends in consumption of ultraprocessed foods among US youths aged 2-19 years, 1999-2018. *JAMA*, 326(6), 519-530. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.2021.10238>
2. MacMillan, C. (2024, July 10). *Ultraprocessed foods: Are they bad for you?* Yale Medicine. <https://www.yalemedicine.org/news/ultraprocessed-foods-bad-for-you>
3. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service. (2022). *The National School Lunch Program*. <https://fns-prod.azureedge.us/sites/default/files/resource-files/NSLPFactSheet.pdf>
4. Creel, K. (2024, May 3). *2024 National School Nutrition Association survey highlights the growing farm to school trend, importance of school meals for all*. National Farm to School Network. <https://www.farmtoschool.org/news-and-articles/2024-national-school-nutrition-association-survey-highlights-the-growing-farm-to-school-trend-importance-of-school-meals-for-all>
5. Martini, D., Godos, J., Bonaccio, M., Vitaglione, P., & Grosso, G. (2021). Ultra-Processed Foods and Nutritional Dietary Profile: A Meta-Analysis of Nationally Representative Samples. *Nutrients*, 13(10), 3390. <https://doi.org/10.3390/nu13103390>
6. Melse-Boonstra A. (2020). Bioavailability of Micronutrients From Nutrient-Dense Whole Foods: Zooming in on Dairy, Vegetables, and Fruits. *Frontiers in nutrition*, 7, 101. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fnut.2020.00101>
7. Center for Ecoliteracy. (2014). *Making the case for healthy, freshly prepared school meals*. https://www.ecoliteracy.org/sites/default/files/uploads/shared_files/CEL_making_the_case_research.pdf
8. California Food Policy Advocates. (2016, December 6). *School nutrition and academic achievement: Research summary*. Nourish California. https://nourishca.org/ChildNutrition/Education%20Reform/CFPA_LCAP_Research%20Summary%20and%20Overview_FINAL_16_12_06.pdf
9. See reference #8
10. National Farm to School Network. (n.d.). *Benefits of farm to school*. https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/5c469df2395cd53c3d913b2d/611027419232d281ad2f51ff_BenefitsFactSheet.pdf
11. See reference #7
12. Anderson, M. L., Gallagher, J., & Ritchie, E. R. (2017, April 13). *How the quality of school lunch affects students' academic performance*. Brookings. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/how-the-quality-of-school-lunch-affects-students-academic-performance/>
13. School Nutrition Association. (n.d.). *School meal statistics*. <https://schoolnutrition.org/about-school-meals/school-meal-statistics/#production-costs>
14. National Farm to School Network. (n.d.). *Benefits of farm to school*. Retrieved from https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/5c469df2395cd53c3d913b2d/611027419232d281ad2f51ff_BenefitsFactSheet.pdf
15. National Farm to School Network. (2024, October 1). *Press release—Celebrating National Farm to School Month 2024*. <https://www.farmtoschool.org/news-and-articles/press-release-celebrating-national-farm-to-school-month-2024>
16. World Wildlife Fund. (n.d.). *Food waste warriors*. <https://www.worldwildlife.org/stories/food-waste-warriors>
17. Friends of the Earth. (2024, November). *Miscellaneous school food policy materials*. https://foe.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Misc_School_Food_Policy_Materials.pdf
18. Weaver-Hightower, M.B. (2022). *Rethinking School Food: Innovative Programs and a Progressive Vision*. In: *Unpacking School Lunch*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-97288-2_6
19. Richardson, Troy A. "At the garden gate: Community building through food: Revisiting the critique of "food, folk and fun" in multicultural education." *The Urban Review* 43 (2011): 107-123.
20. Colorado Department of Education. (2022). *HB-1132 Local Food Purchasing Program 2022 Legislative Report*.
21. Colorado Department of Education. (2023). *HB-1132 Local Food Purchasing Program 2023 Legislative Report*.

22. Izumi, B. T., Pickus, H., Contesti, A., Dawson, J., & Bersamin, A. (2015). Serving fish in school meals: perceptions of school nutrition professionals in Alaska. *The Journal of Child Nutrition & Management*, 39(1), n1. <https://schoolnutrition.org/journal/spring-2015-serving-fish-in-schoolmeals-perceptions-of-school-nutrition-professionals-in-alaska/>
23. McKee VanSlooten, E., Shields-Cutler, N., Pesch, R., & Tuck, B. (2023). Minnesota Department of Agriculture Farm to School Grant Evaluation. Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy. <https://www.iatp.org/documents/mda-farm-schoolgrant-evaluation>
24. McManus, M., & Matts, C. (2023). Amplifying Impact with More Michigan Farms and Foods: 10 Cents a Meal 2021–2022 Evaluation Results. Michigan State University Center for Regional Food Systems. foodsystems.msu.edu/resources/10-cents-a-meal-2021-2022-evaluation-results
25. Washington State Department of Agriculture. (2024). WSDA Farm to School Purchasing Grant Data from SY 2021-2022
26. See reference #21
27. See reference #23
28. See reference #5
29. Washington State Department of Agriculture. (2023). WSDA Farm to School Purchasing Grant January 2022 - August 2022. Author. https://cms.agr.wa.gov/WSDAKentico/Documents/Pubs/FINAL_078-FarmToSchoolPurchasingGrantImpactInfographic-WEB.pdf
30. See reference #22
31. Kruse, D. (2014, March 7). FY 14 Nutritional Alaskan Foods in Schools Report (Covering Quarters 1 and 2). Alaska Department of Commerce, Community, & Economic Development. Retrieved via email from Alaska Community Economic Development Community Aid and Accountability Office [CAA@Alaska.gov]
32. See reference #25
33. See reference #29
34. See reference #25
35. U.S. Food and Drug Administration. (n.d.). *Generally recognized as safe (GRAS)*. <https://www.fda.gov/food/food-ingredients-packaging/generally-recognized-safe-gras>
36. Hall, K. D., Ayuketah, A., Brychta, R., Cai, H., Cassimatis, T., Chen, K. Y., Chung, S. T., Costa, E., Courville, A., Darcey, V., Fletcher, L. A., Forde, C. G., Gharib, A. M., Guo, J., Howard, R., Joseph, P. V., McGehee, S., Ouwerkerk, R., Raisingier, K., Rozga, I., ... Zhou, M. (2019). Ultra-Processed Diets Cause Excess Calorie Intake and Weight Gain: An Inpatient Randomized Controlled Trial of Ad Libitum Food Intake. *Cell metabolism*, 30(1), 67–77.e3. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cmet.2019.05.008>
37. Financial Times. (2024, May 1). “Deny, denounce, delay”: The battle over the risk of ultra-processed foods. *Ars Technica*. <https://arstechnica.com/science/2024/05/deny-denounce-delay-the-battle-over-the-risk-of-ultra-processed-foods/>
38. Nestle, M. (2024, June 5). *Dietary guidelines II. Where is rigorous nutrition research?* Food Politics. <https://www.foodpolitics.com/2024/06/dietary-guidelines-ii-where-is-rigorous-nutrition-research/>
39. USDA and HHS. Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2025-2030. <https://www.dietaryguidelines.gov/resources/2020-2025-dietary-guidelines-online-materials>
40. “2015-2020 Dietary Guidelines.” U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2015. <https://health.gov/our-work/food-nutrition/2015-2020-dietary-guidelines>.
41. Micha, R., Wallace, S. K., & Mozaffarian, D. (2010). Red and Processed Meat Consumption and Risk of Incident Coronary Heart Disease, Stroke, and Diabetes Mellitus: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis. *Circulation*, 121(21), 2271–2283 .
42. Melina V, Craig W, Levin S. Position of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics: vegetarian diets. *J Acad Nutr Diet*. 2016;116:1970-1980
43. McMacken M, Sapana S. A plant-based diet for the prevention and treatment of type 2 diabetes. *J Geriatr Cardiol*. 2017;14:342–354. April 30, 2021, 11:54 AM
44. Cross, Amanda J. et al. “A Prospective Study of Red and Processed Meat Intake in Relation to Cancer Risk.” *PLoS Medicine* 4, no. 12 (December 2007). <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.0040325>
45. Springmann, Marco et al. “Analysis and Valuation of the Health and Climate Change Cobenefits of Dietary Change.” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 113, no. 15 (April 12, 2016): 4146–4151. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1523119113>; Willett, Walter C. and Meir J. Stampfer. “Current

- Evidence on Healthy Eating.” Annual Review of Public Health 34, no. 1 (2013): 77–95. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurevpublhealth-031811-124646>
46. Poore, J., & Nemecek, T. (2018). Reducing food's environmental impacts through producers and consumers. *Science*, 360(6392), 987-992. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aag0216>
 47. Hoekstra, A. Y., Mekonnen, M. M., Chapagain, A. K., Mathews, R. E., & Richter, B. D. (2012). Global monthly water scarcity: Blue water footprints versus blue water availability. *PLoS ONE*, 7(2), e32688. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0032688>
 48. United Nations Environment Programme. (2021). *Annual report 2021*. https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/37946/UNEP_AR2021.pdf
 49. Melina, V., Craig, W., & Levin, S. (2016). Position of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics: Vegetarian diets. *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics*, 116(12), 1970–1980. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jand.2016.09.025>
 50. Culinary Institute of America, & Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health. (2016). *Menus of change: Annual report 2016*. https://ciaprochef.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/MOC_AnnualReport-2016.pdf
 51. Federal Good Food Purchasing Coalition. (2023, November). *Impact analysis full report*. <https://www.fedgoodfoodpurchasing.org/resources/impact-analysis-full-report>
 52. Center for Science in the Public Interest. (2024, February 2). *Government food purchasing and service: Impact analyses*. <https://www.cspinet.org/resource/government-food-purchasing-and-service-impact-analyses>
 53. Santo, R., & Silverman, J. (2023). *Values-aligned food purchasing and service: Promising examples from US federal agencies and programs*. Federal Good Food Purchasing Coalition. <https://www.fedgoodfoodpurchasing.org>
 54. See reference #16
 55. See reference #16
 56. Huang, T. T., Sorensen, D., Davis, S., Frerichs, L., Brittin, J., Celentano, J., Callahan, K., & Trowbridge, M. J. (2013). Healthy eating design guidelines for school architecture. *Preventing Chronic Disease*, 10, E27. <https://doi.org/10.5888/pcd10.120084>
 57. Frerichs, L., Brittin, J., Sorensen, D., Trowbridge, M. J., Yaroch, A. L., Siahpush, M., Tibbits, M., & Huang, T. T. (2015). Influence of school architecture and design on healthy eating: A review of the evidence. *American Journal of Public Health*, 105(4), e46–e57. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2014.302453>
 58. Larsen, J., Jhawar, M., Urahn, S. K., Coukell, A., Hall Ratliff, J., & Promislo, S. (2014). *Serving healthy school meals in California: The tools needed to do the job*. The Pew Charitable Trusts, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and The California Endowment. <https://www.pewtrusts.org/-/media/assets/2014/11/kitscaliforniareport111214final.pdf>
 59. Levy, S., & McPeters, K. (2020). *Growing opportunity for farm to school: How to revolutionize school food, support local farms, and improve the health of students in New York*. American Farmland Trust and Farm to Institution New York State. https://s30428.pcdn.co/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/03/AFT_NY_GrowingOpportunity_FINAL_web.pdf
 60. Zuercher, M. D., Orta-Aleman, D., Cohen, J. F. W., Hecht, C. A., Hecht, K., Polacsek, M., Patel, A. I., Ritchie, L. D., & Gosliner, W. (2024). The benefits and challenges of providing school meals during the first year of California's universal school meal policy as reported by school foodservice professionals. *Nutrients*, 16(12), 1812. <https://doi.org/10.3390/nu16121812>
 61. National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute. (2019, December 17). Americans' poor diet drives \$50 billion a year in health care costs. *National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute*. <https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/news/2019/americans-poor-diet-drives-50-billion-year-health-care-costs>
 62. U.S. Government Accountability Office. (2025, February 5). A warning from GAO – America's fiscal health at risk. *U.S. Government Accountability Office*. <https://www.gao.gov/press-release/warning-gao-americas-fiscal-health-risk>
 63. Down to Earth. (2016, September 1). Diet-related illnesses cost U.S. economy \$1 trillion annually. *Down to Earth*. <https://www.downtoearth.org/news/2016-09/diet-related-illnesses-cost-us-economy-1-trillion-annually>
 64. See reference #60
 65. See reference #60
 66. USDA Food and Nutrition Service. (2022). *USDA Community Eligibility Provision characteristics study*.

- SY 2016–17. U.S. Department of Agriculture. [https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/usda-cep-characteristics-study-sy-2016-17#:~:text=This%20Community%20Eligibility%20Provision%20\(CEP,about%20the%20impact%20of%20CEP](https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/usda-cep-characteristics-study-sy-2016-17#:~:text=This%20Community%20Eligibility%20Provision%20(CEP,about%20the%20impact%20of%20CEP)
67. U.S. Department of Agriculture. (2022). USDA Community Eligibility Provision characteristics study, school year 2016–2017 (Summary). U.S. Department of Agriculture. <https://fns-prod.azureedge.us/sites/default/files/resource-files/CEPSY2016-2017-Summary.pdf>
 68. See reference #66
 69. See reference #67
 70. Food Research & Action Center. (2024, June 26). Act now to ensure children have access to healthy school meals for next school year. *Food Research & Action Center*. <https://frac.org/blog/community-eligibility-provision-2024-2025-school-year>
 71. Food Research & Action Center. (n.d.). Community eligibility. *Food Research & Action Center*. <https://frac.org/community-eligibility>
 72. See reference #66
 73. No Kid Hungry Center for Best Practices. (2023, December). Understanding the implications of the 25% ISP threshold for participation in the Community Eligibility Provision. *No Kid Hungry Center for Best Practices*. <https://bestpractices.nokidhungry.org/sites/default/files/2023-12/Understanding%20the%20Implications%20of%20the%2025%20Percent%20ISP%20Threshold%20for%20Participation%20in%20CEP.pdf>
 74. See reference #73
 75. Hanson, M. (2024, November 23). *School lunch debt statistics [2023]: Total + costs per student*. Education Data Initiative. <https://educationdata.org/school-lunch-debt>
 76. School Nutrition Association. (2025). *Increase reimbursements: Position paper 2025*. <https://schoolnutrition.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Position-Paper-2025-IncreaseReimbursements.pdf>
 77. See reference #75
 78. De La Cour, N. (2023, March 17). *From meager pay to malnutrition, school cafeterias are in crisis*. Jacobin. <https://jacobin.com/2023/03/cafeteria-workers-crisis-school-lunch-strike>
 79. School Nutrition Association. (2025, January). *2025 position paper*. <https://schoolnutrition.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Printable-2025-Position-Paper.pdf>
 80. See reference #79
 81. Hinkley, S. (2024, September). *Hungry for good jobs: Food service workers in public schools*. UC Berkeley Labor Center. <https://laborcenter.berkeley.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Hungry-for-Good-Jobs.pdf>
 82. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (n.d.). *35-2012 Cooks, Institution and Cafeteria*. Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics. <https://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes352012.htm>
 83. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (n.d.). *Occupational employment and wage statistics: Elementary and secondary schools (NAICS 611100)*. https://www.bls.gov/oes/current/naics4_611100.htm#35-0000
 84. Gaddis, J. (2023, February). *Hungry for good jobs: State of the School Nutrition Workforce in Wisconsin*. [PDF file] Google Drive. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1pI9YGj5Qv9wiJ7PDwLpWu4Aj1ZJnt/view>
 85. Labor Standards for School Cafeteria Workers, Turnover, and Public Health Implications. (n.d.). *Berkeley Law Library*. <https://lawcat.berkeley.edu/record/1123819?ln=en>
 86. Cooper, D., & Martinez Hickey, S. (2022, February 3). Raising pay in public K–12 schools is critical to solving staffing shortages: Federal relief funds can provide a down payment on long-needed investments in the education workforce. *Economic Policy Institute*. <https://www.epi.org/publication/solving-k-12-staffing-shortages/>
 87. Billings, K. C., Bryan, S. L., & Donovan, S. A. (2022, July 27). *The school foodservice workforce: Characteristics and labor market outcomes* (CRS Report No. R47199). Congressional Research Service. <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R47199>
 88. Vincent, J. M., Gunderson, A., Friedman, D., McKee Brown, A., Wilson, S., & Gomez, V. (2020). Are California public schools scratch-cooking ready? A survey of food service directors on the state of school kitchens. *Center for Cities + Schools, University of California Berkeley*.

