



April 2025

# California's Healthy School Food Pathway

A midpoint summary of evaluation findings

# Executive Summary

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California has outlined a vision for the school food system that supports children's health while leveraging synergistic relationships with the state's agriculture and workforce development priorities.<sup>1,2,3</sup> To make progress toward this vision, the state budget has included historic investments totaling more than \$2.2B in school food program operations, infrastructure, labor, and procurement since 2021. As the ultimate implementers of school meal programs, the school food workforce is integral to the success of any effort to change school food. Due to a history of underinvestment, the school food workforce requires additional training, skillbuilding, and support to help California realize its school food vision.<sup>4</sup>

**The Chef Ann Foundation** developed the **Healthy School Food Pathway (HSFP) Program** to provide career development opportunities for the school food workforce. HSFP supports aspiring and existing school food professionals to gain the skills they need to establish and manage successful K-12 scratch-cook meal operations by offering three sequential components:

- A seven-week Pre-Apprenticeship focused on foundational skills
- A nine-month Apprenticeship offering in-depth training and hands-on experience
- A 13-month Fellowship focused on leadership development and advanced culinary training for leaders in school food change

This midpoint evaluation report summarizes findings from participants, alumni, and district leaders from 2022-24 across all three HSFP components, with a focus on short-term outcomes. Meaningful changes were observed in participant knowledge and competencies across all three program components.

- Pre-Apprentices had statistically significant gains in school food knowledge, with 58% increasing or sustaining a high pre/post assessment score.
- Apprentices demonstrated an increase in average self-reported competency scores across each of the 29 domains.
- Fellows experienced significant improvements in knowledge, skills, and self-efficacy across each of the 18 competencies over the course of the program.

**Most participants reported using what they learned in HSFP regularly**, with 77% of Pre-Apprentices, 71% of Apprentices, and 93% of Fellows using what they learned at least weekly. **Program satisfaction was high among nearly all respondents:** 93% of Pre-Apprentices, 100% of Apprentices, and 100% of Fellows reported that they were satisfied or very satisfied with HSFP and reported substantial impacts on their careers.

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1 [Ag Vision for the Next Decade: Growing opportunity for California](#)

2 [Planting the Seed: Farm to School Roadmap for Success](#)

3 [California Master Plan for Career Education](#)

4 [Hungry for Good Food Jobs: Food Service Workers in Public Schools](#)

Districts participating in HSFP also reported positive program perceptions: **an overwhelming majority (94%) of district leaders reported satisfaction with their participation.** Many also noted that the program improved leadership development (94%), culinary skills (90%), technical skills and knowledge (89%), morale and engagement (85%), staff capacity (74%), and new hiring or promotion of staff (43%).

HSFP is advancing the field of school food service by empowering professionals, supporting meal programs, and promoting improved eating opportunities for students. By delivering a promising workforce development program for school food professionals, HSFP is building a vital foundation in support of California's school food system investments and vision.

"This is THE best professional development experience I have ever had. I don't want to be "dramatic" but this program was life changing. School food is amazing but it is hard. I left more confident in my ability to be a director but also with a clearer vision of the kind of program I want to create."

– Pre-Apprentice

"I loved this program from inside/out and would do it again. It gave me a confidence in what I am doing. [...] I found a community where people care about school nutrition, who fight for healthy food, who love their job and are not embarrassed to tell the world 'I am a kitchen lady.'"

– Apprentice

"The Fellowship is the single best way of helping those who are the most dedicated to school food that I have found so far. I feel incredibly lucky that I was able to be a part of this first cohort!"

– Fellow



# Introduction & Overview

The Chef Ann Foundation developed the Healthy School Food Pathway (HSFP) program in response to persistent challenges that public school nutrition departments face in preparing and serving freshly prepared meals: **the labor capacity and skill set of the school food workforce.**



Image by Chef Ann Foundation

HSFP supports aspiring and existing school food professionals in gaining the skills they need to create and manage successful K-12 scratch-cook meal operations.



**The pathway consists of three sequential components:**

## Pre-Apprenticeship

A seven-week program providing a foundational introduction to scratch-cook school food operations and knowledge for aspiring and current school food professionals.

## Apprenticeship

A nine-month program offering in-depth training and hands-on experience for individuals who complete the Pre-Apprenticeship and wish to deepen their knowledge and skills.

## Fellowship

A 13-month program focused on leadership development and advanced culinary training for mid- and upper-level school food professionals who want to become leaders in school food change, from any district across the country.<sup>5</sup>



The program was launched in spring 2022 in California. HSFP has since expanded to Colorado, with work underway to expand to additional states. This evaluation progress report focuses on the California-based cohorts of the program from 2022 through late summer 2024 (Table 1).<sup>5</sup>

**Table 1. California-based program participation (2022-2024)**

Program	# of program participants as of July 2024	Total # of program participants as of March 2025 (incl. in progress)
Pre-Apprenticeship	219	633
Apprenticeship	9	100
Fellowship	21 (10 in CA)	70 (33 in CA)

The Chef Ann Foundation is continuing to add host districts and increase the number of participants recruited to each program.

**As of March 2025, there have been 803 participants across the three program components (including those currently in progress), hosted by 138 K-12 district partners (99 in California).**

# School Food Workforce

## Opportunities, Challenges & the California Context

The school food system represents many constituencies, including school food service employees, students, and food producers. The impacts of the system are far-reaching, including those on educational outcomes, local and regional economies, and the environment. California is at the forefront of the healthy school food movement, strategically investing in a future where school meals are freshly prepared from whole or minimally processed ingredients, sourced locally and grown using climate-smart agricultural practices, and supporting student well-being alongside the economic vitality of communities.<sup>6</sup>

As the ultimate implementers of school meal programs, the school food workforce is integral to the success of any effort to change school food. Due to a history of underinvestment, the school food workforce requires additional training, skillbuilding, and support to help California realize its school food vision.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> The initial Fellowship cohorts were split between California-based participants and participants from elsewhere in the United States and territories.

<sup>6</sup> [Planting the Seed: Farm to School Roadmap for Success](#)

<sup>7</sup> [Hungry for Good Food Jobs: Food Service Workers in Public Schools](#)

To make progress toward this vision, the state budget has included historic investments in school food program operations, infrastructure, labor, and procurement since 2021:

**\$650M**  
since 2022

**School Meals for All** to ensure universal access to school meals

**\$600M**  
in 2022

**Enhanced School Meal Reimbursements** to support the economic stability of school meal programs

**\$100M**  
in 2022

**School Food Best Practices Fund** to increase local, sustainable sourcing and scratch cooked meals

**\$100M**  
since 2021

**Farm to School Incubator Grant Program** to expand the farm to school supply chain and procurement of California grown, whole and minimally processed foods, particularly those grown using climate smart practices and by small, mid-sized, and/or socially disadvantaged farm households

**\$750M**  
since 2021

**School Kitchen Infrastructure and Training Program** to upgrade school kitchens and support the school food workforce

**\$45M**  
in 2022

**Healthy School Food Pathway** to support the school food workforce and increase freshly prepared, scratch cooked meals

School food operations are uniquely complex – beyond other meal services such as fast food establishments or restaurants – as they must comply with stringent United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) standards for procurement, preparation, and nutrition.<sup>8</sup> State and local regulations add additional layers to federal rules. Unlike other components of public education, nutrition service departments are self-funded, operating like a business unit within the public education system and relying primarily on student participation to meet their budgetary needs.

Prior research has demonstrated that there are many challenges to ensuring a consistent, skilled school food service workforce, including staff shortages, insufficient funding for school meal program operations, and inadequate worker compensation.<sup>9,10,11</sup> Registered apprenticeship programs are a nationally recognized workforce development strategy that can address many of these multifaceted challenges – including non-competitive wages and lack of structured, industry-appropriate training opportunities for a workforce experiencing long-term underinvestment.



Image by Chef Ann Foundation

8 [USDA Nutrition Standards for School Meals](#)

9 [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](#)

10 [Job Quality and Housing Affordability among California's School Food Service Workforce](#)

11 [SY 2024/25 School Nutrition Trends Report](#)



# Evaluation Methodology

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Food Insight Group (FIG) is conducting an ongoing evaluation of California's HSFP program implementation and outcomes. This evaluation progress report offers a high-level midpoint summary of short-term outcomes, drawing from data collected from participant applications, pre/post program surveys, and surveys conducted with program alumni and school district leaders. FIG also provides process evaluation findings directly to the Chef Ann Foundation to support continuous program improvements.

FIG worked with a team of Chef Ann Foundation staff to develop initial program logic models and identify key evaluation questions. Logic models for each of the three HSFP programs can be found in [Appendix A](#). From there, the Chef Ann Foundation and FIG surfaced key evaluation questions guided by the RE-AIM (Reach, Effectiveness, Adoption, Implementation, and Maintenance) framework. A list of the evaluation questions can be found in [Appendix B](#).

## **The evaluation's objectives include:**

- Identifying facilitators and barriers to program participation and success
- Understanding key changes to participant knowledge, skills, attitudes, and beliefs about school food careers
- Following participant movement and career trajectories through the pathway and into school food careers and/or career advancement
- Understanding program impacts on host districts, including impacts of new participant knowledge and skills

Pre-Apprenticeship and Apprenticeship surveys were offered in both English and Spanish. Invitations and reminders were sent directly to participants from FIG.

## **Limitations**

As HSFP is ongoing, the findings presented in this report are subject to refinement as additional data become available from future cycles. The report's conclusions are based on the perspectives of survey respondents; non-respondents may hold differing views not represented in these findings. The small sample size of the Apprenticeship cohort in particular may limit the generalizability of their feedback. This evaluation offers correlational program effects and is not designed to make causal claims about the role of HSFP on participants' careers. Finally, this report centers short-term outcomes, as most respondents completed the program less than one year prior to data collection. Future iterations of this evaluation will measure longer-term impacts.

# Findings

## Participants report strong satisfaction and meaningful knowledge and competency development, positively impacting school meal program operations.

In addition to participant pre- and post-surveys administered during each cohort, an alumni survey was disseminated to all completed cohorts during the summer of 2024 (Table 2). The pre/post surveys measure participant knowledge and competency development, while the alumni survey measures longer-term changes related to career development.

Table 2. Survey completion rates		
Program	Pre- and Post-Surveys	Alumni Survey
Pre-Apprenticeship	72% response rate (158 out of 218)	44% response rate (97 out of 219)
Apprenticeship	63% response rate (5 out of 8)	78% response rate (7 out of 9)
Fellowship	86% response rate (18 out of 20)	67% response rate (14 of 21)

When asked about their satisfaction with HSFP during the program post-survey, **93%** of Pre-Apprentices, **100%** of Apprentices, and **100%** of Fellows reported that they were satisfied or very satisfied.

“The Fellowship is the single best way of helping those who are the most dedicated to school food that I have found so far. I feel incredibly lucky that I was able to be a part of this first cohort!”

– Fellow

“I loved this program from inside/out and would do it again. It gave me a confidence in what I am doing. [...] I found a community where people care about school nutrition, who fight for healthy food, who love their job and are not embarrassed to tell the world ‘I am a kitchen lady.’”

– Apprentice

**Pre-Apprentices** had statistically significant gains in school food knowledge during the seven-week program, with a combined total of **58%** of Pre-Apprentices increasing or sustaining a high pre/post assessment score.

"I am now looking at labels more closely and checking ingredients for additives."

– Pre-Apprentice

"I gain a lot of knowledge how the school food program runs. I gain a community and I boost my confidence. I hope one day I will be change maker."

– Apprentice

**Apprentices** demonstrated strong growth in the program's **29 competencies**, with an increase in the average self-reported competency score across each of the 29 domains (statistical inferences could not be measured due to the small cohort size).

**Fellows** demonstrated statistically significant gains in knowledge, skills, and self-efficacy and significant improvements across each of the **18 competencies** over the course of the program.

"This is THE best professional development experience I have ever had. I don't want to be "dramatic" but this program was life changing. School food is amazing but it is hard. I left more confident in my ability to be a director but also with a clearer vision of the kind of program I want to create."

– Pre-Apprentice

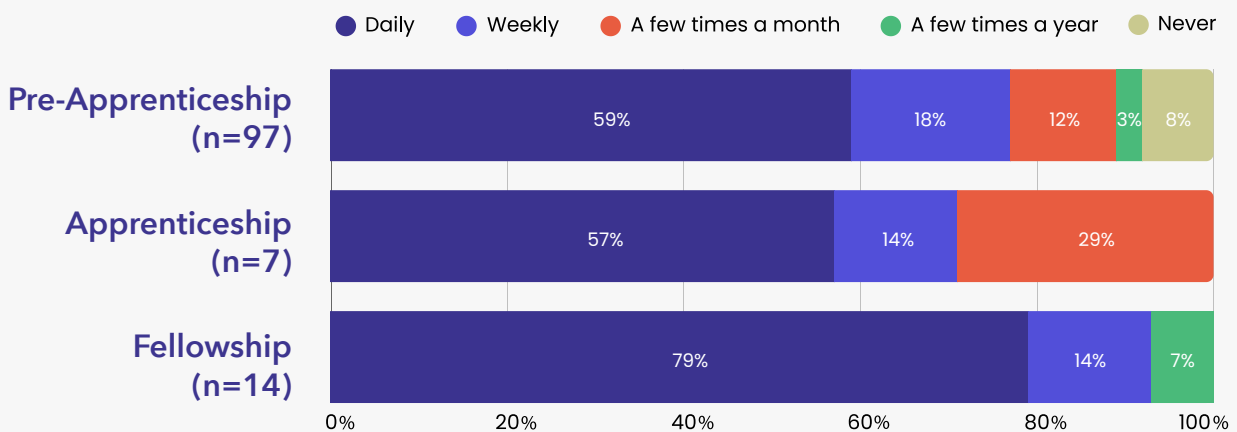
**HSFP participants applied their learning to improve scratch cooking and other practices in their host districts.**



Most participants reported using what they learned in HSFP regularly, with 89% of Pre-Apprentices, 100% of Apprentices, and 93% of Fellows using what they learned a few times a month or more (Figure 1).

## Alumni reported improvements in operational elements, such as efficiencies when ordering, waste reduction, financial skills, and a deeper understanding of school food operations.

Figure 1: How often do you use what you learned in the HSFP program?



"El cambiar los ingredientes que sean más saludables y cocinar desde cero. [To change the ingredients to be healthier and cook from scratch]"

– Pre-Apprentice

"...I am thinking about every meal or ingredient going to the trash bin. How much money we wasted and could save. I think how to improve our meals."

– Apprentice

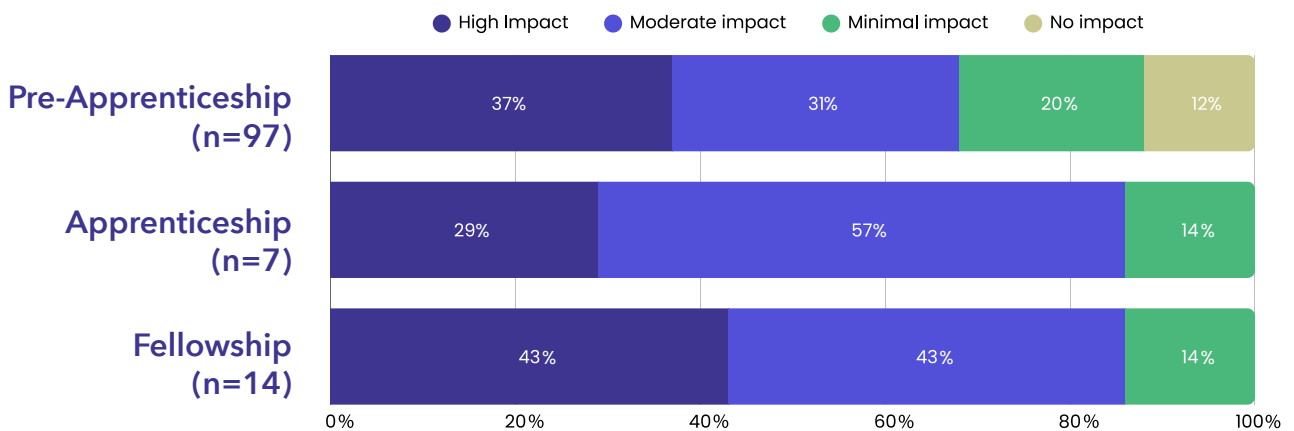
"The fellowship was so comprehensive that I use some aspect of the program daily. Financials, leadership and commitment to scratch cooking to name a few that show up almost daily."

– Fellow

## Career development in school food services may support jobs with high levels of purpose, stability, and security.

Alumni of HSFP report substantial impacts on their career, with 68% of Pre-Apprentices, 86% of Apprentices, and 86% of Fellows reporting moderate or high levels of impact (Figure 2).

Figure 2: To what extent, if any, has HSFP impacted your career?

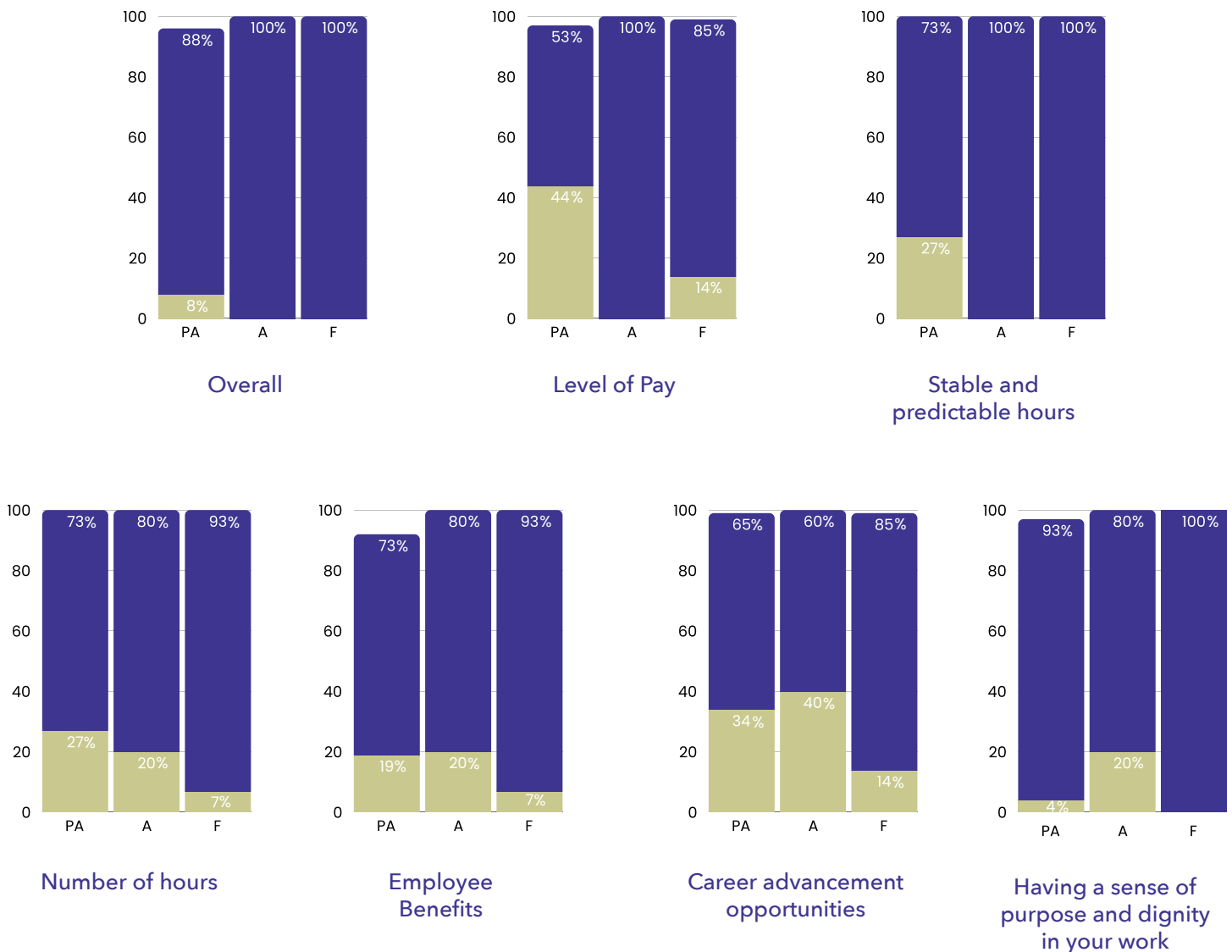


HSFP alumni reported high rates of employment in school food service after completion of the program. Seventy-seven percent of Pre-Apprentices and 71% of Apprentices were currently employed in school food service, and 100% of Fellows reported being employed full-time in school food service at the time of the survey (Table 3).

Program	Currently employed in food service	Previously employed in food service but not currently	Never been employed in school food service (outside of HSFP)
Pre-Apprenticeship (n=97)	77%	3%	20%
Apprenticeship (n=7)	71%	0%	29%
Fellowship (n=14)	100%	0%	0%

Career development in school food services may support jobs with high levels of purpose, stable and predictable hours, and job security. All Fellows reported being satisfied or very satisfied with: their overall job (100%); stable and predictable pay and hours (100%); having a sense of purpose and dignity in their work (100%), and most were satisfied or very satisfied with their job security (93%; Figure 3).

**Figure 3: In your current school food service job, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with each of the following?**



PA = Pre-Apprenticeship (n=97)

A = Apprenticeship (n=7)

F = Fellowship (n=14)

● Satisfied or Very Satisfied  
● Dissatisfied or Very Dissatisfied



## FINDINGS

Findings for Pre-Apprentices and Apprentices were more mixed. Nearly half (44%) of Pre-Apprentices reported dissatisfaction with their level of pay, and more than one third (34%) reported dissatisfaction with their career advancement opportunities. Among Apprentices, 40% were “very dissatisfied” with their career advancement opportunities, while 60% were “very satisfied.” These mixed results may derive from differences in the structure and opportunities associated with positions at different levels within school food service departments. Whereas Fellows may occupy more senior positions with a greater likelihood of full-time hours and relatively higher pay, Pre-Apprentices are in more entry-level positions with fewer hours and lower pay. Apprentices may span the position hierarchy.

“Most positions are part-time which means we don’t get to have health insurance through our work.”

– Pre-Apprentice

“[My main concern about working in school food is] the pay. It’s horrible that our state makes it mandatory that fast food workers get \$20/hr while our school food workers still make minimum wage. Overall funding is lacking to get these schools the resources they need to be successful.”

– Pre-Apprentice



Image by Chef Ann Foundation

## Host districts report high satisfaction with the HSFP program, increased levels of scratch cooking, and strengthened procurement practices.

A survey was conducted among participating district leaders during summer 2024, including superintendents, school food service directors, and professional workers (workers who serve as mentors for program participants, also referred to as “journeyworkers” in other apprenticeship contexts). Fifty of 90 districts responded to the survey (55% response rate), with 54 individual respondents in total.

Districts have the opportunity to participate in any of the three HSFP programs in different years. Table 4 shows the distribution of program participation among the surveyed districts.

# 94%

of district leaders reported being satisfied or very satisfied with their participation.

**Table 4. HSFP Program Participation by District**

Type of Program	n=54
Pre-Apprenticeship only	52%
Pre-Apprenticeship & Apprenticeship	15%
Pre-Apprenticeship & Fellowship	6%
Pre-Apprenticeship, Apprenticeship & Fellowship	6%
Apprenticeship only	2%
Apprenticeship & Fellowship	2%
Fellowship only	19%

District participation in HSFP represents an investment in individual workers within a district, as well as in the field of school food service broadly. Many HSFP participants enter the program already employed in their districts, and the majority of alumni have remained employed in the district where they completed their program. **This high rate of retention represents an ongoing return on the host district’s investment of time and support (Table 5).**

Furthermore, 80% of Pre-Apprenticeship respondents reported that they were very likely to start or continue working in school food in the next one to five years, indicating a high rate of commitment to the field. The majority of participants also expressed interest in eventually becoming a school food service manager, a higher-level position, with 59% of Pre-Apprentices and 80% of Apprentices indicating that they were “definitely interested.”

**Table 5. Did you continue working in the school district where you completed your HSFP program? (Alumni)**

Program	Yes, I continued working there and still work there	Yes, I continued working there but no longer working there	No, I stopped working there after I completed the program	N/A: I was not employed in the district where I completed the program
Pre-Apprenticeship (n=85)	89%	1%	5%	5%
Apprenticeship (n=5)	100%	0%	0%	0%
Fellowship (n=14)	100%	0%	0%	0%

District leaders perceived a range of changes resulting from HSFP. Key findings across HSFP components include that district leaders agreed or strongly agreed that: the program supported leadership development, including mentoring activities (94%); improved culinary skills (90%); increased technical skills and knowledge (89%); improved morale and engagement (85%); increased staff capacity (74%); and led to new hiring or promotion of staff (43%).

"It has also boosted employee morale and willingness to contribute and participate."

– District Leader

"Staff collaborated and worked together better. We saw more people in those kitchens teaching each other."

– District Leader

"Switching to scratch cooking, locally sourced as much as possible and minimally processed as much as possible."

– District Leader

District leaders were asked to share the degree to which they saw impacts on scratch cooking and a variety of sourcing practices. Seventy-three percent of district leaders saw a moderate or significant impact on scratch cooking. District leaders reported more modest gains with moderate or significant impacts on procurement practices of CA-grown products (59%), organic products (36%), and food using climate smart agricultural practices (29%). Scratch cooking is typically a prerequisite for increasing the procurement of whole and minimally processed ingredients, including those prioritized by the state of California, like foods sourced locally and using climate smart agricultural practices. As such, these procurement trends may be expected to rise over the long run if school food service departments are supported in deepening their scratch cooking skills.



# Conclusion

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## **Midpoint program evaluation findings indicate that HSFP is a promising strategy toward strengthening the school food service workforce.**

Evaluation of the Healthy School Food Pathway (HSFP) program using 2022-24 data reveals compelling evidence of its positive impact on participating individuals and host school districts. The data demonstrate significant gains for alumni in knowledge acquisition, skill development, and professional confidence, leading to tangible improvements in school food service practices and worker capabilities.

District leaders reported improved staff morale and engagement as a result of HSFP, and some districts reported increased hiring or promotion of staff. Most Pre-Apprentices reported a high rate of intention to continue working in school food and a desire to progress into leadership positions, and most participants across all program components remained employed in their districts at the time of the alumni survey. These findings are of particular note due to the relatively high rates of turnover observed across the school food service workforce<sup>12</sup> and the consistent reporting within and beyond California that labor shortages are a persistent barrier to school meal program operations and improvements.<sup>13,14</sup>

These positive outcomes suggest that HSFP is effectively equipping districts with the tools, resources, and staff necessary to implement and sustain scratch cooking, which may also support increased local procurement and greater alignment with California's vision for the school food system.

While the Chef Ann Foundation continues to adjust elements of this new program to better serve the needs of participants and host districts, early program outcomes indicate that HSFP is a promising strategy toward advancing the field of school food service by empowering professionals, supporting meal programs, and promoting improved eating opportunities for students. By delivering workforce development opportunities for school food professionals, HSFP is building a vital foundation in support of California's school food system investments and vision.

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12 [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](#)  
13 [CDFA Farm to School Incubator Grant Program Evaluation Progress Report: 2022-2024](#)  
14 [SY 2024/25 School Nutrition Trends Report](#)

# Acknowledgements

The FIG team would like to extend our gratitude to the many HSFP program participants and host district leaders who generously shared their time, perspectives, and stories with us. We have a deep appreciation for their ongoing commitment to nourishing our communities' young people. We would also like to thank Jobs for the Future's Center for Apprenticeship & Work-Based Learning, and the Research, Evaluation & Analytics Unit for their advising, review, and thought partnership throughout this evaluation process. And finally, we would like to thank the the Chef Ann Foundation HSFP team for their ongoing commitment to thorough evaluation and data-informed program development.

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Report designed by [Viscera Studio](#).