

Natomas Unified School District



AT A GLANCE

Vince Caguin, Director of Nutrition Services & Warehousing

North of downtown Sacramento (suburban)

14 K-12 schools

15,595 students

50.5% eligible for free & reduced-price meals (FRPM)

1.2 million lunches served (annually)

Food service model: Scratch cooking; in-season, local and organic produce; seasonal menus

Sources for organic foods: Pacific Rim Produce and Pacific Star Garden

Vince Caguin joined Natomas Unified School District (NUSD) in 2012, after 24 years working professionally as a chef. He has been growing the district's farm-to-school program for eight years, providing nutrition and culinary education in classrooms and supporting the creation and maintenance of school gardens. NUSD's **organic success story is tied directly to their emphasis on seasonal purchasing, developing direct relationships with farmers** and introducing new foods to students.

After generating a successful salad bar program and featuring a diversity of fresh produce that students really enjoy, in 2019 NUSD began purchasing more locally grown and organically produced foods. **Purchasing seasonal items**, which are more cost competitive, enables NUSD to **invest more in organic food purchases**. NUSD is able to purchase certified organic food four to five times a year, a number that Chef Vince expects will grow with new, increased revenue; another boon is the growing number of local farmers they purchase from seeking organic certification.

By staying in regular contact with farmers who they have formed relationships with, NUSD's farm-to-school program has the inside scoop on what foods are in season. NUSD then adapts and creates its menus based on what is seasonal and available locally, a key strategy for keeping costs down. As an educator, Chef Vince believes that it is important to **teach kids about seasonality** to encourage their curiosity to **try new foods**, like apricots, cauliflower, daikon radish and blood oranges. Chef Vince not only invests in his relationships with farmers, but facilitates **students getting to know the farmers**, through classroom visits and trips to local farms. "I am surprised how many students know the farmers by name!"

He also emphasized that students respond better if new foods are accompanied with a lesson or learning moment. If not, it often takes 2-3 tries for students to familiarize themselves with a food item.

Another important impact of NUSD's focus on local organic produce is the staff's **improved scratch cooking skills**. As their skills have grown, they have brought more raw, whole ingredients in-house to prepare fresh meals. By focusing on scratch cooking, the cost savings of **buying whole foods in bulk further enables more purchases of organic foods**.

Featured Organic Products: Tomatoes, Lettuce, Turkey and Butternut Squash



Organic tomatoes and lettuce: NUSD is proud to feature transitional organic tomatoes from Fiery Ginger Farms, used to make “Pico de Gallo” salsa, a favorite among their students. The same fresh tomatoes are also sliced up and offered in the popular salad bar. The salad bar also regularly features transitional organic lettuce from Fiery Ginger Farms.

***Special holiday meal* Organic turkey and butternut squash:** NUSD developed a menu that became its annual Thanksgiving meal, using Mary’s Organic Turkey and organic butternut squash from the local Vierra Farms. Chef Vince is passionate about providing kids the opportunity to grow up with an organic, farm-fresh Thanksgiving feast, all prepared in the district’s central kitchen.

Why Organic?

As a former restaurant chef and adjunct professor at the Cordon Bleu College in Pasadena, Chef Vince aims to expose students who eat in his cafeterias to new foods as often as possible, helping to evolve and develop their pallets. “In school food, we’re in the business of teaching kids about things they don’t know they like,” he says. His desire to educate kids fuels his desire to source higher quality foods that he knows taste better. Organic foods, in his view, are of higher quality and therefore inspire students to taste new foods that become their new favorite flavors.

In addition, Chef Vince aims to support producers who are transitioning to organic practices, to create a food system that is better for the planet. By buying from local and transitional organic farms, Chef Vince provides a solid revenue stream to growers through direct sales to his district.

“Start off small. It is easy to look at other programs and wonder, ‘why aren’t we there?’ Natomas did not get to where it is overnight, it took eight years. Sixty percent of what we have accomplished is a result of building relationships

– Chef Vince

Pandemic Innovation

Despite the challenges posed by COVID-19, Chef Vince has remained dedicated to buying from local and organic farmers. Although it might have felt easier to abandon his values, he believes shortening the distance from farm to table is better for the local economy and results in better quality food for his students. NUSD adapted early on, and even grew while the crises accumulated in California. The district increased the number of meals served, doubled its direct purchases from local farmers, and tripled its volume of produce purchased through the USDA Department of Defense (DoD) Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program. Before the pandemic, NUSD projected a 2020 revenue of \$6 million. But due to an increase in services and program participation, the district has increased revenue to \$6.6 million, allowing investments in staff, the school food program, and higher quality ingredients. Chef Vince shared, “we now have some money to purchase organic food where we did not before.”

Key Partnership: Community Alliance with Family Farms (CAFF)

NUSD received help with local and organic sourcing from Community Alliance with Family Farms (CAFF). With CAFF’s help, it also was able to identify a new distributor, Pacific Rim Produce, which has supplied local and organic products to NUSD since 2019. With a robust “bid generator” tool to aid school food service directors with local and organic food procurement preferences in their bids, CAFF has been instrumental in helping nutrition services staff obtain organic food. In addition, CAFF provides the school district with a wealth of information on distributors across the state that carry local and organic foods. CAFF has also helped facilitate new relationships between farmers and the school district.

Other key partners include the California Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA), the Center for Ecoliteracy (CEL), and an emergency grant from No Kid Hungry.

