

# 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.