School Food Advocacy Toolkit

This toolkit is for parents, caregivers, educators, and community members who care about replacing ultraprocessed foods in schools with fresh, delicious, made-from-scratch meals that protect kids' health and the environment.

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About the Toolkit

Creating a school food advocacy group is a powerful way to enact change.

This toolkit is divided into three steps to help you navigate the ins and outs of building an advocacy group to improve school food in your community:

Step 1
Get Educated

Step 2
Get Organized

Step 3
Take Action

School Food Directors: Critical Partners in School Food Change.

As you explore this toolkit, keep in mind that partnering with your district's school food director is one of the best ways to make real change happen. While these individuals have a lot on their plate and plenty of priorities to balance, they've also dedicated their careers to providing nourishing food to kids in their community. Finding common ground and working in partnership with your school food director is a powerful recipe for school food reform.

Get Educated

School Food at a Glance

Nearly 30 million children eat school meals.
That's more than half of all school-age kids in the U.S.!

Kids can consume up to 50% of their daily calories at school.
Improving school food is one of the most effective ways we can improve kids' diets.

Less than 25% of school meals are prepared from scratch.
By providing schools with the resources, training, and equipment needed to make more scratch-cooked meals, we can reduce kids' consumption of harmful ultraprocessed foods.

73% of students receive free or reduced-price lunch.
When school food is accessible and, ideally, free, it offers financial relief for households.

17.9% of children live in food-insecure households.
School food is a vital part of reducing childhood hunger.

Get to Know School Food

Understanding the basics of the school food system will help you advocate for change more effectively.

How is school food governed?

School food is governed by the National School Lunch Program and the School Breakfast Program. These programs are administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Administration.

What nutrition requirements do schools need to follow?

Schools need to follow a strict set of complex nutrition standards set by the federal government. These standards are based on the Dietary Guidelines for Americans. Schools also need to follow strict meal patterns, which dictate the amounts of fruit, vegetables, grains, meats/meat alternatives, and milk that must be offered or served to students.

What if your school doesn't participate in the National School Lunch Program?

While Chef Ann Foundation traditionally works with districts that participate in the federal school breakfast and lunch programs, we encourage broad advocacy for better school food, no matter your school's meal program structure. We welcome you to take inspiration where you can from this toolkit.

As you explore this toolkit, you'll see that schools must follow complex meal regulations. While these regulations are meant to ensure that all kids get nutritious meals, they don't differentiate between whether this nutrition comes from ultraprocessed foods or from meals made with fresh, whole ingredients.

It can be a lot easier for schools to buy packaged ultraprocessed foods — which can be formulated any which way to meet school nutrition regulations — than for schools to cook meals from scratch that meet these requirements. That's because school food programs have been historically undervalued and underfunded by the government.

Ongoing underinvestment in school food programs means most schools don't have the budget, staff, training, equipment, and facilities they need to cook meals from scratch, so serving ultraprocessed foods has become the status quo. Most school food professionals want to serve kids fresh meals, but they are operating within a broken system that makes this difficult.

Still, despite these challenges, all schools — no matter their budget, student population size, or location — can take meaningful steps toward making school meals fresher and more sustainable. That's where you come in!

By getting to know your district's school food program, you can become a partner for change.

Ultraprocessed Foods & Children's Health

Today, **more than 60%** of a typical child's diet is made up of ultraprocessed food. Ultraprocessed foods are often high in salt, sugars, and artificial additives with limited nutritional value. They are also often **engineered to be addictive** and contribute to consuming excess calories. Ultraprocessed foods are linked to **lower academic performance** and **chronic health conditions**, including type 2 diabetes, heart disease, and **depression and anxiety**.

Get to Know Your District's School Food Program

Explore Your District's Wellness Policy

The federal government requires all schools participating in the National School Lunch Program or the School Breakfast Program to write and implement a **local school wellness policy**. This policy documents efforts to promote student health through healthy eating and physical activity. Understanding your district's wellness policy — and the process for updating it — will help align your school food goals with your district's goals.

1. **Find your school district's wellness policy.**
   This document will likely be publicly posted on your district's website. If it isn't, you can request it from your district's administrative office.
2. **Read your district's wellness policy.**
   Look for opportunities where replacing ultraprocessed foods with fresh and scratch-cooked meals would support your district's stated wellness goals. For example, if your district states it is committed to feeding students healthy food so they can focus in class, serving scratch-cooked meals with less added sugars could help avoid sugar highs and crashes that impede learning.
3. **Continue to refer back to your district's wellness policy.**
   As you continue to learn about school food, revisit your district's policy to continue to identify ways your goals intersect with your district's goals. Working toward shared goals is a great way to build your relationship with your district's food service team.
4. **Ask how you can get involved with shaping your district's wellness policy.**
   The federal government requires districts to permit the general public and the school community — including parents, students, teachers, school administrators, and others — to participate in the wellness policy process. If you think your district's wellness policy could be improved, you can voice your recommendations to your district.

Determine Whether Your School Food Program is Managed In-House or Outsourced

School districts generally choose between self-operation (in-house) or outsourcing to a third-party Food Service Management Company (FSMC). While outsourcing is often considered by districts for its perceived convenience, self-operation is the better choice for students, staff, and the community.

We know that districts often have competing priorities, and don't want to stigmatize any school food program that currently utilizes an FSMC. But it's also important to understand why FSMCs exist and why transitioning to self-operation is a key step for districts working towards more healthy, scratch-cooked meals.

Unlike school districts, private FSMCs are for-profit entities that must prioritize financial targets. When a contract is negotiated it typically establishes a fixed price for each meal type (breakfast, lunch, snack, or supper). In most states, the FSMC can only maximize its profit after a contract is established by controlling two main variables: food costs and labor costs. Typically, to meet profit margins, FSMCs rely heavily on pre-packaged, ultraprocessed foods rather than fresh, scratch-cooked menu items and often implement labor cuts or offer lower wages. This frequently results in an undertrained workforce with rapid turnover.

Outsourcing can seem like an appealing way to save time, but more often than not, it strips the school district and the local community of their agency. When a private company owns this process, it limits the district's ability to adjust menus, add staffing, or adapt to evolving trends in the child nutrition space.

If your school's meal service is currently managed by an FSMC, you do not have to accept the status quo. Parents have the right to speak directly with the food service director to ask questions about how meals are prepared and where ingredients are sourced. Learn as much as you can about the current FSMC contract agreement, including when it expires and what the performance metrics are. We encourage parents to use their voice within the district to advocate for updated contract terms, higher food quality standards, and ultimately, a transition to a self-operated, community-centered school food program.

Note: If your district's school food program is self-operated, feel free to skip this section! Most of this toolkit is already tailored to you. If your district outsources to a Food Service Management Company, read this section to learn more about how outsourcing works and why you might want to advocate for an in-house operation.

Review Your District's Menu

School food service departments typically share their menus with parents and list monthly menus on the school's website. Review these menus to get familiar with what's on rotation, and whether the menu items are pre-packaged "heat-and-serve" products or cooked from scratch.

Have Lunch With Your Child

If your school allows it, having lunch with your child will let you observe your school food program in action. Contact your district's school food service department to schedule a time to have lunch with your child. During your visit, take notes about what you're observing. For example:

- What's the proportion of ultraprocessed food to fresh foods?
- Is there a salad bar?
- Is the atmosphere welcoming?
- How much time do children have to eat?
- Are desserts offered with every meal?
- Do you notice "a la carte" items (such as packaged snack foods at the end of the lunch line) that are competing with the day's prepared meal?
- Are high-sugar beverages being offered, like flavored milks?
- Do any of the meals feature local ingredients?
- Do the menu items reflect students' cultures?
- How are foods marketed to students?
- Do kids get to choose what they eat?
- Does the food look appetizing?
- Are there foods served individually packaged in plastic?
- How much waste is being produced?

Resources to Inspire Change

Fortunately, many programs and resources exist that can help your district make changes to its school food program! Get to know what resources are available to support your advocacy group's efforts. The Chef Ann Foundation and other nonprofits, as well as government agencies, offer a variety of grants, programs, and other resources:

Chef Ann Foundation
The Lunch Box
American Heart Association
Center for Ecoliteracy
Edible School Yard
National Farm to School Network
Slow Food USA
USDA
Voices for Healthy Kids

Get to Know Your School Food Program

- ☐ Explore your district's wellness policy
- ☐ Determine whether your school food program is managed in-house or outsourced
- ☐ Review your district's menu
- ☐ Have lunch with your child

Identify Your Priorities for Change

As you can probably see by now, there are likely a lot of opportunities to improve your district's school food program. Remember, it's better to start small, like working with your district to apply for a grant that supports a small shift toward more scratch cooking. Celebrating easy wins can be motivating to both your school and your advocacy group, inspiring larger changes in the future. Also, keep in mind that your priorities might change as you form your advocacy group and meet with your school's staff.

Priorities to Consider

- Salad bars with fresh produce
- Local ingredient sourcing
- School gardens
- Nutrition education (in classrooms and the lunchroom)
- Fresh, scratch-cooked breakfast
- Longer lunch periods
- Ingredient transparency
- Student taste tests

Make a list of all your ideas for change, then for each idea consider:

- Does it align with your district's wellness policy?
- How much impact would it have on supporting student health?
- Would it require a lot of resources (funding, staff training, equipment, etc.) or is it relatively easy to implement?
- Would this idea have widespread support? Who might oppose it?

Rate your ideas on a scale of 1–10 for these considerations, then see which ideas score highest. Consider making these ideas your initial priorities.

	Consideration	Rating
Idea	Alignment with wellness policy	
	Impact on student health	
	Ease of implementation	
	Potential for widespread support	
	Consideration	**Rating**
Idea	Alignment with wellness policy	
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	Consideration	**Rating**
Idea	Alignment with wellness policy	
	Impact on student health	
	Ease of implementation	
	Potential for widespread support	

Get Organized

Find Your Advocacy Group Members

The most effective advocacy groups are often composed of a variety of community members with varied backgrounds, skills, and competencies — make sure to think broadly and invite individuals with different backgrounds. Advocacy groups with five to ten people who can commit to the mission and the meeting schedule tend to be most productive in influencing change.

Contact potential members to gauge whether they might be interested in joining your advocacy group and why they'd be a valuable addition. Prepare yourself to hear "no" — that's okay. Remember, you want members who share your passion for change and have the time and energy to invest in making change happen.

Consider the following types of members:

- Parents, family members, and caregivers of students
- School food service director or food service staff
- Parent Teacher Association (PTA) members
- Teachers
- School garden or community garden representatives
- School board members
- School nurses or health professionals working in the community
- School administrators
- Student health advisory council members
- Community advocates
- Representatives of community businesses who share the mission of healthy food
- Representatives from local non-profits or community-centered organizations
- Local food producers
- Labor union representatives

Notes:

Plan Your Meetings

Once you've assembled a core group of members, you can plan your meetings. It's important to create an atmosphere where everyone feels welcome and structure productive meetings.

Recommended Best Practices

1. Identify a convenient time and location such as your school, library, or community center. Consider meeting virtually, or offer a virtual hybrid option.
2. Recruit a volunteer to provide childcare, or allow children to be present if appropriate.
3. Encourage a potluck with healthy snacks and/or refreshments.
4. Email the agenda, working documents, and pre-meeting tasks in advance.
5. Meetings should be under 90 minutes, with a break mid-way for any meeting longer than an hour.
6. Assign rotating or ongoing roles:
   Facilitator: Responsible for identifying the topics before each meeting, drafting the agenda with group input, and guiding the meeting through the agenda.
   Timekeeper: Responsible for making sure the meeting starts and ends on time by monitoring when the group should move on to a new section of the agenda.
   Notetaker: Responsible for documenting the conversation during the meeting, typing up the notes, and distributing them to the group after the meeting.
7. Ensure technology needs are set up ahead of time.
8. Bring supplies to support dynamic discussion, such as poster paper for discussion notes.

Goals for Your First Meeting

- Get to know each other and why each person wants to be a part of the group. Understanding what motivates each member to pursue change strengthens group cohesion and helps clarify the most impactful issue to tackle together.
- Agree upon group expectations — for example, "We will strive to build positive relationships with our district's food service team members."
- Establish the roles of each member (facilitator, timekeeper, notetaker) and whether these roles will rotate.
- Present what you've learned about your district's school food program to date and the initial priorities you've identified. Gather feedback on whether the group is aligned with your draft of priorities, or if they'd like to make adjustments.
- Determine the agenda for the next meeting.
- Try to keep the mood inspiring and positive.

Tips for Ongoing Meetings

- Hold meetings every other week or monthly to keep momentum going.
- Book the space that the group will use for meetings in advance.
- Ask for feedback from group members on agenda items prior to each meeting.

Take Action

Connect with Decision-Makers

Once you have convened a group and identified priorities, it's time to start building relationships with key decision-makers.

We recommend starting by reaching out to your food service director if they aren't already a member of your advocacy group. Let them know you are convening a group to support the food service program and advocate for changes that will make it easier for them to serve fresh, healthy food to students.

Remember, your food service director can be one of your biggest allies in this work. They are dealing with challenges resulting from historic underinvestment in school food programs. Get to know them and the issues they're facing, along with the changes they want to make. By building a supportive relationship, your advocacy group and food service director can work together to shape the future of school food in your district.

Next, it may be helpful to individually connect with other decision-makers, including:

- Existing committees for student health & wellness
- School district administrators
- School board
- PTO/PTA
- Teachers and school staff
- Students, parents, and community members
- Representatives from local government

Identify Action Steps

After building these individual relationships, it's time to get to work on implementing your priorities. Once you've selected a priority issue or a program to implement at your school, it's important to determine what actions you need to take in order to see it through from start to finish. Create a step-by-step plan in one of your advocacy group meetings. In subsequent meetings, be sure to check on progress, troubleshoot obstacles, and refresh on inspiration to keep moving towards implementation.

If your district already has an active wellness committee, consider whether this work can be tackled there or if it's useful to maintain an independent advocacy group. Either way, it may be helpful to form a working group or subcommittee that provides an opportunity for additional stakeholders to stay involved.

You Did It!

Take a moment to pat yourself on the back for learning about and building school food advocacy in your community. When individuals like you get involved in this work, we can really move the needle on school food reform. Thank you for engaging in this important work and advocating for healthy food for kids!

More Information

For more information about how to inspire school food change in your community, visit the Chef Ann Foundation's Policy and Advocacy page at chefannfoundation.org/policy-advocacy. Connect with us at policy@chefannfoundation.org and let us know how you've used the toolkit to advocate for better school food.