

# Encinitas Union Elementary School District



## AT A GLANCE

**Lea Bonelli, Nutrition Services Director**

Encinitas in San Diego County, CA (suburban)

9 elementary schools

5,342 students

15.4% eligible for free & reduced-price meals (FRPM)

244,980 lunches served (annually)

**Food service model:** central kitchen; scratch-cooking; family-style; waste reduction/composting; district organic garden; local and organic food

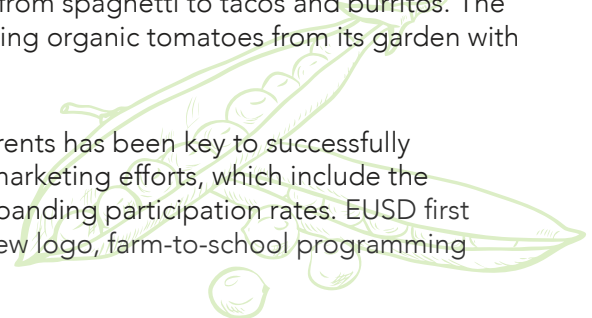
**Sources for organic foods:** American Produce, The Farm Lab (Encinitas USD Farm), and direct purchasing from local suppliers

With 30% of students participating and about 1,800 students served daily, Encinitas Union’s Nutrition Services Department maintains a commitment to scratch cooking. Lea Bonelli, EUSD’s Nutrition Services Director, is proud to serve **local, sustainable and organic foods** as much as possible out of her **scratch-cooking kitchen** operation. She is also focused on reducing her food service operations’ environmental impact through **waste reduction** measures such as **composting, serving meals family style and reducing kitchen/cafeteria waste**.

The school district operates a **10-acre certified organic garden** — making it the first in the nation to grow certified organic food on school district land and feed that produce directly to its students! The district also has smaller gardens at all nine elementary school sites. In 2018, The Ecology Center in Encinitas began partnering with EUSD to create the “Farm Lab.” Aligning with the district’s green initiatives and its health and wellness program, the garden and hands-on learning center provide educational retreats for students. The Ecology Center’s program helps students **learn about nutrition and the environment through fun interactive lessons**, reinforcing positive messages about the foods being served in the cafeteria.

Encinitas launched its efforts to procure **organic proteins** in 2019, starting with **organic beef and chicken**. The kitchen staff use these in a wide range of students’ favorite menu items, from spaghetti to tacos and burritos. The district is now able to make a fully organic Bolognese sauce for pasta, using organic tomatoes from its garden with organic ground beef from Mindful Meats.

Serving fresh, organic foods and marketing this to both students and parents has been key to successfully increasing student participation in school meal programs. The district’s marketing efforts, which include the development of a beautiful marketing logo/brand, have been vital to expanding participation rates. EUSD first launched its marketing program during the 2014-15 school year with a new logo, farm-to-school programming



and updated menu templates. In the subsequent years, the marketing has grown to highlight major menu changes that include organic and freshly prepared foods, salad bars and the elimination of packaged foods. As a result, the district generated a 16% increase in school lunch participation in just five years. The **additional revenue** that EUSD has brought in from recent years **enables the district to invest those funds back into procuring more organic** and other healthy foods, which will in turn bolster even greater participation from new students. Next up, Lea is working on finding a source for organic flour to make an entirely organic and home-grown pizza!

## Featured Organic Products: Seasonal Produce, Beef and Chicken

**Organic produce:** As its only customer, EUSD's Nutrition Services can source the bulk of its organic produce from the district's 10-acre certified organic farm. In addition to procuring a rich diversity of produce through the **Farm Lab**, the district has been serving much of this fresh home-grown produce in its schools' salad bars, which have been a big hit with students.

Pizza is one of the most popular menu items Encinitas proudly makes using produce from its organic farm, including tomatoes, herbs and other freshly harvested toppings. The kitchen staff also make tomato sauce used in a variety of dishes throughout the school year. To supplement what they source from its garden, the district purchases organic produce from American Produce Company, including apples, kumquats, avocados, oranges and persimmons, as well as organic lettuce from Go Green Agriculture.

**Organic beef and chicken:** Lea is most proud of the organic meat and chicken, which are monthly menu items. Organic ground beef is used in a variety of dishes, including tacos, burritos and pasta sauces. Working with Mindful Meats items directly from Marin Sun Farms, Encinitas has been pleased with the quality of these products, as well as with the positive response from the school district's parent community, who support these changes. Knowing organic protein is more expensive, Lea balances her budget by incorporating USDA commodity ingredients using federal "entitlement" dollars to purchase canned beans, rice and tortillas, among other foods, and blending the organic meats with less expensive items from the USDA.

*"When adding organic items to your menu, start small. Pick one item and do your research to find the most competitive price."*

– Lea Bonelli,  
EUSD Nutrition  
Services Director

## Why Organic?

Lea Bonelli is committed to purchasing all organic food for herself. Lea believes the students in her district should also have access to nutritious high-quality foods that don't contain hormones and aren't sprayed with pesticides. She also knows that sourcing organic is something the school community supports, which encourages her and her team, strengthens her program and guides her purchasing decisions.

## Key Partnership: The Ecology Center

The partnership between EUSD and The Ecology Center in Encinitas has been key to the school district's successful organic food production and nutrition education efforts with students and parents alike. While growing food and managing a small production garden, **The Ecology Center** supports the school district community in a multitude of ways, including organizing volunteers for the garden, hosting farm to table dinners, and providing students and parents with engaging learning opportunities. The Ecology Center aims to prepare these learners to be leaders.

*"Typically, purchasing organic meat can more expensive, but we have been lucky to get a competitive price and are able to combine our organic meat with inexpensive proteins like beans, or adding the meat to sauces, in order to stretch the product. We have added organic ground beef into our scratch-made Bolognese sauce, and it has been a hit with students and staff. Our community has been incredibly receptive to the incorporation of higher quality proteins on our menus, and we see that with the continual increase in meal participation."*

– Lea Bonelli,  
EUSD Nutrition Services Director

