

# Improved and Expanded Nutrition for Students

Oakland, California

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## Problem Overview

In the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD), schools were not serving sufficiently nutritious food to students. Most of the meals were made from processed, packaged foods. The students were overall dissatisfied with the options available with school meals. Furthermore, school nurses shared that the student body had high obesity and diabetes rates, along with high stress levels.

Neither the school district nor individual school sites were adequately utilizing their kitchen equipment. Staff was only opening and warming pre-made food. Many school sites had inadequate cooking facilities to efficiently prepare and serve school meals.

Seventy percent of students were eligible for free and reduced-priced school meals. The surrounding communities faced healthy food deserts where fresh fruits and vegetables were scarcely available.

The following information sources helped OUSD staff identify the problems that needed attention:

- 1) Student free- and reduced-meal applications.
- 2) Student obesity and diabetes data reported by school nurses.
- 3) Observation of school sites not comprehensively using their cooking equipment.
- 4) Anecdotal conversations with community partners and parents.

## Program Activity/Description

OUSD Nutrition Services staff reviewed the menus and cooking volume at 30 schools that had kitchens. The menus were changed to include more freshly prepared foods. The percentage of processed foods included in school meals decreased from 80 percent to 25 percent!

Food services staff started to cook again, using healthier ingredients. Pizza crusts prepared onsite are made with whole wheat flour instead of white flour. Staff adds chicken, turkey sausage, and/or vegetable toppings to replace simply cheese and pepperoni. Sixty-seven school sites have added a salad bar to the cafeteria. Volunteer parents and employed students manage the salad bar: refilling food items, encouraging students to take servings from the salad bar, and restricting students from taking too much of limited premium commodities such as fresh strawberries.

Two central kitchens located at the district provide menus for the majority of their schools. District staff has created new, healthier recipes and prepares items such as hand-rolled chicken enchiladas instead of pre-packaged, frozen food.

The Nutrition Services Director successfully applied for USDA provision to allow all students, regardless of financial ability, to participate in the no-cost school breakfast program. Nine-thousand students receive breakfast each day. The district now also adds health-related specifications to its food procurement bid process requiring that purchased food be locally grown.

At one school, fifth-graders calculated the “food miles” associated with food obtained by the school for serving meals to students. Food miles represent the total distance food travels from where it is grown, to all the places where it is processed and packaged, to where it is finally consumed. In one case, a food item traveled 15K miles: it was grown in South America, processed in China, and then eaten in Oakland USD.

To plan for the future, the district commissioned a “Rethinking School Lunch” feasibility study to determine how to improve the quantity, procurement process, nutritional quality, and delivery system for school meals. Study recommendations include, among other suggestions:

- 1) Purchasing cooking equipment and renovating school kitchens.
- 2) Developing school-community kitchens that public entities can use during evenings and weekends.
- 3) Creating a large central commissary for receiving deliveries and preparing food items.
- 4) Expanding use of salad bars.
- 5) Formulating seasonal recipes reflecting ethnic traditions.
- 6) Selecting model schools to provide observational professional development opportunities for school staff.
- 7) Increasing the number of school gardens, including establishment of a large district garden.
- 8) Food-scrap recycling (composting).
- 9) Provision of cooking classes for nutrition services staff.
- 10) Building a new central kitchen/commissary which will support changing the source for the majority of meals served from individually pre-wrapped food to bulk food, thus facilitating food service for other sites in the district.
- 11) Establishing a one-fifth acre district farm.

## Additional Partner Contributions

The Community Alliance with Family Farmers (CAFF) assisted in formulating the farm-to-school program to secure locally grown food for use in school meals. CAFF consultants worked with community members, parents, teachers, and Nutrition Services staff to determine what priorities should govern produce procurement. In descending order, the community favored food items that were fresh, local, and organic. In this context, “local” was defined as crops grown within 250 miles of the school district. CAFF members also wrote and secured a grant from UC Davis to support implementation of the farm-to-school project. OUSD Nutrition Services staff then successfully utilized USDA rules for food procurement to factor in geographical preference stipulations into the bidding process.

On another front, the East Bay Asian Youth Center worked to open produce markets on 22 school campuses. Since these schools have no school bus service, parents who pick up their children at these schools have opportunity to buy fresh fruits and vegetables at school. The farmers markets also provide cooking demonstrations. Similar in nature, the Alameda County Public Health Department, Nutrition Services Division provides Harvest of the Month educational materials and sample produce for teachers. Then the school cafeterias serve the selected food item the following week.

Another partner, the Oakland School Food Alliance (a parent organization), sends representatives to school board meetings to advocate for improved school nutrition. They also support expansion and upgrades of school kitchens. They helped get grants for OUSD to expand provision of breakfast to more students. Episcopal Charities also donated funds for expanding the Breakfast in the Classroom program.

Finally, the Center for Ecoliteracy identified funders and hired contractors to perform the “Rethinking School Lunch” feasibility study addressed in the above section.

## **Program Evaluation & Activity Outcomes**

Following are three factors OUSD Nutrition Services staff noted that provide insights regarding the impact of their activities:

- 1) Number of school meals served.
- 2) Invoice amounts tied to farm-to-school program purchases.
- 3) Anecdotal input from parents and other community members regarding the activities described in the above sections.

One **short-term** outcome was the revision of food service menus to include healthier choices.

**Intermediate** outcomes include:

- 1) Successful farm-to-school food procurement program for both school meals and parent purchases of fresh produce.

- 2) Expansion of salad bar use to more schools.
- 3) The average percentage of processed food present in meals prepared at schools with cooking kitchens decreased from 80 percent to 25 percent.
- 4) Expansion of free breakfast program utilization. All students are eligible to participate.
- 5) Completion of the “Rethinking School Lunch” feasibility study that offered many suggestions for improving infrastructure and processes related to providing healthier meals for students.

### **Program Contact Information**

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