



Building a Better Tray

How School Districts are Cooking with Healthier, Higher Quality Proteins



Introduction: Inspiring School Menus with Higher Quality Proteins

School food professionals across the U.S. have always been on the forefront of developing tasty, healthy, and creative dishes that are student approved and fuel school success. School food professionals are taking up a new mantle to serve higher quality meals that replace industrially produced, processed meat and cheese with more scratch-cooked, plant-forward meals featuring high-quality proteins. By high-quality proteins, we mean whole, plant-based foods, such as tofu, beans, lentils, and other legumes, as well as animal products raised without routine antibiotics or added hormones and, ideally, produced using regenerative organic and/or grass-fed practices.

Friends of the Earth and the Chef Ann Foundation's report, [*Beyond the Nugget: The Hidden Health Risks of Industrially Produced Animal Proteins—and the Path Toward Better School Lunches*](#), illuminates the prevalence of industrially produced meat and cheese in America's school meals. Because of USDA policy and structural and financial challenges, purchasing cheap, industrially produced, processed animal products is often the go-to option for school districts with limited budgets and kitchen infrastructure. But the story doesn't end there. Across the country, districts large and small are finding practical ways to reduce the reliance on processed meat and dairy and serve healthier, higher quality meals.

In order to truly move toward healthy protein choices in schools, we must commit to policy changes and sustained investment in kitchen infrastructure. In the meantime, with this resource, we showcase eight districts that are already setting the standard for high quality, fresh school meals. These districts span urban, suburban, and rural settings from Alaska to Virginia, with enrollments from under 150 to more than 16,000 students. The staff in these districts have changed their procurement and preparation to prioritize whole ingredients, plant-based proteins, or high-quality animal products to develop delicious, nutritious meals that students love. We hope you can use this resource as inspiration for tried-and-true strategies to bring the best food to students.





Photo credit: Coalition for Healthy School Food

Bombay Beans and Potato Aloo

School District Profile

Name: Ithaca City School District

Location: Ithaca, New York

Locality type: City, small

Enrollment: 5,133 students

Demographics: 68% White, 4% Black or African American, 8% Hispanic or Latino, 13% Asian, 1% Some other race, 5% Two or more races

Recipe Highlight: Bombay Beans and Potato Aloo

This plant-based, speed-scratch recipe combines diced potatoes, tomatoes, and vegetarian baked beans with spices for a cafeteria-friendly take on a classic North Indian dish. Recipe [here](#). Recipe developed by Jamie Zervos, Executive Chef, Ithaca City School District in New York State

Crediting: 2 oz M/MA

Preparation: Speed-scratch

Protein Source: Beans

Key Ingredients: Yukon gold potatoes, vegetarian baked beans (canned, in sauce), diced tomatoes, spices

Dietary Fit: Vegan, top 9 allergen-free

Why It Works:

1. Brings award-winning flavor as a recipient of the 2025 USDA Healthy Meals Incentives Recognition Award for Innovation in the Preparation of School Meals
2. Provides plant protein from whole, minimally processed foods
3. Works for a variety of diets, like gluten free and vegan
4. Affordable, clocking in at \$0.30/serving
5. Provides a lower-emissions alternative to beef dishes

How Ithaca Made It Work

- **Split preparation across kitchens.** As of 2023, all of the food for the district is made in a central kitchen to ensure quality and consistency, with almost every meal served in the district now made with whole foods. For this recipe, potatoes are washed and chopped, and canned beans and tomatoes are drained at the central kitchen. These ingredients are portioned and sent to school kitchens, where staff prepare the remaining components on site, simplifying on-site preparation of the final dish.
- **Designed the recipe for school foodservice:** The dish uses familiar, affordable ingredients — including beans, potatoes, tomatoes, onions, garlic, and spices — and is vegan and gluten-free.
- **Introduced thoughtfully.** The district's Executive Chef, Jamie Zervos, worked to create recipes and menus that include higher quality foods, culturally relevant dishes, and sustainable foods. This recipe was tested with students, with some calling it “delicious” and many students reporting that they enjoyed it.

- **Earned national recognition:** The recipe received a Healthy Meals Incentives Recognition Award. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) in collaboration with Action for Healthy Kids (AFHK) awarded the 2025 Recognition Award for the Innovation in the Preparation of School Meals to Ithaca City School Child Nutrition for work in creating healthier recipes.
- **Partnership Support:** Ithaca City School District was a participant in Chef Ann Foundation's [Custom District Support](#), [Tompkins County School Food Reboot](#), [The Coalition for Healthy School Food](#) (CHSF) has worked with [the Ithaca City School District](#) since 2008 to introduce and promote plant-based foods.

"Kids love Bombay Beans and Potatoes Aloo because it's delicious and is inspired by the flavors of India. We love it for those reasons too, and it's a great use of USDA Foods canned Vegetarian Baked Beans and Diced Tomatoes. Potatoes, onions, and garlic as well as cilantro for garnish can be obtained locally so it's also great for our Farm to School program."

— Jamie Zervos, Executive Chef, Child Nutrition Program, Ithaca City School District (NY)

Lessons Learned

- **Splitting preparation** of a multi-step scratch recipe between a central kitchen and school kitchens lets districts deliver scratch-cooked meals at scale without requiring every site kitchen to be a full production kitchen.



Photo credit: The Lunch Box



Tiger Teriyaki Tofu with Rice

School District Profile

Name: Fallbrook Union Elementary School District (K-8)

Location: Fallbrook, California

Locality type: Town, fringe

Enrollment: 5,042 students

Demographics: 65% Hispanic/Latino, 20% White, 5% Multi-Ethnic, 1% Black, 5% Unknown

Recipe Highlight: Tiger Teriyaki Tofu with Rice

A speed-scratch entrée featuring organic tofu marinated in teriyaki sauce with garlic and ginger, paired with red bell peppers and green beans, and served over long grain rice. [Recipe here.](#)

Crediting: 1 oz M/MA, 2 oz grain

Preparation: Speed-scratch

Protein Source: Tofu (organic)

Dietary Fit: Vegan, nut free

Key Ingredients: USDA-certified organic super firm tofu, teriyaki sauce, bell pepper, rice

Why It Works:

1. Provides a plant-based protein option that meets a wide range of dietary needs
2. Uses familiar flavors that are approachable for students
3. Fits within existing school kitchen workflows
4. Offers a lower-cost, lower-carbon alternative to meat-based entrées
5. Cheaper than chicken: Tiger Teriyaki Tofu is \$0.71/serving, while Fallbrook's BBQ Chicken Teriyaki is \$2.14/serving

How Fallbrook Made It Work

1. Built Student Excitement Through

Engagement: The district partnered with [Healthy Kids, Happy Planet](#) on a student engagement campaign featuring “Queen Bean” and “Princess Pea Pod” characters. During recess taste tests, students sampled the dish, learned about plant-based proteins, and interacted with nutrition staff. Many students were new to tofu, so this focus on education and exposure helped build student familiarity prior to the dish’s appearance on the menu.

As a result, students became more comfortable trying tofu, and excitement from the engagement campaign translated into higher participation when the entrée was served during lunch.

2. Supported Staff Through Training and

Recipe Development: Some nutrition services staff had limited experience preparing tofu, requiring training and hands-on support. Through recipe testing, refinement, and repeated preparation, staff at the central kitchen and school sites developed confidence and consistency in producing the entrée.

3. Optimized Recipe for School Kitchen

Operations: Fallbrook developed a preparation process that balances scratch cooking with operational efficiency:

- Tofu is cubed and marinated in teriyaki sauce with fresh ginger and garlic two days before service.
- Marinated tofu is refrigerated to maximize flavor.
- On the day of service, tofu is baked with vegetables.
- Rice is prepared separately and combined during service.

This speed-scratch approach allows the district to prepare a fresh entrée while maintaining the efficiency needed for school meal programs.

4. Overcame Procurement Challenges: The district initially faced challenges finding a tofu supplier that met its quality and sourcing goals. Through persistence, Fallbrook secured organic, non-GMO tofu made with U.S.-grown soybeans through Sunrise Produce Distributor.

5. Partnership Support: Fallbrook Union Elementary School District was a host district for Chef Ann Foundation's [Healthy School Food Pathway Program](#) and also partners with Friends of the Earth's [Climate-Friendly School Food Program](#) for on-the-ground resources.

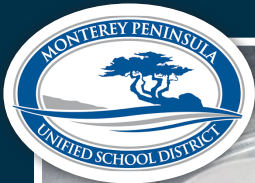
“We were able to get more facetime engagement with students during their recess time, handing out samples and talking to them about why plant-based proteins are good for their bodies and the planet. That excitement translated into higher participation of that menu item when we served it for lunch, so that’s been a great success.”

— Amy Haessly, Director of Child Nutrition Services, Fallbrook Union Elementary School District

Lessons Learned

- **Student engagement is key when introducing new foods:** Many students were hesitant to try tofu because they had never tasted it or were unfamiliar with plant-based proteins. Taste tests, education, and opportunities to interact with the food helped build acceptance.
- **Advance preparation improves both flavor and efficiency:** Marinating tofu ahead of time enhanced flavor while making preparation on the day of service faster and easier for kitchen staff.





Shredded “Steak” Fried Rice Bowl

School District Profile

Name: Monterey Peninsula Unified School District

Location: Monterey, California

Locality type: Suburban, midsize (Monterey County, K-12)

Enrollment: 9,350 students

Demographics: 45% White, 5% Black or African American, 32% Hispanic or Latino, 10% Asian, 2% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, 1% Some other race, 6% Two or more races

Recipe Highlight: Shredded “Steak” Fried Rice Bowl

This dish features Better Chew shredded “steak,” drizzled with teriyaki sauce and served over fried rice and edamame. [Recipe here.](#)

Crediting: 2 oz M/MA, 2 oz Whole Grain

Preparation: Speed-scratch

Protein Source: Better Chew shredded “steak,” made of soy

Key Ingredients: Better Chew shredded beef, Teriyaki sauce, fried rice, shelled edamame

Dietary Fit: Vegan, nut free

Why It Works:

1. Clean label plant protein, with recognizable ingredients
2. Pre-cooked “steak” and pre-prepped rice make it an easy speed-scratch meal
3. Cost-competitive, with each serving clocking in at \$2.76
4. The “steak” is sourced from a California-based, Black-owned small business, putting money back into the local economy
5. Shredded “steak” and fried rice can be easily re-used in other menu items

How Monterey Peninsula Made It Work

1. **Minimized costs:** Monterey Peninsula found a supplier for the shredded plant-based “steak,” Better Chew, that was able to meet their cost needs, providing the shredded plant-based “steak” for \$80 per 10 lb case, making it about \$1/serving for the protein.
2. **Started small:** MPUSD started with trying out Better Chew’s crispy “chicken” product during Black History Month, and after seeing positive student response, began to incorporate shredded “beef” and shredded “chicken” products.
3. **Kept proteins flexible:** The shaved steak used in this fried rice bowl, as well as the shredded “chicken” made by Better Chew, can be used for dishes like Korean BBQ, shawarma, Massaman curry, and ramen that would typically contain meat. This simplifies operations, and allows students who don’t eat meat to participate in fun, popular lunch dishes.
4. **Partner Support:** Monterey Peninsula Unified School District was a host district for Chef Ann Foundation’s [Healthy School Food Pathway Program](#) and also partners with Friends of the Earth’s [Climate-Friendly School Food Program](#) for on-the-ground resources.

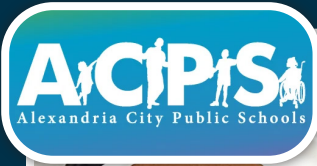
Lessons Learned

- **Follow familiar contexts:** Instead of inventing a new dish from scratch, this dish follows the format of similar beef or chicken teriyaki rice bowls, but swaps the meat for plant protein. This minimizes complexity while maximizing familiarity to students.
- **Student feedback is key:** Monterey Peninsula focused on student feedback when testing new plant proteins, and noticed an increase in vegan/vegetarian participation since switching to Better Chew products.

“Chef Chew has made eating vegan thoroughly enjoyable! His ingredients are whole foods rather than chemistry products. Even our students who are avid meat-eaters reach for our vegan options now!”

— Micha James, Director of Nutrition Services, Monterey Peninsula Unified School District





Black Bean Burger

School District Profile

Name: Alexandria City Public Schools

Location: Alexandria, VA

Locality type: City, midsize

Enrollment: 16,575 students

Demographics: 50% White, 21% Black or African American, 18% Hispanic or Latino, 6% Asian, 1% Some other race, 5% Two or more races

Recipe Highlight: Black Bean Burgers

Veggie burgers procured through USDA foods, featuring black beans, brown rice, and corn. Recipe [here](#).

Crediting: 2 oz M/MA (without bun)

Preparation: Heat and serve (pre-made patty). Use can be expanded by staff incorporating this into other scratch-cooked entrees. Speed-scratch entrees

Protein Source: Beans

Key Ingredients: Black bean burger (black beans, cooked brown rice, corn, soy protein), burger bun, veggies for topping

Dietary Fit: Vegan, nut free

Why It Works:

1. Available on USDA Foods to purchase with entitlement funds
2. Highly versatile: can be served whole as a burger or incorporated into multiple menu formats like bowls, wraps, salads, etc
3. Strong student appeal thanks to a familiar format
4. Inclusive option for diets like vegetarian, vegan, halal, kosher, and certain allergies

How Alexandria Made It Work

1. **Expanded beyond the burger:** The black bean burger is a familiar format that facilitates normalizing plant-based proteins. While the patty itself is pre-made, staff expand its use through scratch-style applications (e.g., crumbling into tacos, adding to bowls), increasing perceived freshness and variety.
2. **Leveraged entitlement money:** The school district leveraged USDA Foods entitlement dollars to purchase the black bean burger, making it easy to integrate this plant-based option without additional cost burden. This is one way to use entitlement dollars for plant-based center-of-the-plate options.
3. **Started with affordability:** This item is significantly more cost-effective than USDA Foods commodity beef patties (~\$3.69/lb vs. \$5.08–\$5.86/lb for beef), making it a budget-friendly option for districts.
4. **Partner support:** Alexandria City Public Schools is a participant of Chef Ann Foundation's [Healthy School Food Pathway Fellowship](#) and [Salad Bars to Schools](#) Grantee.

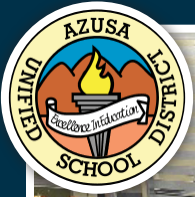
Lessons Learned

- **Get flexible:** Using one versatile product in multiple menu applications can increase acceptance and also reduce operational complexity.
- **Familiarity first:** Introducing plant-based options through familiar formats first can facilitate acceptance before expanding them into more creative offerings.

“The USDA Commodity Black Bean burger is one of those ingredients that just feels good to cook with – it’s simple, hearty, and packed with fiber. It works beautifully in everything from sandwiches, loaded baked potatoes, bowls, salads and more, giving kitchens a lot of flexibility. It’s easy to prepare, satisfying for students, and a great value for school nutrition programs looking to add more plant-based and planet-forward options.”

— Jason Tepper, Executive Chef, Alexandria City Public Schools, and a 2023 Chef Ann Foundation Fellow





Organic Chicken Drumsticks

School District Profile

Name: Azusa Unified School District

Location: Azusa, CA

Locality type: Suburban, large

Enrollment: 6,045 students

Demographics: 14% White, 2% Black or African American, 68% Hispanic or Latino, 13% Asian, 1% Some other race, 2% Two or more races

Recipe Highlight: Organic Chicken Drumsticks

A dry-rubbed, baked organic chicken drumstick featuring a simple, flavorful seasoning blend. Recipe [here](#).

Crediting: 2 oz M/MA

Preparation: Scratch-cooked

Protein Source: Chicken (organic, free range, non-GMO)

Key Ingredients: Mary's air chilled organic chicken drumsticks, wing seasoning mix

Dietary Fit: Top 9 allergen-free

Why It Works:

1. Simple, low prep recipe that doesn't require complex equipment or ingredients
2. Made of highly recognizable whole foods and no additives
3. Surprisingly affordable, ringing up at about \$1.95/lb
4. Familiar and flavorful taste, with strong student appeal
5. Certified organic chicken, which reduces pesticide exposure

How Azusa Made It Work

1. **Secured staff buy-in early:** Stella Ndahura, Azusa Unified School District's Director of Nutrition Services, engaged staff early in the process of transitioning to locally sourced, minimally processed chicken. Staff buy-in was made easier by the fact that many nutrition staff have family members attending schools in the district and, as a result, were motivated to serve healthier, higher-quality food.
2. **Leveraged KIT funds:** Azusa used KIT (Kitchen Infrastructure and Training) funds from the California Department of Education to transition to procuring raw and organic proteins. KIT funding supported the infrastructure and training needed to procure raw, organic proteins. This funding helped bring organic chicken from being unattainable to a lunchtime reality.
3. **Emphasized training:** For schools not already cooking with raw chicken, food safety and handling training was essential, as raw chicken introduces higher contamination risk. Continuous food handling and safety trainings are key to making the recipe work in kitchens.

4. Partner support:

Azusa Unified School District was a host district for Chef Ann Foundation's [Healthy School Food Pathway Program](#) and also partners with Friends of the Earth's [Climate-Friendly School Food Program](#) for on-the-ground resources.

- **Training is key:** Strong food safety training modules must be built in to ensure that staff are confident in the safe preparation of chicken, from raw to serving. This is especially important in districts that don't typically prepare raw meat.

Lessons Learned

- **Don't forget the space:** Although the recipe is straightforward, proper equipment and tools are critical: dedicated refrigerator space is needed for thawing the chicken and ample cooling racks are needed for the post-bake cooling.

"We are highlighting local sourcing and sustainable practices, which shows the community that we are invested in the overall well-being of our students."

— Stella Ndahura, Director of Nutrition Services, Azusa Unified School District





Salmon Burgers

School District Profile

Name: Dillingham City School District

Location: Dillingham, Alaska

Locality type: Rural, remote

Enrollment: 403 students

Demographics: 23% White, 5% Hispanic or Latino, 3% Asian, 55% American Indian/Alaska Native, 14% Two or more races

Recipe Highlight: Salmon Burgers

Scratch-cooked salmon burgers made with whole grain and wild-caught, locally sourced salmon, paired with mild herbs. Recipe [here](#).

Crediting: 2.5 oz M/MA, 2 oz grains

Preparation: Scratch-cooked

Protein Source: Salmon (locally sourced, wild caught)

Key Ingredients: Wild-caught U.S. salmon, whole grain breadcrumbs or oats

Dietary Fit: Dairy free, nut free, soy free

Why It Works:

1. Familiar, burger format boosts student acceptance
2. Whole grain breadcrumbs or oats help boost the fiber content
3. Featured regularly (i.e., Salmon Fridays) to support consistency while maintaining variety
4. Flavor is easily adaptable to student preferences
5. Supports local procurement while maintaining high nutritional quality

How Dillingham City Made It Work

1. **Aligned with local availability:** Dillingham City School District sources salmon locally, leveraging regional fishing systems and community partnerships to access wild-caught seafood. By aligning menus with local availability and featuring salmon regularly, they create a consistent demand that supports reliable procurement, reduces supply chain challenges, and strengthens relationships with local suppliers.
2. **Focused on familiarity and flavor:** Serving salmon in a familiar burger format made this more approachable for students. This approach allowed for gradual acceptance of seafood items while maintaining comfort and familiarity in presentation. Staff prepare the burgers in-house using whole ingredients and adjust flavors (e.g., herbs, lemon) to balance the stronger salmon taste and improve student appeal.
3. **Keeping costs simple:** Utilizing locally sourced salmon helps reduce food transportation costs while supporting the regional economy. Portions are standardized, allowing for cost control and efficient menu planning. Incorporating salmon into a consistent weekly menu item also supports bulk purchasing and streamlined inventory management. The salmon burger can be adapted into bowls or wraps, increasing versatility across the menu.

4. Worked in collaboration:

Support from programs like the Chef Ann Foundation helped build staff confidence in handling seafood, seasoning appropriately, and executing scratch-cooked recipes consistently. A moderate amount of training was required to prepare and form patties from scratch. Dillingham City School District is also a Chef Ann Foundation [Get Schools Cooking](#) Participant and [Salad Bars to Schools](#) Grantee.

“Salmon is a resource deeply rooted in our community and traditionally harvested and shared by families throughout the region. Being able to bring that same connection to our students through school meals is incredibly special to us. Watching the kids light up on salmon burger day and hearing them ask for seconds firsthand has been one of the most rewarding parts of serving this recipe.

Salmon burgers are not only a delicious and healthy way to prepare salmon, but they also help connect students to familiar flavors and local traditions in a fun, approachable way. Finding creative recipes that truly engage students’ taste buds can sometimes be a challenge, but this recipe has quickly become a favorite in our cafeterias. Seeing students genuinely excited to eat a nutritious meal made with a food so important to our region reminds us exactly why we do this work every day.”

— Cheyenne Wilson, Food Service Manager,
Dillingham City School District

Lessons Learned

- **Start with the familiar:** Introducing local salmon through familiar formats like burgers, tacos, and bowls helped increase student acceptance and comfort with seafood-based meals.
- **Keep training consistent:** Consistent scratch-cooking training and technical assistance helped staff build confidence in adapting local ingredients into student-friendly recipes.



Bison Mac and Cheese

School District Profile

Name: Hardin Public Schools

Location: Hardin, Montana

Locality type: Rural, remote

Enrollment: Approx. 1,792 students

Demographics: Approximately 30% White, 60% American Indian/Alaska Native, 6% Hispanic/Latino, 3% Two or more races

Recipe Highlight: Bison Mac and Cheese

A main dish featuring whole grain pasta, scratch cheese sauce, and locally sourced bison meat, prepared with tomatoes.

[Recipe here.](#)

Crediting: 2.5 oz M/MA, 1 oz grain

Preparation: Fully scratch-cooked

Protein Source: Bison (locally sourced)

Key Ingredients: Bison meat, whole-grain pasta, cheddar cheese

Dietary Fit: Nut free, soy free

Why It Works:

1. Uses a familiar, highly accepted format (macaroni and cheese) to introduce a new protein
2. Can be adapted into multiple formats, like bowls or vegetable variations
3. Incorporates culturally relevant and regionally sourced ingredients while maintaining comfort food appeal
4. Supports local procurement and reduces reliance on highly processed foods

How Hardin Made It Work

1. **Procured strategically:** Through grant funding and community-based procurement efforts, the district was able to source locally-produced bison meat. This approach strengthened relationships with local producers while also creating a more reliable and regionally-aligned supply chain, thereby reducing dependence upon processed USDA commodity items.
2. **Engaged partnerships and training**
Technical assistance from Chef Ann Foundation helped build staff confidence in handling new ingredients and executing scratch-cooked recipes consistently: A moderate amount of training was needed to support scratch cooking techniques, including for the preparation of the roux-based cheese sauce and for properly cooking and seasoning bison meat. Staff prepare the dish completely from scratch, combining a classic mac and cheese base with a bison-tomato mixture that is then layered and baked.
3. **Built affordability:** A local spending grant offset the cost of sourcing bison, beef, and eggs, which made it feasible to transition away from lower cost, highly processed items. By using bison in a mixed dish, this higher-cost protein was stretched across multiple servings, balancing costs with nutritional quality.

4. Introduced gradually: Bison was incorporated into a well-loved and familiar entree, which made it easier for students to accept a new protein. This approach allowed for gradual exposure while maintaining student comfort and familiarity with an existing menu item. The inclusion of cheese and tomato helps balance the flavor of bison, making it more approachable and palatable for students. The recipe also can be adapted by incorporating vegetables or adjusting seasonings to adapt to student preferences.

5. Partner support: Hardin Public Schools is a Chef Ann Foundation [Get Schools Cooking](#) Participant.

“In the past three years, we have seen a culture change in our kitchen and cafeterias that we’re very proud of. We’ve worked hard to eliminate as much processed food as we can and we’re still working on that. We do a lot of scratch cooking, and we have salad bars in every school.”

— Marlo Spreng, Director of School Nutrition, Hardin Public Schools

Lessons Learned

➤ **Start with student favorites:**

Introducing an alternative meat through a familiar dish with well-loved flavors (e.g., cheese, pasta, tomato-based sauces) helped improve student acceptance and allowed for gradual menu innovation while also easing the transition away from highly-processed proteins. This gradual approach increased student buy-in before expanding this protein to other entrees.

➤ **Add bison across the menu**

strategically: Using bison as a protein across different recipes (e.g., pasta dishes, tacos, bowls) can support menu variety while simplifying procurement and kitchen operations. Serving it in contexts with lower saturated fat and sodium can help balance the nutritional profile.





Green Chile Egg Bites

School District Profile

Name: Elida Municipal Schools

Location: Elida, New Mexico

Locality type: Rural, remote

Enrollment: 146 students

Demographics: 75% White, 24% Hispanic/Latino, 1% Two or more races

Recipe Highlight: Green Chile Egg Bites

Scratch-cooked, restaurant-style egg bites made with local cheese and New Mexico green chiles. Similar recipe [here](#).

Crediting: 2 oz M/MA

Preparation: Scratch-cooked

Protein Source: Eggs (local), cheese (local), cottage cheese

Key Ingredients: Local whole eggs, cottage cheese, shredded cheddar cheese, diced New Mexico green chilies.

Dietary fit: Vegetarian, nut free, soy free, gluten free

Why It Works:

1. Follows a familiar format that students recognize
2. Shows off regional flavors while supporting local procurement
3. Provides a protein-packed, vegetarian friendly option
4. Can be easily customized to fit different flavor profiles
5. Simplifies procurement by using ingredients like eggs, cheese, and green chiles that are used across multiple recipes

How Elida Made It Work

1. **Started with familiarity:** Egg bites are a familiar item for students, so this scratch-cooked version facilitated students becoming comfortable with scratch-cooked items while still recognizing the meal as approachable and convenient. Regional flavors (New Mexico green chilies) added variety without straying too far from student preferences.
2. **Provided staff training:** A moderate level of training and technical assistance supported staff in moving further along the scratch-cooking continuum, including batching, portioning, baking, and safely holding scratch-prepared breakfast items at a safe temperature.
3. **Procured locally:** The district sources local cheese and New Mexico green chilies through regional procurement efforts and is continuing to expand local purchasing practices, including efforts to procure local beef for additional scratch-cooked menu items.
4. **Leaned on a trusted partner:** Chef Ann Foundation provided technical assistance and support that helped build confidence in using fresh and locally sourced ingredients. Staff fully prepare the egg bites from scratch using local, whole eggs, local cheese, and green chilies. The

recipe can be adapted with additional vegetables, proteins, or seasonings, allowing for flexibility and increased menu variety while maintaining a fresh, homemade feel. Elida Municipal Schools is also a [Get Schools Cooking](#) Participant and [Salad Bars to Schools](#) Grantee.

“We made two different varieties. One was a plain egg bite, and the other was made with green chile from a local vendor, Veggie Shack. Green chile is a staple in our little New Mexico cafeteria and is featured in several food items, from condiments and vegetables to main dishes. Throughout the day, students kept telling us that ‘those egg things were really good.’ They also asked if they could have them again.”

— Beth Fair, Food Service Director, Elida Municipal Schools.

Lessons Learned

- **Introduce scratch-cooked items through familiar formats:** The recognizable egg bite format, which can be seen at restaurant chains, helped increase student acceptance while gradually transitioning away from highly processed products.
- **Incorporate regional flavors into approachable menu items:** Taking this approach helped build student interest and support the district’s shift toward more values-aligned, scratch-cooked meals.



Recommendations and Conclusion

As demonstrated by these eight case studies, finding solutions to industrially produced, often-processed meat and cheese-centered entrees isn't just a lofty goal. It is a reality for school districts across the country that are already serving tasty and nutritious scratch-made, plant-forward entrees featuring high-quality ingredients.

The following recommendations outline practical, actionable steps that school districts can take within existing constraints to improve the nutritional quality, safety, and sustainability of school meals.



Expand culturally relevant plant-based offerings, including a daily plant-based option:

School districts should increase the availability of plant-based entrées, with the goal of offering at least one appealing plant-based option each day. Prioritizing the replacement of processed meat items — such as nuggets, hot dogs, and deli meats — with plant-based alternatives is a practical first step, as processed meat products are among the products most associated with serious health risks.



Expanding plant-based options can improve dietary quality, increase fiber intake, and offer inclusive choices for a wider range of students:

Plant-forward school meals should be developed with student preferences, cultural food traditions, and community input in mind. For example, Los Angeles Unified School District's Harvest of the Month program and Austin Independent Schools' plant-based global cuisine menus have demonstrated student acceptance of plant-forward options rooted in cultural diversity.^{1,2} For resources on expanding, improving, and marketing plant-based options, visit [Friends of the Earth's School Nutrition Services Resources](https://foe.org/organic-procurement/).

For more recipes and resources, visit [Chef Ann Foundation's Sustainable Lunchrooms webpages](https://chefannfoundation.org/sustainable-lunchrooms-webpages). You can take the [Plant Forward online course](https://chefannfoundation.org/plant-forward-online-course) offered through Chef Ann Foundation's School Food Institute for a deep dive into how to incorporate plant-based options into school meals



Expand organic offerings.

Several of the health risks outlined in our report are solved for by the USDA Organic standard, which prohibits toxic pesticides; nearly all synthetic food additives, including synthetic nitrates in processed meat; and antibiotics and growth hormones in livestock production. School districts are increasingly purchasing organic produce, but organic animal products can be cost-prohibitive.³ School districts should request organic offerings from their vendors and distributors, including their DoD Fresh vendor. For resources on advocating for organic offerings through DoD Fresh, visit [Expanding Local, Organic Options Through DoD Fresh](https://foe.org/expanding-local-organic-options-through-dod-fresh) on Friends of the Earth's website.



Begin the transition to scratch cooking:

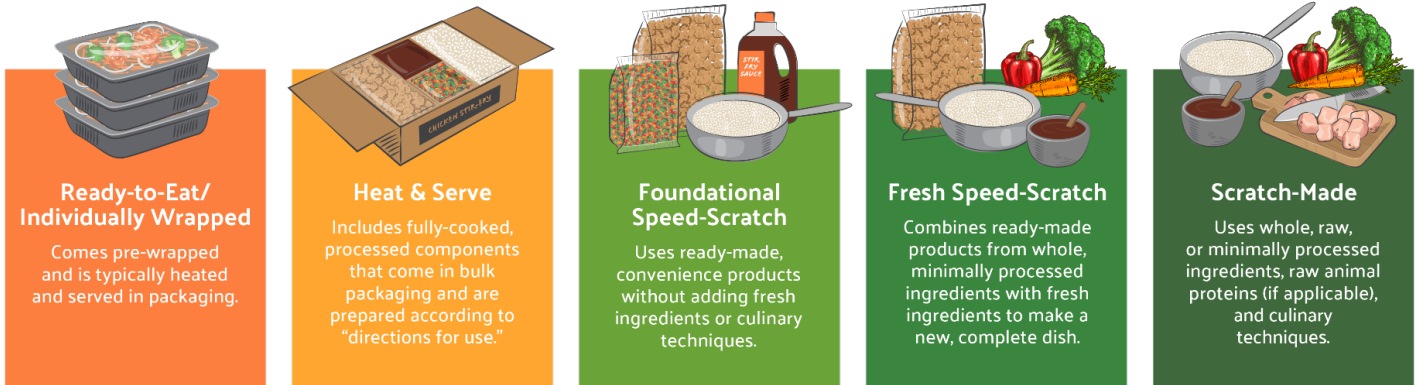
While a full transition may take time, districts can start by incrementally increasing scratch-cooked items and reducing reliance on pre-processed, heat-and-serve products. Even small shifts, such as preparing certain sauces, grains, or plant-based entrées in-house, can improve ingredient quality, reduce exposure to harmful additives, and build staff skills over time. Investing in training, equipment, and menu planning is key to supporting this transition and creating more flexible, resilient meal programs. For resources to support scratch cooking, visit The Lunch Box, [Chef Ann Foundation's free, online resource library for scratch cooking in schools](https://chefannfoundation.org/free-online-resource-library-for-scratch-cooking-in-schools). Learn how schools can follow Chef Ann Foundation's [Scratch-Cooking Continuum](https://chefannfoundation.org/scratch-cooking-continuum) to gradually shift from heating and serving pre-packaged food to cooking scratch-made meals.

1 Wilk O and Bomba M. Vegan Meals in LAUSD: A case study and lessons-learned for alternatives in school food service. June 2018. <https://www.oxy.edu/sites/default/files/assets/UEPI/vegan%2520report.pdf>.

2 Bradley L. Feeding the Future: Redefining the Student Dining Experience in Austin, Texas. Jan 28, 2021. [https://greenschoolsnationalnetwork.org/feeding-the-future-redefining-the-student-dining-experience-in-austin-texas/#:~:text=Austin%20Independent%20School%20District%20\(Austin,not%20typically%20seen%20in%20schools](https://greenschoolsnationalnetwork.org/feeding-the-future-redefining-the-student-dining-experience-in-austin-texas/#:~:text=Austin%20Independent%20School%20District%20(Austin,not%20typically%20seen%20in%20schools).

3 <https://foe.org/organic-procurement/>

Scratch-Cooking Continuum



The Chef Ann Foundation's scratch-cooking continuum illustrates the journey from pre-packaged, processed foods to creating scratch-made dishes using whole, fresh ingredients and culinary techniques.



Leverage commodity entitlements

strategically: Given that many USDA Foods ingredients and processed items available from approved processors — particularly meat



and dairy products — contain ingredients of concern and toxic contaminants and come from industrial production systems that utilize growth promoting drugs, antibiotics,

and pesticide-laden feed, districts should use their commodity entitlement dollars strategically. Prioritizing plant-based ingredients through Direct Delivery and fresh produce through programs like DoD Fresh can help shift menus toward higher-quality ingredients, while reserving commercial food budgets for animal products that meet stronger sourcing, nutrition, and sustainability standards unavailable through USDA's commodity foods program.

While the school food system still has a long way to go to incentivize the purchase and consumption of plant-forward, scratch-cooked entrees featuring high-quality proteins, these steps being taken by school districts mark a crucial step forward. When students have opportunities to enjoy these meals at school, a new standard is set for the nutritious, inclusive food that today's children deserve. With creativity, collaboration, and hard work, these school districts are reimagining the proteins at the center of the lunch tray and setting a higher standard than ever.