

BOULDER VALLEY SCHOOL DISTRICT, COLORADO

Lead with vision and take chances.

Ann Cooper is a K-12 foodservice visionary. Years before entering the school food world, Ann was a fine dining chef. Her school foodservice career began as director at Ross School in East Hampton, New York, where she transformed the menu to seasonal and sustainable. She was then recruited by Alice Waters to transform school food in Berkeley, California before taking the helm in Boulder.

Ann has led Boulder's district to become one of the most successful school food operations in the country. Since Ann began nine years ago, BVSD has prioritized scratch cooking and local and organic sourcing whenever possible. The kitchen avoids using highly processed foods, high fructose corn syrup, chemicals, dyes or food additives.

Plant-forward or vegetarian options are offered daily at every meal, along with salad bars stocked with fresh, delicious and often local farm produce. BVSD is the first REAL certified school district in the country, recognizing the district's excellence in implementing healthy and sustainable food goals. Boulder has received 39 USDA Healthier U.S. School Challenge awards and is the only school district on the Good Food 100 Restaurants List. Ann also helps other school districts through her non-profit, the Chef Ann Foundation, which aims to "provide school communities with the tools, training,



Ann Cooper,
Foodservice Director

"We know our mission is to serve kids healthy food and educate them about healthy food, and that's what we do."

At A Glance

31,000 total students

\$8.8 million total budget

\$2.6 million food budget
(\$1.25/lunch)

13,000 meals served /day

2,219,000 meals served /year

19.4% free & reduced meals

95% scratch cooking

Self operated foodservice,
3 regional production kitchens
(planning central kitchen for
2019-20).

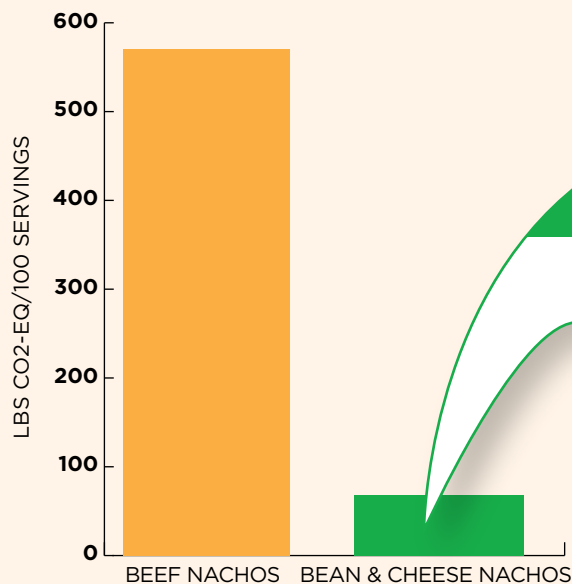
Plant-based every day (plus 25%
regional)

resources, and funding to create healthier food and redefine lunchroom environments."

Ann says her experience working in high-end restaurants makes her "willing to take more chances." "I have two big white boards with my next six-week menu cycles on it. I ask myself, 'how do I sell it?' I'm not worried about pushing the envelope. For example, the day veggie Bibimbap is on the menu, there are red

The Power of One Veggie Option: Bean and Cheese Nachos

Source: *EPA GHG Calculator*



Approximately 13 percent of students choose the **VEGGIE NACHOS** when served alongside the Beef Nachos. Over 7 years, just by offering this veggie option, BVSD reduced its carbon footprint by **800,000 pounds of CO2 equivalent**.

equivalent to



900,000
miles driven

OR



burning
41,000 gallons
of gasoline

OR



planting 9,000
seedlings &
letting them grow
for 10 years

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pork tamales and a chicken dish. We can take chances, and even if the vegetarian dish doesn't sell well, something else will. But for a lot of other people, they can't take a chance to lose Average Daily Participation (ADP). It's like a menu mix, if the total overall works out, it's okay," she says.

Creative funding strategies help pay for better food.

BVSD features a robust catering program that helps fund their local and regional purchases and their quality plant-based menu items. This "School Food Project" program includes food truck catering and event catering marketed to the public for events, parties and meetings, as well as classroom celebrations. Rather than a parent bringing in a cake or pizza, kids can have a pizza party prepared by the school foodservice staff, with items such as vegetable crudité, hummus or quesadillas. The catering business helps raise money for the program and boosts exposure for their work.

Community events and nutrition education can increase participation.

Ann and her staff participate in more than 200 events a year teaching kids "what we eat matters." These

events range from menu tastings to "A Taste of BVSD Food Festival." The tastings, Ann says, "provide an opportunity for students to try samples of our menu items and Harvest of the Month featured produce." "It's challenging to get anyone to change eating habits," said Ann. "But we do Rainbow Days, menus tastings, and chef demos, which supports the students trying new flavors and helps make changing their pallets easier."

To deepen kids' engagement, Ann hosts Iron Chef competitions where students can cook what they want to eat for school lunch. "We had 12 teams apply for the Iron Chef this year and we chose six. Every team had to get up and speak about why they chose their dish. We have six teams of kids in middle school talking about plant-forward and really understanding it. It's great."

In this year's plant-forward theme, "kids came up with the menu and the winner was served in schools," Ann says. This year's winner was a traditional tomato soup with pureed chickpeas. "Soups are challenging because of the protein requirement in school foodservice. The kids pureed the chickpeas into the soup and served it with veggie flatbread."



Boulder Valley School District's innovative approaches to educate and engage students:

- "Rainbow Days" introduce elementary students to the salad bar while teaching them healthy fruit and veggie choices (tasting the rainbow) and portion control;
- Chef demonstrations engage secondary students with a sensory approach and encourage them to try new foods;
- Calendar and poster art contests show what local food means to kids;
- Farmer visits enable students to meet BVSD's farmer partners, who grow the beautiful produce for schools' salad bars and lunch menu;
- Farm field trips provide hands-on experiences for students to learn about farm operations, where food comes from and how it is grown;
- "A Taste of BVSD Food Festival" offers parents, students and the community an opportunity to sample high-quality entrees and side dishes while celebrating local food — and connects students and their families with BVSD garden and farmer partners.

Source: Boulder Valley School District

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Source: Boulder Valley School District

Ramp up plant-based options with whole ingredients.

To expand the variety of vegetarian and vegan options, Ann insists on using whole foods for her plant-based dishes. “I don’t like meat analogues because I want to cook with real ingredients,” she says. “I get that it’s climate friendly, but it’s highly processed and I don’t feel like it’s teaching children anything. To make a chicken nugget that’s plant-based isn’t teaching kids how to eat vegetables.” Ann is also concerned about the manufacturing processes used to produce these meat substitutes, such as protein isolates.

Boulder’s participation numbers have increased (up 29 percent in the nine years since she’s been with the district) as Ann has added more vegetarian options. About 10 to 15 percent of BVSD students choose vegetarian options daily. Next year, she’s ramping up her plant-based game with a veggie ramen with (Meat/ Meat Alternate) protein from tofu and edamame. “We’ve had good luck with Ramen bowls,” she says. “Ethnic food works well. A bean burrito (50% beans, 50% cheese) sells well too and another new item next year is an open-face falafel with tzatziki, which will be vegan, and almost all of our dressings will be vegan with aquafaba.”⁵⁰

Ann is also **blending animal and plant protein to offer more plant-forward entrees.** The Plant-Forward Continuum is a useful framework developed by Ann and promoted by the Chef Ann Foundation. The continuum shows how foodservice directors can incrementally include more plant-based protein that credits as meat or meat alternative or M/MA into dishes — adding first 25 percent plant protein, then 50 percent, then 100 percent. For instance, Boulder Valley has been adding 25 percent (M/MA) beans into the beef nachos, reducing the cost and enabling the district to buy higher quality local beef. Blending is not only more climate-friendly, it also supports more purchasing of local and fresh products.

Policy limitations

Ann acknowledges that plant-based proteins for K-12 students are a challenge due to USDA guidelines and restrictions. “The idea that quinoa is not considered a protein is a problem. We need to figure out a whole foods answer to this. It’s not about highly processed. It’s about how to use whole foods as a plant-based answer.”