

April 23, 2021

Acting Administrator Cindy Long
Food & Nutrition Service
Braddock Metro Center II
1320 Braddock Place
Alexandria, VA 22314

Dear Acting Administrator Long,

We, the undersigned group of California school districts, are writing to respectfully request reforms to school meal programs to better meet our needs and those of the students and families we serve.

With a looming climate crisis, rising rates of childhood obesity and diabetes, and an increasingly socially aware and culturally diverse student population, schools are shifting our menus to be healthier, climate-friendly, and culturally appropriate. This entails sourcing more plant-based sources of protein, organic foods, and animal products raised humanely and without routine antibiotics or hormones.

Whether for environmental, animal welfare, religious, health, or cultural reasons, demand for plant-based foods is growing rapidly, especially among our youth. According to a recent poll, 79% of Gen Zs are looking to go meatless a few times a week, with 65% finding plant-forward eating “appealing.”ⁱ Today’s generation of students recognize that threat that climate change poses to them. A Washington Post-Kaiser Family Foundation poll found that one in four American teens have participated in a walkout, attended a rally or written to a public official to express their views on global warming.ⁱⁱ Many of our students are bringing this admirable spirit of activism to the cafeteria and asking for more climate-friendly food.

Our student bodies continue to become more culturally and racially diverse. Having access to affordable plant-based ingredients and dishes helps us provide our students with culturally appropriate meal options. For instance, the National Institutes of Health estimates that between 50 and 95% of people of color are unable to process lactose and a growing number of students are vegetarian, so we need more readily available alternatives to meat, cheese, and cow’s milk to satisfy the Meat/Meat Alternate and Fluid Milk requirements.

Students and their families also want more organic options and higher quality meat produced without hormones or routine antibiotics. Organic food sales skyrocketed from \$3.4 billion in 1997ⁱⁱⁱ to over \$50 billion in sales today.^{iv} Now, 60% of broiler chickens in the U.S. are raised without the use of routine antibiotics to meet demand from consumers, restaurants, and foodservice operators. A majority of consumers (65%) think public institutions should only purchase meat, eggs and dairy products from animals raised more humanely.^v

Most of our schools are unable to meet this rising demand from students and lag behind the growth of these socially and environmentally advantageous industries because of policy and economic barriers that we face. Overcoming some of these barriers would require action from Congress, but we believe USDA could better support us in procuring, preparing, and serving these foods in several ways, including:

- Updating meal pattern requirements to allow for crediting of plant-based proteins in a wider variety of foods;
- Increasing the availability of plant-based proteins, organic options and. meat and dairy raised humanely and without hormones or routine antibiotics – including processing capacity – through USDA Foods;

- Improving supply chain transparency in USDA Foods;
- Expanding technical support and resources to support us in procuring, preparing, and marketing plant-based and organic foods and higher quality meat; and
- Increasing organic produce available for purchase through the DoD Fresh program.

We look forward to engaging with USDA and stand ready to offer specific ideas to accomplish our mutual goal of providing nutritious, delicious, and sustainable meals to our children.

Sincerely,

Cabrillo Unified School district

Carpinteria Unified School District

Laguna Beach Unified School District

Morgan Hill Unified School District

Ojai Unified School District

Palm Springs Unified School District

San Ramon Valley Unified School District

Shandon Joint Unified School District

Turlock Unified School District

Yuba Environmental Science Charter Academy

CC: Secretary Tom Vilsack

Katherine Ferguson, Chief of Staff

Stacy Dean, Deputy Undersecretary for Food, Nutrition and Consumer Services

Kumar Chandran, Senior Advisor Senior Advisor, Nutrition, Office of the Secretary

Donna Johnson-Bailey, Senior Nutrition Advisor, Food, Nutrition and Consumer Services

ⁱ Jed, E. (2018, August 13). Aramark Brings Gen Z Food Trends To Life On College Campuses Nationwide. [Www.Vendingtimes.Com. https://www.vendingtimes.com/news/aramark-brings-gen-z-food-trends-to-life-on-college-campuses-nationwide/](https://www.vendingtimes.com/news/aramark-brings-gen-z-food-trends-to-life-on-college-campuses-nationwide/)

ⁱⁱ Post-Kaiser Family Foundation. (2019, December 9). Washington Post-Kaiser Family Foundation Climate Change Survey, July 9-Aug. 5, 2019. [Washington Post. https://www.washingtonpost.com/context/washington-post-kaiser-family-foundation-climate-change-survey-july-9-aug-5-2019/601ed8ff-a7c6-4839-b57e-3f5eaa8ed09f/?itid=lk_inline_manual_5](https://www.washingtonpost.com/context/washington-post-kaiser-family-foundation-climate-change-survey-july-9-aug-5-2019/601ed8ff-a7c6-4839-b57e-3f5eaa8ed09f/?itid=lk_inline_manual_5)

ⁱⁱⁱ McNeil, M. M. (2018, May 18). Maturing U.S. organic sector sees steady growth of 6.4 percent in 2017 | OTA. Organic Trade Association. <https://ota.com/news/press-releases/20236>

^{iv} McNeil, M. M. (2020, June 9). COVID-19 will shape organic industry in 2020 after banner year in 2019 | OTA. Organic Trade Association. <https://ota.com/news/press-releases/21328>

^v ASPCA. (2020). ASPCA Surveys. <https://www.aspc.org/shopwithyourheart/business-and-farmer-resources/aspca-surveys>