

# Improving Meal Quality in California's Schools

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A Best Practices Guide for Healthy School Food Service



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## **California Food Policy Advocates**

California Food Policy Advocates is a public policy and advocacy organization whose mission is to improve the health and well-being of low-income Californians by increasing their access to nutritious and affordable food.

CFPA is California's only statewide advocacy organization with a focus on food and nutrition for low-income people. The organization's work emphasizes the critical importance of preserving, improving, and expanding participation in the federal food programs, the state's strongest tool in overcoming malnutrition and hunger. CFPA works with community-based organizations to identify critical food access problems and to mobilize effective solutions to them.

CFPA uses research and analysis, advocacy, and community education and mobilization to ensure that every Californian has access to the nutrition required to grow, to learn, and to lead a productive life. Many of our reports, including this one, are available online at [www.cfpa.net](http://www.cfpa.net).



## **Acknowledgements**

CFPA would like to express its deep appreciation to the school food directors and school administrators who contributed so much of their time and experience to the publication of this guide. In many cases, as you will see, they also have agreed to offer their advice and help to any one who calls for additional information. This is illustrative of the wonderful commitment to their students' nutrition, health and well-being that we have encountered in compiling this guide. We commend and thank each one of them.

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# Introduction

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Public policy finally is catching up with the experts who have warned for years that our children's diets -- too little good food in some cases, too many empty calories in others -- and sedentary lifestyles carry with them the grave, life-threatening consequences of hunger and childhood obesity. Within this context, the schools, where more than 6 million California youngsters go each school day, can be a safe haven where they eat healthy, life-nurturing meals, avoid damaging junk food and come to understand the difference.

Recognizing the urgency of the effort to gain our children's nutritional safety, policy makers at the national, state and local level are mobilizing as never before to implement a multi-prong strategy to prevent childhood hunger and obesity. These nutrition epidemics can be traced back to a long litany of causes, to an environment that makes it very difficult for our children to eat well and to be physically active. Having acknowledged that, however, it still makes sense that schools and school meals should be the place to start. And this Best Practices Guide is designed to be a resource to those on the front line -- school district policy makers and food service managers -- who are eager to learn how some of their peers have injected better nutrition and new appeal into their schools' meals and kept their departments financially sound in the process.

Recent policy developments that make publication of this Guide so timely include:

- **SB 19 (Escutia, 2001)** SB 19 is unprecedented legislation to improve food in every elementary school in California. Sodas will be entirely eliminated; the nutrition content of "competitive" food ( food that is separate from the USDA-approved school meals) sold on campus will be highly regulated and improved; and the quality of USDA meals will be improved by a 10 cent increase in state reimbursement for every healthy USDA meal.

SB 19's major provisions are scheduled to become active in 2004. As a condition to implementation, however, the Legislature must

appropriate the required funds in the state's 2003-2004 budget. And for this to happen, given the state's fiscal crisis, two things must occur: First, the policy and pilot grants that SB 19 currently is seeding must generate successful experiments in the school districts that are designing and implementing new school food policies and practices. They will provide the proof that SB 19 can work. This Best Practices Guide should assist in that effort.

Second, local school district policy makers, including the whole school community, pleased with what their districts are doing, and emboldened by success in other schools, will have to convey to their legislators an insistence that the new meal reimbursements be funded – despite state budget exigencies. The information this Guide contains, illustrating that schools around the state can do what SB 19 calls for, should help to build strong support for that critical budget item.

- **First Lady's Child Nutrition Task Force**

Sharon Davis, California's First Lady, recently has convened a blue ribbon task force as our state's part of a national campaign called Hunger Free America. The Task Force has focused first on the School Breakfast Program, a severely underutilized federal child nutrition program. Over 1,000,000 low-income children in California's schools, already qualified for free and reduced-price school lunches, miss out on the equally important breakfast. The Task Force is committed to closing that gap, and as attention centers on school breakfasts, this Guide will offer useful suggestions on how to prepare hearty meals that children want and schools can afford.

- **The Surgeon General's Call To Action To Prevent and Decrease Overweight and Obesity (2001)**

<http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/topics/obesity>

Last year, the Surgeon General, issuing a forceful call to action to prevent childhood obesity, commented:

Overweight and obesity... have reached epidemic proportions in the United States. Overweight and obesity are increasing in both men and women and among all population groups. In 1999, an estimated 61 percent of U.S. adults were overweight or obese, and 13 percent of children and adolescents were overweight. Today there are nearly twice as many overweight children and almost three times as many overweight adolescents as there were in 1980. We already are seeing the tragic results of these trends. Approximately 300,000 deaths a year in this country are currently associated with overweight and obesity. Left unabated,

overweight and obesity may soon cause as much preventable disease and death as cigarette smoking.

Many people believe that dealing with overweight and obesity is a personal responsibility. To some degree they are right, but it is also a community responsibility... **When school lunch-rooms... do not provide healthy and appealing food choices, that is a community responsibility.**

As the Best Practices Guide shows, many of California's school food service directors, with strong support from their school community, already have found ways to "provide healthy and appealing food choices."

- **UC Berkeley's Center for Weight and Health** issued a report in 2000, entitled: *Improving Children's Academic Performance, Health and Quality of Life: A Top Policy Commitment in Response to the Children's Obesity and Health Crisis in California.*

<http://www.cnr.berkeley.edu/cwh/activities/position.shtml>

The document represents a powerful indictment of the choices our communities offer our children in deciding what to eat and how to be physically active. The report vividly describes the nutrition and health dangers facing our children and the vital role that school meals can play in preventing hunger and obesity.

National statistics mustered in the report show that "approximately 1 in 4 children are already overweight or at-risk. This is an increase of about 77 % for children ages 6-11 and 120% for adolescents in less than 15 years." And in California, the numbers are still worse, while rates of risk for overweight among African-American and Latino teens are substantially higher than for whites (50% and 36% vs. 25%).

As the Center points out: "Our children are facing a health crisis. Their diets are high in fat and sugar, low in fruits and vegetables, and are low in many essential nutrients. They don't get enough exercise and are spending more time in solitary, sedentary activities like watching TV and playing video or computer games..."

At all economic levels, poor diet and inactivity are resulting in an alarming increase in the rate of childhood obesity and the appearance of health problems in children that used to occur primarily in adults. These include hypertension, type 2 diabetes, hyperlipidemia and hip and joint problems. Paradoxically, while many of our children suffer the health consequences of living in an affluent society, too many of California's children go to school hungry...**It is ironic**

that while California leads the nation in agricultural production, it ranks 13th [11th currently] among the states in prevalence of hunger...Sub-optimal diets, inactivity, and hunger are also affecting our children's ability to learn. Schools and communities have vital roles in promoting and supporting children as they practice good health habits because healthy, well nourished, active children are ready and able to learn." [Emphasis in the original.]

- **School Nutrition Dietary Assessment Study II, USDA FNS OANE, April, 2001** reports on significant improvements in the school meal programs. USDA's school lunch program continues "the long-standing goals of providing one-third (lunches) and one-fourth (breakfasts) of students' daily need for calories and key nutrients. In addition, the standards include goals for fat and saturated fat content that are consistent with Dietary Guidelines recommendations."

SNDA-II charts the progress schools made between 1991-92 and 1998-99 in improving school meal nutrition quality and concludes that: "The picture painted by the available evidence is a strong and positive one." On virtually all counts, school breakfasts and lunches have improved and are continuing to get better.

This Best Practices Guide captures some of the techniques that California school food service directors and their staffs have used to improve their students' meals. The practices detailed here represent a variety of approaches from a variety of school districts: rural and urban, northern and southern, large and small. We hope the Guide inspires further school nutrition improvements and supplies concrete examples and contacts with which to make them happen. We would welcome hearing about any other successful school meal strategies so that we might include them in subsequent revisions of this Guide.

## **Important Terms**

Terms used in this report include:

- **Food Service:** The department within the school district or school that operates the school breakfast and/or lunch program, including the operation of the National School Lunch Program.
- **National School Lunch Program (NSLP):** This program, administered by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) in cooperation with state and local education agencies, subsidizes the cost of preparing and serving meals at participating schools. The NSLP assures that breakfast and lunch are available to all students

at participating schools and that the meals meet specific nutritional requirements.

- **Competitive Foods:** USDA defines competitive foods as foods offered at school, other than meals served through USDA's school meal programs — school lunch, school breakfast, and after-school snack programs. These include both foods of minimal nutritional value (FMNV) (described in Appendix B of the regulations for the National School Lunch Program, and prohibited for sale in food service areas during the school meal periods [7 C.F.R. 210.11(b)]) and all other foods offered for individual sale (ranging from second servings of foods that are part of the reimbursable school meal to foods that students purchase in addition to or in place of a reimbursable school meal, such as a la carte sales and other foods and beverages purchased from vending machines, school stores, and snack bars).<sup>1</sup>
- **A La Carte:** Foods sold individually and not as part of a complete NSLP meal. Like other competitive foods, a la carte items are exempt from the dietary guidelines to which the NSLP meals must adhere.

## **School Meal Programs**

School meal programs are essential to many children's healthy growth and learning. According to a USDA analysis of the 1994-96 Continuing Survey of Food Intakes for Individuals (CSFII) data:

- National School Lunch Program (NSLP) participation is associated with higher average intakes of many nutrients, both at lunch and over 24 hours.
- NSLP participants have substantially lower intakes of added sugars than do nonparticipants.
- NSLP participants are more likely than nonparticipants to consume vegetables, milk and milk products, and meat and other protein-rich foods, both at lunch and over 24 hours; they also consume less soda and/or fruit drinks.
- School Breakfast Program participation is associated with higher intakes of food energy, calcium, phosphorous, and vitamin C.
- School Breakfast Program participation has been positively linked in numerous studies to improved academic performance.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *CND, USDA, Foods Sold in Competition with USDA School Meal Programs: A Report to Congress (January 12, 2001).*

<sup>2</sup> *CND, USDA, Foods Sold in Competition with USDA School Meal Programs: A Report to Congress (January 12, 2001), citing Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. Final report submitted to the U.S. USDA of Agriculture. Children's Diets in the Mid-1990s. Dietary Intake and Its Relationship with School Meal Participation. 2001.*

## Obesity and Other Nutritional Problems

Obesity is an increasing problem among children and adolescents, and stems from a multiplicity of environmental causes:

- The diets of only two percent of school-aged children meet the Food Guide Pyramid serving recommendations for all five major food groups.
- Overall, the percentages of children meeting the recommended number of food group servings are 14 percent for fruit, 17 percent for meat, 20 percent for vegetables, 23 percent for grains, and 30 percent for milk. Girls ages 14 to 18 have especially low intakes of fruits and dairy products.
- More than two-thirds of girls ages 14 to 18 — and even greater percentages of children in other age/gender groups — exceed the recommendations for intake of total fat and saturated fat.
- Children’s diets are high in added sugars. For all children, added sugars —including sugars used as ingredients in processed foods or added to foods as they are consumed — contribute an average of 20 percent of total food energy.
- Children are heavy consumers of regular and diet soda. Overall, 56 to 85 percent of children (depending on age and gender) consume soda on any given day. Teenage males are especially heavy consumers of soda, with over a third consuming more than three servings a day.<sup>3</sup>

These poor eating habits have helped contribute to a nationwide epidemic of childhood obesity. The prevalence of overweight among youth ages 6-17 years in the U.S. has more than doubled in the past 30 years, with most of the increase since the late 1970s. Overweight and obesity in children can lead to Type II diabetes. Type II diabetes accounted for 2 to 4 percent of all childhood diabetes before 1992, but skyrocketed to 16 percent by 1994.<sup>4</sup>

According to a report issued in 2000 by UC Berkeley’s Center on Weight and Health, obesity and overweight also are resulting in hypertension, hyperlipdemia, hip and joint problems and other conditions appearing in children that previously were associated with adults.

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<sup>3</sup> *CND, USDA, Foods Sold in Competition with USDA School Meal Programs: A Report to Congress (January 12, 2001).*

<sup>4</sup> *CND, USDA, Foods Sold in Competition with USDA School Meal Programs: A Report to Congress (January 12, 2001).*

## Competitive Foods

Competitive foods may hurt school-age children's nutrition. In one recent study, for example, fifth-grade students who ate only snack bar meals consumed significantly less total fruits, juices, and vegetables (0.40 serving)<sup>5</sup> than fifth-grade students who ate school lunch meals (0.82 serving). Because there are either no or very few nutritional standards for competitive foods, they may be higher in fat, sugar, and calories and lower in nutritional value.

Competitive foods also hurt school meal programs by discouraging participation. A la carte foods may mean cash for the food programs, but the consequent drop in school meal participation means less support from USDA and state sources. Where the competitive foods are sold outside food services, as in vending machines or student-run stores, the school food programs may not realize any revenues at all. Further, the presence of competitive foods — available only to children who can pay — may lead to increased stigmatizing of children who eat free and reduced-price meals.<sup>6</sup>

These national trends are much in evidence in California's high schools. According to a report commissioned by the Public Health Institute, at 71 percent of the school districts surveyed, a la carte items, including pizza, hamburgers, submarine sandwiches, french fries, chips, cookies, yogurt, bagels, ice cream, and soda accounted for up to 70 percent of all food sales at the school. While some schools offer brand-name fast foods, many school districts also sell healthier a la carte items. More than half offer fruit, yogurt, bagels, and packaged salads. A la carte items are primarily sold from free-standing vending machines, fast food carts, and snack bars. Of the high schools that sell a la carte items, more than half sell them in the cafeteria.

A growing trend, present in 14 percent of the responding districts, is to market fast foods under a district brand name, with foods either prepared by the district or purchased as generic items from a vendor. When the district controls the production, it can modify the foods to be healthier, for example, by using low-fat cheese on pizza and low-fat beans in burritos. Fifty-four percent of the districts sell modified versions of traditional fast foods.<sup>7</sup>

Nearly two-thirds of the districts that sell a la carte items reported that the main reason they do so is because students like them.

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<sup>5</sup> Cullen KW, Eagan J, Baranowski T, Owens E, de Moor C, *Effect of a la carte and snack bar foods at school on children's lunchtime intake of fruits and vegetables. J Am Diet Assoc* 2000 Dec;100(12):1482-6.

<sup>6</sup> CND, USDA, *Foods Sold in Competition with USDA School Meal Programs: A Report to Congress* (January 12, 2001).

<sup>7</sup> Public Health Institute, *2000 California High School Fast Food Survey: Findings and Recommendations* (February 2000).

Nearly 30 percent said these items add variety, and another 30 percent said sales of these items keep the food service program operating in the black. About one-fourth said the foods are popular, affordable, and can adhere to nutritional guidelines. Others identified the constraints of a short lunch period or lack of facilities, personnel, and food options as the main reasons for offering students a la carte foods.

## **Best Practices**

Food service staff in California schools are well aware of these issues and are taking steps to improve their offerings and increase participation in the school meal programs. This guide highlights a few of the innovative approaches that California Food Policy Advocates has discovered in the course of surveys and interviews with food service directors throughout the state.

The surveys were conducted by email in the summer of 2001. Respondents were asked for background information on their programs, about practices to increase healthy food choices (including a la carte items and competitive foods), about practices to increase participation in free/reduced meals, about new ways of using facilities to improve meal quality, and about school and district policies, student satisfaction, parent involvement, and community partnerships. In many cases the surveys were followed by telephone interviews. From the responses CFPA staff selected a number of programs representing a variety of different approaches to improving school food and school meal participation.

The descriptions that follow are organized in three primary categories:

- Practices to increase participation
- Practices to expand healthy offerings
- Supporting food service through nutrition policies and innovative collaborations

Most of the programs profiled fit into more than one of these categories, as their staff are looking at all sides of the equation — food quality, participation, and policy — in their efforts to improve their students' nutritional status, and these brief profiles cannot do justice to the full range of efforts and strategies employed by food service directors. Similarly, there are many other districts in California employing these and other innovations to improve their school meal programs. CFPA hopes that these best practice profiles will raise questions and spur ideas for food service directors in California.

# Practices to Increase Participation in NSLP

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## **Best Practice: Offering more choices while limiting competitive food sales**

Folsom Cordova Unified School District, Sacramento County, Alajos Schieder, 916.355.1180, [aschiede@fcusd.k12.ca.us](mailto:aschiede@fcusd.k12.ca.us); [www.fcusd.k12.ca.us](http://www.fcusd.k12.ca.us)

Folsom Cordova Unified School District has made an enormous change to the foods available to the district's students – all competitive, junk and ala carte foods and soda sales have been eliminated entirely throughout the district's food service department. Concerned about student nutrition, Al Schieder, Folsom Cordova's school food service director, cancelled the soda and vending contracts and focused on attracting students through high quality meals. Thinking like a business person – Al's background is in private industry – FCUSD created a business plan in which these meals, by attracting more students, would more than pay for themselves.

FCUSD cut out a la carte foods completely: the high school menu does not even include a price list. Instead, the district offers the same eight choices – including teriyaki rice bowls, California roll sushi, udon soup, tortilla wraps, tortellini and fettucine – every day. This makes sense financially, as the menu never changes and planning is very easy. At the same time, the cafeteria environment has been radically transformed – a "completely new environment for the kids," according to Al. It is set up as a food court, features brightly colored banners above the food line and attractively presented lunch options. The servers have taken off their hair nets and now wear uniforms with berets.

According to Al, the changes have been slowly won – "change is hard." Still, these changes have paid for themselves. In 1995, FCUSD had sales of approximately \$1.8 million, and a net loss of \$220,000. In 2001, sales reached \$3.2 million, labor costs had

decreased as a percentage, and the program generated \$400,000 in reserves, which allowed for the redesign of the cafeterias. Al considers that he is "in business" to make nutritious meals. He is willing to make investments in his program that will pay back down the line. (While the special sushi machine that they bought was expensive, the California rolls are cheap to produce and the department was able to recoup the cost fairly quickly.)

Significantly, these investments also have allowed FCUSD to increase free and reduced-price participation. For example, in 1995 at Cordova High School, 500 students qualified for free and reduced-price meals, but only 120 lined up in the stigmatizing free lunch line. Now there is no separate line, and Cordova High serves over 800 school lunches. And over 400 needy students participate daily.

### **Best Practice: Creating attractive eating environments and eliminating co-payments**

Corona-Norco Unified School District, Riverside County,  
Meg Chesley, 909.736.3256;  
<http://www.campuscatering.org/>

Corona-Norco's cafeteria renovations have been key in increasing NSLP participation. The schools now boast eight themed dining areas, ranging from a summer camp theme at an elementary school, to a 50's diner theme at a junior high school, to sports bar and Old West themed cafeterias in two of the high schools. Most of the renovations were done with child nutrition funds, but one was a collaboration with vendors, and one was paid for exclusively through facilities funds – primarily a grant from the state for school modernization – that also paid for better equipment and improved cooking facilities. The renovations range from the simple to the fancy: from murals painted by nutrition staff themselves, to the "cow bus," an indoor dining facility at a continuation high school that was created out of a donated school bus. One cafeteria, Santiago High School's "Shark Tank" site, features four satellite preparation and serving kitchens, one in each academic wing.

Meg and her staff have found that students' attitudes toward school food service changed dramatically with the renovations. Of course, the staff also strive to provide nutritious foods that students like. Meg's long-range vision is to transform parents', students', and teachers' opinions of school food and to make the cafeteria their first choice as a place to eat.

In another effort to increase participation, Corona-Norco eliminated the co-payment for reduced-price meals. The district found that higher participation by these students offset the loss of income from co-payments. At the time of this change, students who qualified for free meals participated at a rate of about 75%, while only 55% of reduced-price students participated. Assuming that the participation rates would equalize if the copayment were dropped, Meg figured that her reimbursement for the reduced-price group could be about 10% higher.

In fact, with the elimination of the co-payment, reduced-price students participate at a higher rate than the students qualifying for free meals. The number of eligible students overall has increased, and the district has seen a shift from free to reduced-price students. Meg cautions that there is no magic number that determines whether eliminating the co-payment is cost effective – it depends on the number of students who qualify, the number participating, the prices for lunch and the cost of providing the meal.

### **Best Practice: Feeding hungry kindergartners**

Hawthorne School District, Los Angeles County,  
Amy Beckstrom, 310.219.2848 Ext 209, [abeckstrom@hawthorne.k12.ca.us](mailto:abeckstrom@hawthorne.k12.ca.us);  
<http://www.hawthorne.k12.ca.us/educaters/Default.htm>

Hawthorne, a K-8 district, has very high free and reduced-price participation: over 80% of their students qualify for a free or reduced-price school meal. One of the district's key innovations to increase participation has centered upon kindergarten students. While half-day kindergartners were eligible for free lunches, the schools did not advertise the service because they had no one to monitor these young children during lunch. Kindergartners were generally "shooed away" from campus at lunchtime, and kindergarten lunch participation was therefore only 5%.

Unable to fix the supervision problem for the half-day students, Amy and her staff decided instead to provide reimbursable lunches for kindergartners during snack break. Teachers and administrators worried about the time it would take, but Amy found that she could offer a healthy meal in the same amount of time as their usual snack time. Participation went from 5% to 95%, with the revenue from increased participation supporting the extra food and labor costs. The program won teacher support because no classroom time was lost and teachers received additional classroom tools in the form of nutrition-themed coloring pages. In Hawthorne, morning kindergartners are now guaranteed two meals a day, while afternoon kindergartners get a nutritious lunch.

## **Best Practice: On-site preparation of homemade foods**

Healdsburg Unified School District, Sonoma County,  
Nancy May, 707.431.3434, [nmay@husd.com](mailto:nmay@husd.com);  
<http://www.husd.com/directoryservices.html>

The Healdsburg USD food service staff under Nancy has focused on weaning students off branded items and replacing them with homemade foods. Previously, the district contracted with a vendor that provided prepackaged and frozen meals unpopular with students and food service staff alike. Healdsburg schools now prepare meals on-site, and the staff takes pleasure in preparing the meals and serving them to happier customers. The high school offers a salad bar featuring produce from the Network of Sonoma City Farmers. Each school has a garden, and the school produce is included in the menus whenever possible. Healdsburg has even started to accept produce from students' family farms to decorate the cafeteria and use as surplus.

The high school has a fairly new cafeteria, paid for by a districtwide bond for school remodels. In addition to allowing more food choices for students, the process of cafeteria construction proved an opportunity to involve the wider school community in nutrition education. Nancy enlisted the Board of Trustees (school board) to support efforts to restrict sales of branded items with an honest and descriptive presentation and samples of the food. Board members and the superintendent volunteered to prepare meals in the new kitchens, an experience that greatly increased their understanding of the importance of school food. Nancy also has worked closely with parents to involve them in student nutrition. She attends PTO meetings, bringing food samples and encouraging parents to use the food service department for their events.

Participation has increased greatly at the elementary schools with the introduction of fresh foods. In the junior high school, a la carte participation is up, and school lunch participation increased in the first year before leveling off. A new salad bar at the junior high school has improved participation rates this year.

Unfortunately, competitive foods remain a serious challenge at the high school. The campus is more open than it had previously been, and lunch numbers are off this year as a result. (Students do participate at their morning break, when food services offers a hot breakfast, featuring breakfast burritos, roasted potatoes, and other items.) A la carte items sold at the junior high and high school are as nutritious and low-fat as possible (i.e. goldfish crackers, wheat thins). While Healdsburg still has a few years to go on a 10-year Pepsi contract, Nancy has limited soda to the

high school vending machines and is replacing the soda with waters, Odwalla juices, and a local organic apple juice. Two snack machines remain at the high school but, again, Nancy lets them sit empty sometimes and has pulled candy in favor of other items.

## **Best Practice: Controlling vending contracts**

Tracy Unified School District, San Joaquin County  
Paula Weeks, 209.830.3255, [pweeks@tusd.net](mailto:pweeks@tusd.net);  
<http://www.tracy.k12.ca.us/business/food/>

Tracy USD is unusual in that Paula Weeks keeps tight control over all contracts with vendors that sell food outside the cafeteria. She negotiates a single contract for the entire district, and her close involvement at this level has three primary benefits for school nutrition services. First, she can ensure that the vending contracts are in line with federal regulations. Second, she has greater control over the types of food offered through the machines. Third, food services get significant revenues from the contracts – 25% of all commission sales outside the cafeterias – because of the economies of scale that a single contract permits. These monies, in turn, allow Paula and her staff to make other healthy changes within the district.

While they still offer promotional items – like Little Caesar’s pizza – with certain meals, Tracy is increasingly focused on fresh and less packaged foods. Paula has concentrated the foods with limited nutritional value at one point-of-sale (POS) while offering more nutritious items at the rest of their carts and snack bars, thus increasing the percentage of revenue from healthier a la carte and reimbursable meal points of sales. Furthermore, new serving, refrigeration and heating equipment has allowed more on-site preparation and fresher menu options. Paula has worked with a company to design outside kiosks for use in food court areas and designated food court areas on new school plans. The proceeds from the vending contract have supported purchasing the outside kiosks that offer Tracy students more variety, upscale and healthier foods. (The district, with 16,000 students, has low free and reduced-price numbers, and a high paying population. The a la carte options are a major focus in the district.)

While the Tracy school board adopted a policy eliminating the sale of homemade food from campuses and restricting competitive sales, Paula plans to go back to the board to seek a stricter version. While the elementary and junior high schools are in compliance with the policy, the high school store is sometimes in direct competition with food services. The district administration, which is heavily dependent on its share of the vending machine commissions, actively supports and enforces Paula's decisions.

She strongly encourages adopting a board nutrition policy that supports the food services department, meeting with stakeholders about competitive food sale options, and emphasizing that vendors support school associations (i.e. by honoring bid pricing, donations, etc.).

# Practices to Expand Healthy Offerings

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## **Best Practice: Healthy Alternatives in Elementary Schools**

Alisal Union School District, Monterey County  
Suzanne Du Verrier, 831.753.5776; <http://www.salinas.k12.ca.us/>

This K-6 district has been a trailblazer in streamlining food service administration and paperwork. For example, Alisal USD piloted the Provision 2 program, beginning in 1990. More recently, Alisal spearheaded the development of the Summer Food Seamless Waiver, which permits school districts to operate the summer food program under the much simpler NSLP rules. (The Seamless Waiver has proved to be so successful that USDA has encouraged school districts throughout the country to adopt it as a means of expanding participation in the program.) The District has used money saved through participation in these programs on a concerted campaign to improve food quality.

In order to meet 5-A-Day goals, Alisal is establishing salad bars in all 11 of its schools; as of 2002 seven of these are in place. Students like the salad bars a lot, and Suzanne credits the preparation done with teachers and parents for this success. Before each salad bar is rolled out, food service staff first attend a teachers' meeting to explain the nutritional basis for the salad bar and how teachers can help students eat well from the bar. Next, food service staff go to every classroom to discuss salad bar etiquette and nutrition with students. Finally, letters are sent to parents explaining salad bar rules ("don't take more than you can eat," etc.) and asking for parent support.

Although Alisal has no a la carte sales or vending machines, and sells no soda or chips, Suzanne continues to work with schools on alternatives to candy sale fundraisers. At one school, parents chose to purchase granola bars through the food service department (at a discount) instead of selling chocolate. Working cooperatively with site administrators is an important component of this program's success. For example, on testing days the breakfast

program runs later, so that principals and teachers can be sure that all students get a good meal at the beginning of the day. Through the district's Nutrition Network grant, Alisal staff perform extensive nutrition education in the classroom – especially with 4th and 5th grades – and with migrant, ESL, and early childhood parents. Partnerships with WIC and Project Lean contribute to the program's success.

### **Best Practice: Healthy POS options**

Anaheim City Elementary, Anaheim Union High School,  
Orange County, Terry Pangborn, 714.999.3560;  
[http://www.auhsd.k12.ca.us/Food\\_Services/Catering/Index.htm](http://www.auhsd.k12.ca.us/Food_Services/Catering/Index.htm)

The Anaheim food service department is working to offer kids more choices. At the elementary level, students choose from five entrée selections along with daily offerings of fresh fruits and vegetables. The high schools feature salad bars as well as a la carte fresh fruit and vegetable trays.

The Healthy Food Cart, offering lower fat items such as salads with low fat dressing and nonfat yogurt, has been particularly effective. Anaheim Union's lunch period is only 25 minutes and the campus is closed, so the cart – which serves as many as 150 students per day – is essential to serving healthy food to a large number of students. The snack bars now offer healthier alternatives as well (though students are still able to purchase candy, chips, and soda from the student stores). More fruits and vegetables have meant increased costs to the food program, but Terry has managed to keep the program in the black.

### **Best Practice: Healthy midmorning snacks**

Carlsbad Unified School District, San Diego County,  
Howard Sonkin, 760.918.2084;  
<http://www.carlsbadusd.k12.ca.us/food.htm>

Chips and carbonated drinks are out at Carlsbad's elementary schools, and sunflower kernels, string cheese, and bottled water are in. Recognizing the need for a midmorning snack in the elementary schools, Howard and staff took advantage of the district's small size (eight elementary schools) and implemented the snack program districtwide. While it requires additional staff, the midmorning snack has been positively received by hungry kids, and is one of the food service department's most successful practices. In several of the eight schools, the snack is a reimbursable breakfast for children who didn't get breakfast before school. CUSD has structured food costs in the program to break even.

While school food service does not sell candy or soda at either of the district's two high schools (one large, one small), students are happy with a variety of meal and a la carte choices, and healthier drinks. Carlsbad offers a vegetarian entrée daily, as well as choices of fresh fruit and vegetables, and offers a brunch period in the middle and high schools. Unfortunately, competition continues in the form of vending machines – a major fundraiser for the Associated Student Body – and a student store, a program of the school's marketing class, that sells soda, chips, and cookies, and even delivers snacks to school groups meeting during mealtimes. Efforts to rein in the competitive sales, which have prevented food services from breaking even at the high school for several years, continue.

### **Best Practice: Celebrating locally grown produce**

Chico Unified School District, Butte County,  
Joel Adema, 530.891.3022, [foodsvcs@cusd.chico.k12.ca.us](mailto:foodsvcs@cusd.chico.k12.ca.us);  
<http://www.chicousd.org/nutrition/index.html>

Chico's food service program emphasizes locally grown fruits – apples, kiwis, and mandarin oranges – and tries to use local farmers and brokers. Each year, in collaboration with the Chico Food Project, a community food group that encourages the use of locally grown produce, Chico Unified sponsors Farm City Week, a program that has expanded to two weeks of activities. Farm City Week promotes local agriculture and educates students – and adults – about local farmers. Students learn where and how fruits and vegetables are grown and processed, touring farms, markets, and processing centers.

Despite competitive sales at the high school from nearby restaurants, vending machines, and the student store, the program has for several years sold only Gatorade, Snapple, and water, and has remained in the black. School meals now include more fresh fruits and vegetables; junior high and high schools have salad bars. Chico works with 5-A-Day and SHAPE, and a recent grant for nutrition education has allowed for the training of food service staff and teachers.

### **Best Practice: Emphasizing whole foods**

Paso Robles Joint Unified School District, San Luis Obispo County, Rod Blackner, 805.237.3346 Ext 132,  
[rblackner@king.prps.k12.ca.us](mailto:rblackner@king.prps.k12.ca.us); <http://king.prps.k12.ca.us/food/>

Paso Robles Joint USD's food service department focuses on "whole foods." Among other innovations, Paso Robles has for over a decade offered homemade, high-protein, low-fat breads,

made largely from vegetables, as part of the NSLP. Elementary school salad bars offer the breads along with a wide range of vegetables and legumes, and at the secondary level Rod and his staff offer five entrée choices including a homemade hot entrée, a vegetarian offering, their own bean/cheese burrito, and a fully reimbursable meal from the salad bars.

Paso Robles' Culinary Arts Academy teaches restaurant-level cooking skills. The two-year program is equivalent to a freshman year at a culinary college. The Academy offers catering services to district and outside clients, and these services brought in over \$250,000 last year. The Academy also incorporates nutrition education, teaching elementary students through hands-on activities such as making bread or fruit turnovers. Even without revenue from the Academy and catering, Rod's program is solvent, and participation, as well as revenue, has increased at a steady 5-10% each year.

A new blast chiller and other equipment in Paso Robles' central kitchen – paid for in part by catering revenues – have improved meal quality and variety. The blast chiller allows them to cool 2000 portions of Sloppy Joe mix, for example, and then package it and serve it the next day at the various school sites. Salad bars have decreased expenses (less waste) and excited students. An assembly on "salad bar etiquette" preceded the introduction of the salad bars, and student conduct has not been a problem.

### **Best Practice: Entrée bars**

Calaveras Unified School District, Calaveras County,  
Ann Delara, 209.754.2122;  
[http://www.calaveras.k12.ca.us/08 Departments/Food/fse.htm](http://www.calaveras.k12.ca.us/08_Departments/Food/fse.htm)

Entrée bars, which allow students to pick and choose fruits, vegetables, baked potato toppings, and the like, are popular innovations that have succeeded, in many districts, in reducing waste and increasing participation. In Calaveras, elementary school students choose each day from 5 entrée selections, including a side-item steam bar which changes daily from salad bar to potato bar to taco bar to veggie bar. Middle schools feature entrée salads (chef, tuna, and taco) three times a week, and the high school has similar offerings. Since Calaveras campuses are closed and rural, and the district does not have many fast food restaurants or businesses near schools, Calaveras food service staff tries to keep student interest and participation through nutritious and appealing foods and a wide range of choices. Despite the many choices and the extra time needed to implement the program, costs have been kept low, and the program remains in the black. Daily NSLP participation has increased to 2000 meals (60%); students' and

teachers' opinions of the school food service program have changed for the better.

Two mornings a week, Ann teaches nutrition classes at all levels. She has held food shows at the elementary and secondary schools, bringing in vendors and allowing students to evaluate their foods. (Winners were added to the schools' menus.) Monthly newsletters include recipes – with nutrient analyses – to make at home.

### **Best Practice: Mini farmers' market**

Capistrano Unified School District, Orange County,  
Dawn Davey, 949.489.7375; <http://www.cusdcampuscatering.com/>

Capistrano USD has taken the entrée bar to another level by transforming the 5-A-Day fruit and vegetable bar – available to elementary students along with four daily choices of entrée – into a mini farmers' market. This event, at four of Capistrano's elementary schools, involves not only offering new fruit and vegetable choices, but also promotional activities like a visit from a dairy calf that students can pet as they learn about the importance of calcium in their diets.

Another innovative practice has been the use of the food service department website. Students can email the "Food Wiz" anonymously with menu planning suggestions and questions, resulting, according to department staff, in better menus, more honest communication between students and food service staff, and increased NSLP participation, especially by elementary students.

### **Best Practice: Farmers' Market Salad Bar**

Santa Monica-Malibu Unified School District, Los Angeles County,  
Tracie Thomas, 310.450.8338 Ext 342, [payton@smmusd.org](mailto:payton@smmusd.org);  
<http://www.smmusd.org/depts/food/index.html>

The Farmers' Market Salad Bar (FMSB) program in Santa Monica-Malibu USD offers students a wide variety of fresh fruits and vegetables purchased directly from local farmers. The program, which grew from a parent's suggestion, replaces ordinary salad bars with fresher, more appealing farmers' market produce. When a 1997 pilot at McKinley Elementary proved successful, the department implemented the program at all 15 schools, and the program has proven both popular and sustainable, with a FMSB lunch costing less than a hot entrée meal.

Students can take as much as they want and only what they want from FMSB, which eliminates waste. A fully reimbursable meal, the FMSB is kept fresh and interesting with the addition of a potato bar, pasta bar, or soup bar once a month: students who select the salad bar receive the hot entrée along with it. Salad bar participation doubles on these days. FMSB participation is boosted by the district's gardening program, operated by volunteers and paid staff, which maintains gardens at all school sites, conducts farm and market tours, and offers nutrition lessons. Started under a "Gardening Angel" program funded by the City of Santa Monica, the garden program links the garden to the cafeteria to the classroom for Santa Monica-Malibu students.

# Supporting Food Service Through Nutrition Policies and Innovative Collaborations

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## **Best Practice: Developing a district-wide food policy**

Berkeley Unified School District, Alameda County  
Erica Peng, Nutrition Network, 510.644.6710;  
<http://www.berkeley.k12.ca.us/>

In 1999, Berkeley's school board approved a food policy that received notice for its efforts to "[e]nsure that the food served shall be organic to the maximum extent possible." With strong emphasis on the district's gardens program, and a goal of eliminating the reduced-price category, the policy – developed with input from parents, students, administrators, and community leaders – reflects a new understanding of the School Board's role and the schools' role in improving Berkeley students' nutrition.

The policy is still not fully implemented, and some parts of it may need to be revisited. For example, while the organic farmers' market salad bars at the elementary and middle schools were initially very popular and paid participation increased at the schools that have them, the program has turned out to be more expensive than anticipated when labor costs – for shopping at the farmers' markets, for example – are included. Similarly, the elimination of the reduced-price category is being revisited.

A Menu Advisory Committee consisting of parents, teachers, community and Board members, and administrative staff, met during the 2000-2001 school year to look at the policy and review the district's priorities. Students were involved in taste testing, and the Committee reviewed menus and discussed expansion of the school breakfast program to additional sites, contracts with local farmers for fresh and/or organic produce, and efforts at better communication with the Child Nutrition Services Program.

School gardening is key to Berkeley USD's food policy. Using USDA Food Stamp Nutrition Education Funds, Berkeley's Nutrition Network provides students at 11 schools with produce-tasting classes and gardens where they grow and harvest fruits

and vegetables. The garden activities are wide-ranging. They include cooking classes for children and parents; field trips to the weekly Farmers' Markets at which students are given a budget to buy healthy foods and then return to cook a meal; and farm field trips to learn about sustainable agriculture. A SHAPE grant supports staff development: food service staff are learning about organic farming and receiving cooking classes.

### **Best Practice: Encouraging student involvement in food services**

Herbert Hoover High School, San Diego County,  
Naomi Butler, Food On The Run Site, Project Lean,  
619.283.6281; <http://hoover.sdcs.k12.ca.us/index.html>

Student members of Club LEAN (Leaders Encouraging Activity and Nutrition) at Herbert Hoover High School in San Diego meet every week and work to help the food service department advertise healthier items. Hoover has been part of the state's Project LEAN pilot program since 1996. Under the program, while fast food options are still available, Hoover students are aggressively offered healthier options as part of the regular meals and a la carte offerings. School administrators report that some of these healthier offerings sell well enough that – although they may still be more expensive than less nutritious items – the department can break even.

The active involvement of student food activists sets Hoover's program apart. At Hoover, where 100% of the students qualify for free or reduced-price meals, Club LEAN members have set up sampling booths for their peers, and then have marketed the more popular items. Their advertising campaigns have led to increased sales of Baja Bowls (Spanish rice with vegetables, black beans, and salsa), for example, and greater participation in the breakfast program overall. Students in Club LEAN have demonstrated the connections between marketing, economics, and nutrition education in student choices and advocated for policies that encourage greater availability of healthy foods.

### **Best Practice: Integrating nutrition into the curriculum**

El Monte City School District, Los Angeles County,  
Wanda Grant, 626.453.3734;  
[http://www.emcsd.k12.ca.us/child\\_nutrition.html](http://www.emcsd.k12.ca.us/child_nutrition.html)

In El Monte, food service staff have created an outstanding partnership with teachers and administrators to integrate nutrition education into the K-8 curriculum. Related to the SAT9 and developed over 12 years by El Monte teachers in collaboration

with food services, the nutrition lessons are part of the core curriculum and can be accessed on the district website . The food service department purchased cooking carts for classroom demonstrations, and a library cart stocked with books that incorporate nutrition education in all school subjects. As part of a math lesson, for example, students determine the quantities of calcium or sugar in certain beverages. In history, students track the creation and popularity of the pretzel through medieval times or study the changes in U.S. milk distribution over the twentieth century. Wanda has been a leader in finding funding for this nutrition curriculum, and has 75 paid teachers involved. Retired teachers have been hired to organize and teach the lesson plans. Challenges include the large amount of paperwork necessary to create an audit trail and to organize the personnel service contracts with the teachers.

### **Best Practice: Eliminating candy and soda on campus**

Sequoia Middle School, Fresno Unified School District,  
Fresno County, Principal Maureen Moore, 559.457.3210;  
<http://www.fresno.k12.ca.us/schools/sequoia.html>

At Sequoia Middle School in Fresno, a committed team of food service staff, school administration, faculty, parents and students have dramatically changed the school's orientation toward both meal programs and competitive foods over the last few years.

First, student and parent complaints about "maple bars for breakfast" led the school to cut back on 50% of the maple bars. When that worked, they cut out all of them, substituting hot, healthy breakfasts at the school. Recognizing that many of Sequoia's 850 students – 93% of whom qualify for free breakfast and lunch – did not eat after leaving school for the day, Sequoia added an After School Snack Program.

Other sources of sugar on campus were the vending machines and a snack bar, which support a principal's discretionary fund. Over time, the snack bar operator has agreed to provide foods with higher nutritional value and eliminate candy, while the vending machines have dropped soda and carry only waters and sports drinks. Surprisingly, the profits have exceeded those in the candy/soda days (with snack bar income doubling).

Finally, there are the fundraisers. Candy and soda sales had become a major source of funding for class activities, but the Principal, Maureen Moore, declared a temporary moratorium on these sales during a two-week standardized testing period, as an experiment in improving test scores. Jennifer Jordan, a physical

education teacher who had sold candy and soda after classes, offered her students healthy foods instead, and found that they were willing not only to eat, but to buy, these healthier alternatives, and the moratorium became permanent.

Sequoia's principal believes that as a result of the nutritional changes, there has been a decrease in behavior problems, and expulsions and suspensions have decreased at the school. She credits student ownership and participation in the process with making healthier eating part of the school culture.

This year, Sequoia has added a Food/Nutrition class. Sequoia has started this year with 6th graders on campus for the first time. The addition of 6th graders gave Sequoia the opportunity to add an elective. Foods/Nutrition seemed to be the best class to offer. The school reports that it is very excited about its next steps to increase nutrition education on campus. Now they feel they have a comprehensive program, teaching nutrition, selling nutritious snacks and eating nutritious breakfasts and lunches.

Also, Sequoia's Physical Education Department supports this program by engaging students in dialogue and activities about healthy bodies. Principal Moore feels extremely grateful to her students, parents, teachers, support staffs, district and community people who have helped Sequoia build a strong Healthy Choices culture at Sequoia.

# Appendix

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## List of Participants

Joel Adema, *Chico Unified School District*  
Amy Beckstrom, *Hawthorne School District*  
Rod Blackner, *Paso Robles Joint Unified School District*  
Naomi Butler, *Herbert Hoover High School*  
Meg Chesley, *Corona-Norco Unified School District*  
Dawn Davey, *Capistrano Unified School District*  
Ann Delara, *Calaveras Unified School District*  
Wanda Grant, *El Monte City School District*  
Nancy May, *Healdsburg Unified School District*  
Maureen Moore, *Sequoia Middle School, Fresno Unified School District*  
Terry Pangborn, *Anaheim Union High School District*  
Erica Peng, *Berkeley Unified School District*  
Alajos Scheider, *Folsom Cordova Unified School District*  
Howard Sonkin, *Carlsbad Unified School District*  
Tracie Thomas, *Santa Monica-Malibu Unified School District*  
Suzanne Du Verrier, *Alisal Union School District*  
Paula Weeks, *Tracy Unified School District*