

Appendix A: Organic School Food Case Studies



Tahoe Truckee Unified School District



TTUSD
FOOD
 AND
NUTRITION
SERVICES
 FRESH & LOCAL

AT A GLANCE

Kat Soltanmorad, RDN, Nutrition Services Director

Truckee, CA (rural)

12 K-12 schools

4,061 students

31% eligible for free & reduced-price meals (FRPM)

235,000 lunches served (annually)

Food service model: Scratch cooking; bulk purchasing; waste reduction; composting; local, sustainable and organic farm purchasing

Sources for organic foods: Tahoe Food Hub, Produce Plus and Sierra Harvest farmer donations

When Kat Soltanmorad started as Tahoe Truckee United School District's Nutrition Services Director in 2012, there was already a clear desire to transform the food service program to a predominantly **scratch-cooking** model. The community also supported expanding **purchases from local, sustainable and organic farms**, and **increasing bulk purchasing**. Along with the backing of students and parents, Soltanmorad's efforts to invest in local and organic foods has received widespread support from the district's kitchen and facilities staff and its leadership, including the school board, the superintendent, teachers and principals. This shared commitment throughout the school community for organic and healthy food access, regardless of income, has propelled the program and made all the difference in its success.

The food service program's total annual budget of about \$3.5 million enables investments in quality nutritious foods, as well as in the food service staff who make it all possible. Providing full-time jobs with benefits has been a priority, demonstrating the high value the district places on its food service staff and their retention, as well as on the nutrition services program. Beyond healthy food, the school district focuses significant energy on waste reduction, composting, recycling and environmental education.

Working with three main distributors, the food service program **emphasizes fresh produce, supporting local farmers, and organic** as much as possible. Produce Plus, which is known for its organic and local selection, represents about 60-70% of the district's purchases. Roughly 10% of the district's local and organic produce comes from the Food Hub.



Featured Organic Products: Variety of Seasonal Produce

The TTUSD has focused primarily on organically produced in-season fruits and vegetables. Because seasonal produce is more price competitive, TTUSD has been able to procure certified organic, organically grown, or transitional organic **stone fruit** (peaches, nectarines, plums and apricots), **kiwis**, **citrus** (blood oranges and Satsuma mandarins), **melons**, **lettuce**, **squash** (zucchini, butternut and spaghetti), **tomatoes** (slicer and cherry) and **pears**.

The following produce has been purchased through the Tahoe Food Hub, sourced from numerous farms in the area: several organic apple varieties, potatoes, cabbage, beets, persimmons, grapefruit and cucumbers. Examples include:

Organic melons (cantaloupe): When in season, these and other organic melons are a favorite of TTUSD students. Cut into bite-sized pieces, they are refreshing for students to snack on during a warm day. Through the Tahoe Food Hub, TTUSD has been able to source its organic melons from the [High Desert Farming Initiative – UNR \(University of Reno, Nevada\)](#).

Organic red slicer tomatoes: Known for their sweetness, red slicer tomatoes are versatile and are used by TTUSD for salad bars, grab 'n go salads, as well as for sandwiches, burritos and tomato sauce. [Stone's Throw Farms](#) has been a great source for these delicious tomatoes.

Organic Bartlett pears: Delicious to eat when ripe and sliced up, these Bartlett pears are a treat for TTUSD students. Enjoyed when in season, these organic and local pears, from [Indian Springs Organic Farm](#) are a hit.

Why Organic?

TTUSD's Nutrition Services is guided by the belief that local and organic are important because they promote environmental sustainability—for water, soil and air. "Looking at our entire food system and food cycle has been important," says Kat Soltanmorad. "In the Tahoe-Truckee area, the community, most who live and work here, really embraces that." Prior to becoming TTUSD's Director, Kat was a Food Nutrition Educator/Coordinator with the Orange County Department of Education, promoting fresh fruits and vegetables in schools. As a registered dietitian, she understands that **organic promotes both healthy bodies as well as environmental sustainability**. Kat is most proud of creating access and equity by providing healthy organic food to all students. This has become especially important given health disparities and diet-related conditions related to coronavirus. The TTUSD community appreciates supporting local growers. The economic and social benefits are as important as the delicious, scratch-made entrées their cooks prepare and serve daily.

"I would stress to others that it doesn't happen overnight, and it doesn't happen alone. You can partner with people to write grant applications, to work with your facilities department, to connect with the community. Figure out what your needs are first, then you can identify the partners who can help make it happen."

– Kat Soltanmorad,
Nutrition Services Director

Pandemic Innovation

With the help of the community and key donations from local businesses, the school district has been able to continue providing meals using local and organic produce to families during COVID-19. North Star donated over \$30,000 worth of food at the beginning of the pandemic, including organic produce. Local farmers have also donated mixed varieties of organic lettuce, washed and ready to go, a key ingredient in TTUSD's grab 'n go salads. The Tahoe Food Hub continues to provide an average of 65-80 produce boxes a week delivered via school bus drivers to families in need who have been affected by the pandemic. From March to November 2020, the district has served over 200,000 free meals and counting.

Key Partnership: Tahoe Food Hub

TTUSD partners with its local non-profit [Tahoe Food Hub](#) to procure from local and organic farms. This partnership aligns with the community-oriented culture of TTUSD and enables the district to support farmers in its community. The Hub's mission is to bring the community together to build a regional, sustainable and equitable food system. The Hub believes that all communities need a food hub that supports local producers and provides food security.

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.

San Francisco Unified School District



AT A GLANCE

Jennifer LeBarre, Executive Director
Alexandra Emmott, Culinary Manager

San Francisco, CA (city)

135 K-12 schools

61,031 students

48.2% eligible for free & reduced-price meals (FRPM)

3.6 million lunches served (annually)

Food service model: Mixture of 25% self-operated scratch-cooking food service and 75% prepared foods from vendor Revolution Foods; bulk foods; organic and local foods; waste reduction

Sources for organic foods: Daylight Foods, Veritable Vegetable, Mindful Meats and Sysco

San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) has a unique mixture of self-operated food service and vended meals. Despite its partially outsourced food service and SFUSD's facility limitations, under the leadership of Jennifer LeBarre and Alex Emmott, a striking 7% of San Francisco Unified School District's produce served in 2018-19 was certified organic. As a large school district with a significant food budget, **SFUSD's organic consumption has a sizeable impact on local organic farms.** In addition to buying organic produce, SFUSD is proud to have led the way by using **bulk organic milk and organic beef** for its school food programs.

SFUSD uses USDA commodity dollars to buy organic produce through California's **Unprocessed Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Pilot Program**. By sourcing through Daylight Foods, an official distributor for the program, SFUSD can purchase Coke Farm organic strawberries. This shows the potential for sourcing more organic foods through this government pilot program.

SFUSD is particularly proud of its partnership with Straus Family Creamery, providing students with the highest quality organic milk while also reducing the considerable waste from serving milk in individual cartons. The milk is served from stainless-steel dispensers. Initially SFUSD served the milk at a limited number of school sites, but now the district **plans to expand bulk organic milk** to more school sites. This purchase is a win-win for the environment and for students, as the district can **support local organic agriculture and family farming while energizing students** to care about and recognize quality. It also teaches students about waste reduction, by showing them they can take only what they want from the dispensers, with no packaging. Sourcing from Straus Creamery helps the district meet its **environmental sustainability and animal welfare goals** under its commitment to the Good Food Purchasing Program (see below). With less milk wasted and more milk enjoyed, the district has also saved money on milk as a result!

On the horizon: Four additional kitchens are being built with local bond money, with goals to build more kitchens on district school sites in the future; this includes plans for a more robust central kitchen that is well-equipped for scratch cooking on a larger scale.

Featured Organic Products: Ground Beef, Milk, and Strawberries

Organic, local and humanely raised ground beef: SFUSD purchases organic beef directly from Mindful Meats at a price point that works for the program. Mindful Meats produces organic, pasture-raised beef using dual-purpose animal agriculture, and is well-respected in its environmental stewardship and sustainable harvesting methods. The district creatively “stretches” ground beef by mixing it with beans, a blend that’s widely enjoyed by students.

Organic, local and humanely raised milk: Inspired by Napa and Novato school districts’ positive experience serving bulk organic milk, SFUSD decided to bring in organic milk to serve at some of its schools. SFUSD proudly serves organic milk from Straus Family Creamery, farmed just over the Golden Gate Bridge and distributed by Veritable Vegetable.

Organic strawberries from Coke Farm: Knowing that most kids love strawberries, but that conventionally grown strawberries contain among the highest amounts of pesticide residues of any crop in the U.S., SFUSD is proud to serve organic strawberries to students.

“We’re serving children, often children who rely on free and reduced-price meals, so we’re committed to improving the meals we serve. Their health and future are at stake. Plus, we are all giving our hard-earned tax dollars to provide students’ meals, so I want to use government funds to not only support the health of our kids but to support small and sustainable growers.”

– Alexandra Emmott,
SFUSD Culinary Manager

Why Organic?

With bright red berries at the top of the Dirty Dozen pesticides list, and a lot of women farmworkers harvesting strawberries, this is one of the most important produce items to prioritize buying organic. Women are particularly vulnerable to pesticide exposure, which in turn may cause birth defects and other serious health issues. During peak season, the price of organic strawberries can also be competitive with conventional strawberries.

“Start small! Pick one item, one day, even one school, and figure out how you’re going to do it. You’ll need to figure out the procurement, staff training, recipe development if that applies, all the moving pieces. Doing it one time helps you figure out a lot about the process.”

– Alexandra Emmott,
SFUSD Culinary Manager

Pandemic Innovation

During COVID-19 shutdowns, the district worked diligently to gain government approval so that some of their organic produce purchases via the Unprocessed Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Pilot Program would be sent to their prepared food vendor, Revolution Foods. SFUSD was then able to negotiate delivery costs and receive a credit on meal prices from Revolution Foods, since it had bought some of the organic produce separately from Coke Farm. As a result, organic strawberries were included in the prepared food meal boxes that SFUSD families were receiving each week.

Key Partnership: Center for Good Food Purchasing

As part of its commitment to improve the quality and impact of its food sourcing, in 2016 San Francisco Unified adopted the Good Food Purchasing Program (GFPP). This program “transforms the way public institutions purchase food by creating a transparent and equitable food system built on five core values: local economies, health, valued workforce, animal welfare, and environmental sustainability.” SFUSD’s sourcing of local and organic foods helps the district achieve the program’s following criteria: 15% of purchases made within 250 miles; 15% of purchases from 3rd party certified sustainable vendors; and 15% of purchases from 3rd party certified humane animal products. SFUSD’s commitment to GFPP extends to its contract with Revolution Foods, in addition to the food service provided in-house. The Center for Good Food Purchasing provides tools, technical support and verification to help schools achieve their individual goals in the program.

Morgan Hill Unified School District



AT A GLANCE

Michael Jochner, Director of Nutrition Services

Morgan Hill, Santa Clara County, CA (suburban)

15 K-12 schools, plus an adult continuation school

9,022 students

36% eligible for free & reduced-price meals (FRPM)

373,961 lunches served (annually)

Food service model: On-site cooking; scratch-cooking; bulk purchasing; local and organic produce; waste reduction

Sources for organic foods: Daylight Foods, Goldstar and Sysco

Under the new leadership of Chef Michael Jochner, formerly the Executive Chef for Bon Appetite at Google, MHUSD's food service program has made significant changes to improve the quality of its meal service by transitioning from packaged meals to scratch cooking.

In 2019, MHUSD launched its "Fresh Meals" program, aimed at featuring more fresh fruits and vegetables, primarily through **salad bars and scratch cooking** offered at four of the district's eight elementary schools (the remaining schools plan to come on board in 2020-21). In order to meet their cooking needs, staff have dismantled much of the central kitchen's operations and shifted cooking to individual sites. Despite initial skepticism from some district staff, leaders, and parents, the program has been popular with students, as evidenced by their increased participation rates. In a short period of time, Chef Michael has greatly improved the district's finances — going from 64% of district sites operating at a loss, to more than 52% now breaking even. Even better, at least two of these schools began generating revenue.

Daylight 150 is a new program of Daylight Foods focused on helping customers source **organic and seasonal produce grown by local family farms** "in their backyard," within 150 miles of Daylight Foods.

After the first week of the salad bar program, student participation and enthusiasm for the fresh food increased significantly, and one school's custodian held up a single 55-gallon bag of trash and showed Chef Michael that, "this is all the trash...for the whole day!" Previously, that school had been producing 4-5 bags of garbage (mostly food waste) per day.

Marketing the program has been important to its success. In addition to using some of the marketing resources that Daylight Foods provides, Chef Michael creates individual acrylic sign holders to identify various produce items featured on salad bars and to familiarize students with new menu items — an effective marketing strategy he learned while working as a chef at Google. Chef Michael doesn't mention "organic" explicitly on these signs, as he feels that the term can be confusing. Marketing "fresh" food to students has been more inclusive and welcoming.

By increasing students' fresh food options and eliminating individually wrapped and served items, the district has **reduced waste, saved money and increased healthy food consumption**. Coupled with **purchasing in bulk**, the district has reduced its carbon footprint while increasing food quality and creating a positive, environmentally proactive food service program.

Chef Michael is most proud of having **trained and empowered his staff** to prepare fresh foods. The **organic food items are included in the new salad bars**, which have been the impetus for teaching scratch cooking and knife skills to his staff. He has also led the change to establish speed-scratch and scratch-cooked food operations for middle and high schools. Cooking alongside his staff, providing them with real chef's knives, cutting boards and support, he has helped create a lot of change in a short period of time.

Featured Organic Products: Fuji and Pink Lady Apples, Strawberries, Blueberries and Black Beans

Chef Michael has been happy to feature **organic Fuji** and **Pink Lady apples** on the menu, as well as **organic strawberries, blueberries**, and canned cooked organic **black beans**. When asked why he chose to feature organic Pink Lady apples, he shared that they taste amazing and look beautiful: "The pink color is exciting!"



"My advice is to start thinking more about how you cook at home—think more like a chef. I treat it all the same. I go to work to fight for our kids who deserve better food. I encourage directors to rethink and reimagine their labor."

— Michael Jochner,
Director of Nutrition Services

Why Organic?

Chef Michael is ambitious and goal-oriented, and believes strongly in the benefits of operating a quality food service program. He is committed to serving exceptional food and believes that if the food is fresh and good, more children will participate. He also believes he owes it to his students — the next generation — to give them clean and healthy foods, to have it better than he had it as a kid.

Key Partnership: LunchAssist

The support provided by LunchAssist to prepare the school district for its first administrative review was key to enabling Chef Michael to focus his attention on making meaningful changes to his school meal program. Digitizing his documentation and providing auditors with requested documents and records in real time relieved him from spending an overwhelming amount of time sifting through details and reports during a state administrative review. Software programs are now readily available to maximize data tracking and reporting and should be considered whenever feasible.

About **LunchAssist**: LunchAssist believes that school nutrition programs should be able to devote all their attention to feeding children well. Following the numerous rules and regulations is important work but can be challenging (and burdensome). LunchAssist's mission is to provide inspiration, support and guidance to school nutrition professionals so they can focus on what matters most. LunchAssist helps schools with various technical assistance pieces, including farm-to-school programming, procurement, menu planning and equipment grants, all of which can support organic food procurement either directly or indirectly.

San Luis Coastal Unified School District



AT A GLANCE

Erin Primer, Director of Food Services

San Luis Obispo, CA (small city/town)

15 K-12 schools (10 elementary, two middle, three high schools)

7,801 students

33.7% eligible for free & reduced-price meals (FRPM)

294,252 lunches served (annually)

Food service model: scratch cooking; local and organic farms; local food businesses

Sources for organic foods: The Berry Man, GoldStar and Sysco Ventura

Under the leadership of Erin Primer, San Luis Coastal Unified School District (SLCUSD) began sourcing local and organic foods for its food service program in 2017. The combination of **locally sourced, high quality, fresh and organic foods**, to the extent possible, has been **a recipe for success**. As many food service directors can attest, it can be challenging to increase participation among the full-paying students. However, by serving fresh, local and organic food, the school district has been successful in attracting more students to the cafeteria. And more full-paying students means more profit to invest back into superior quality food! San Luis Coastal USD Nutrition Services **proudly markets its locally produced food using this creative and attractive map** of its suppliers that is displayed on their website. Included on this map are four certified organic farms.

Erin's leadership in supporting local farms earned her the 2020 Farm Advocate of the Year award from the Community Alliance with Family Farmers: *"As a leader in the Farm-to-School movement on the Central Coast, Erin has worked tirelessly to incorporate more local food from small farms and ranches into school menus, setting an example for other districts across California. Leading menu development, food acquisition and food-based education in one of San Luis Obispo County's largest school districts, Erin has not only helped grow sales outlets for local farms, but also helped school children learn where good food comes from and who their local farmers are. As a result of her vision, passion and hard work, SLO County is a healthier, more sustainable and more abundant community for all."*



Featured Organic Products: Grains, Legumes and Pasta from Local Purveyors

The school district works with many local farmers who are either certified organic or committed to using organic growing practices. The SLCUSD also uses three main distributors—The Berry Man, GoldStar and Sysco Ventura, as well as some of their local business partners.

San Luis Coastal features the following organic foods in their school meal programs:

Ancient grains and legumes from Kandarian Organic Farms, such as Emmer Farro, Ayocote Negro Beans, and Red Lentils.

Organic, locally made pasta from Etto Pastifico Pasta, delivered to the school in reusable bins, enabling the district to provide the freshest organic macaroni and cheese to their students. Using reusable containers makes for a climate-friendly and delicious meal with no plastic or other packaging waste.

Organic, locally grown lentils from Kandarian Organic Farms. Known as a very progressive and community-oriented farmer, Mr. Kandarian works with the school food service program to supply the district with his organic lentils, from which both cooked lentil dishes and scratch-made lentil burgers are prepared. These popular scratch-cooked lentil burgers are plant-forward, climate-friendly, nutrient-dense and organic, as well as cost-effective.

“Leverage your menu by spotlighting featured [local and organic] items/ ingredients, and utilize USDA Foods programs, such as Brown Box and DoD Fresh, to stretch small food budgets.”

– Erin Primer,
Director of Food Services

Why Organic?

Erin makes decisions based on her department’s core values, prioritizing fresh, local and real food. Using public dollars to invest in local businesses is a key part of her program. “For us, it’s about where the food we serve comes from,” she says. “We actually know and have a relationship with many of our farmers/food businesses.” She adds: “It’s not always more expensive. Many vendors will give bulk volume discount pricing.”

“What can come out of this [pandemic] is a rebirth for school food! We had to stop our operations, and now we have a chance to redesign and rebuild. We need to be intentional on how we want to come out of this and what we want the world to look like. The time to do this is right now. We can create a better future because of this pandemic.”

– Erin Primer,
Director of Food Services

Pandemic Innovation

This past summer, amid the COVID-19 pandemic, San Luis Coastal USD Nutrition Services began a virtual cooking class for students to learn how to prepare and taste-test climate-friendly, plant-forward items being considered for future menus. One item that quickly became a favorite was an **organic Thai basil lentil burger**, which is now featured on their three-week menu cycle. Erin and her team were so inspired that they initiated a new Fall 2020 plant-forward menu line of meatless entrées, where orders are placed in advance and sent home to families. The popularity of the plant-forward menu line has exceeded everyone’s expectations. In fact, this new menu line has helped increase participation from 5,000 meals a week to 20,000 meals a week, and 30% of all meals sent home are now meatless!

Key Partnership: Local Purchasing Co-op and the Center for Ecoliteracy (CEL)

Creating strong partnerships has been central to San Luis Coastal USD’s success. Examples include their involvement in a purchasing co-op with other school districts located in San Luis Obispo County, which enables them to **leverage their collective purchasing power to buy the types of foods that align with their values of fresh, local and sustainable**. The co-op also provides a collaborative launch point for streamlined engagement

with community-based projects such as farmer networking events, grants, student wellness competitions and farm-to-school coordination. The SLCUSD also takes part in the **Center for Ecoliteracy’s California Food for California Kids** program. The California Food for California Kids initiative offers educational and marketing programs to improve school food and increase student literacy about how food is grown and about the food system.

Riverside Unified School District



AT A GLANCE

Adleit Asi, RUSD Director of Nutrition Services

Scott Berndt, Riverside Food Hub Coordinator

Riverside, CA in the Greater Los Angeles Area (city)

50 K-12 schools

41,617 students

68% eligible for free & reduced-price meals (FRPM)

4.3 million lunches served (annually)

Food service model: Scratch cooking; central kitchen; salad bars; food hub; local farms

Sources for organic foods: Riverside Food Hub

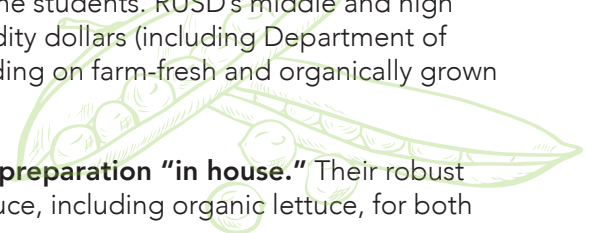
Riverside Unified School District (RUSD) has been a leader in the farm-to-school movement since 2005, the year it launched its first salad bar program. In 2017, it **established the Riverside Food Hub** as part of the district's nutrition services program. The food hub is currently supported by USDA and California Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA) grants but aims to be self-sustaining by generating \$1.2 million in revenue by 2021.

This unique on-site, district-operated hub not only serves its large school district population but is also a resource for community programs and smaller school districts nearby, making the hub more flexible while serving community needs. RUSD has worked with and supported 15 local farmers through in-season purchases. The Riverside Public Health Department, a partner of the food hub, offers added education support by providing programs such as Harvest-of-the-Month.

Carrying forward their innovative approach, Adleit Asi, RUSD's Director of Nutrition Services, and Scott Berndt, Riverside Food Hub Coordinator, worked together with their entire team to bring farm-fresh and organically grown produce to their students, along with agricultural and nutrition education. Their impacts are felt across the food system, and they have proven that students enjoy fresh fruits and vegetables and are even willing to try new foods. Seven schools in the district have school gardens, enabling students to take part in and observe the cycles of food production.

All **33 elementary schools have salad bars featuring local and organically grown produce**. Each day, the salad bars include **three varieties of fruit and three varieties of vegetables**. Much of the produce served at RUSD is incorporated into the highly popular salad bar, which students often flock to even before selecting their entrée. Served in wedges or slices, organic fruit is a healthy delight enjoyed by the students. RUSD's middle and high schools also feature fresh seasonal salads daily. RUSD leverages commodity dollars (including Department of Defense (DoD) Fresh funds) to purchase proteins, allowing greater spending on farm-fresh and organically grown fruits and vegetables.

Through **scratch cooking**, RUSD staff have brought **much of their food preparation "in house."** Their robust central kitchen infrastructure enables them to wash and chop fresh produce, including organic lettuce, for both



salad bars and prepared salads for older students. By building strong relationships and investing in local farmers, RUSD **has supported its local economy**. Consistent with the rural character of the area, Riverside is home to nearly 5,000 acres of preserved farmland and the city strongly supports local agriculture. The Riverside Food Hub makes fulfilling that commitment easier, providing the RUSD food service program with access to both organic and local farmers through the hub.

Featured Organic Products: Citrus, Persimmons, Peaches and Lettuces

Riverside Unified School District is proud to purchase \$2 million worth of produce annually from local farms. Many of these farms use organic practices but are not certified organic. A few certified organic farms also sell through the hub. RUSD is most excited about the **organic citrus, persimmons, peaches** and **lettuces** (Romaine, Red Leaf and Green Leaf) featured on their menus seasonally. All these items are proudly sourced via the school district's own food hub.

Why Organic?

Adleit has an advanced degree in preventive medicine, and her grandfather was a farmer. She understands the importance of pesticide-free farming, and the benefits of organic food for children's health. Underlying Adleit's commitment to local and organic foods is her belief that seasonal food provides better flavor, and that good eating habits are formed early.

Pandemic Innovation

When out-of-district customer sales initially dropped due to COVID-19, the Riverside Food Hub applied for and received a **USDA Farmers to Families Food Box** contract grant. During the summer 2020, the hub purchased produce for home-bound food boxes each week to address the needs of residents and student families in the district. The hub was delivering 100 boxes per week, including to small pantries and churches. In addition to produce boxes, students whose families are in need were able to take home meals provided by the school district. Prior to COVID, the hub purchased \$30,000 in produce per month, but during the pandemic, purchases have been up to \$80,000 per month. The skyrocketing sales show how vital this infrastructure for local food purchasing can be to building community resiliency during a crisis.

Key Partnership: USDA's Local Food Promotion Program and California's Specialty Crop Block Grant Program

Riverside Food Hub is a unique investment by this large school district. Utilizing the district's infrastructure and staff, the hub not only meets RUSD's produce needs, but also serves neighboring smaller school districts and programs — all while supporting local, sustainable and organic farms, protecting farmland by keeping farms in business. In 2018, RUSD received a three-year USDA **Local Food Promotion Program** grant for the hub to expand market opportunities for local and regional farmers. This federally funded program has enabled RUSD and other school districts and food hubs to source local, organic and sustainably produced foods. The **California Specialty Crop Block Grant Program** (SCBGP) has been another important funding source for the hub. This grant has enabled the hub to expand its service beyond the school district, to include more local organizations and programs serving children in the community.

"Food justice is about using the food system to lift people out of poverty. Often schools focus on the thought that cost is a barrier to buying organic and local food. Many children of local farm workers attend our schools and participate in our nutrition programs. By investing money into local farms, and therefore the local economy, this is a way to uplift the entire community by addressing health, poverty and the environment together."

– Scott Berndt,
Riverside Food Hub Coordinator

"Do a salad bar! It's the easiest way. Allow for choice. Plate waste (and therefore cost) will be lower, and your sales of produce will increase. Reduction in waste will allow you to buy fresh fruits and vegetables rather than canned. Prioritizing seasonal produce means that you can get the produce more affordably."

– Adleit Asi,
RUSD Director of Nutrition Services

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

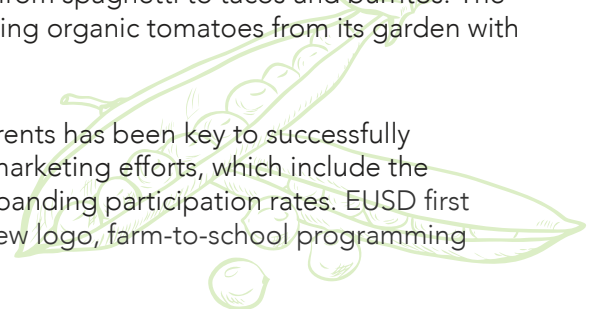
Sources for organic foods: American Produce, The Farm Lab (Encinitas USD Farm), and direct purchasing from local suppliers

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

