

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

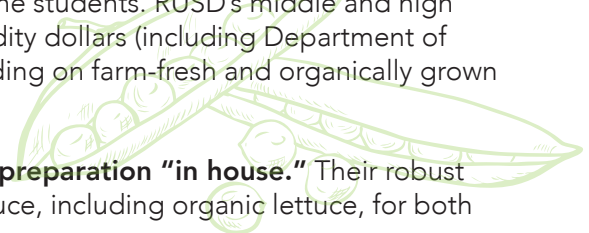
Riverside Unified School District (RUSD) has been a leader in the farm-to-school movement since 2005, the year it launched its first salad bar program. In 2017, it **established the Riverside Food Hub** as part of the district's nutrition services program. The food hub is currently supported by USDA 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