

SCHOOL FOOD RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE NEW YORK CITY TEN-YEAR FOOD PLAN

This document outlines four overarching goals related to school food to include in the New York City (NYC) Ten-Year Food Plan. For each goal, we have listed steps NYC can take in the first year, as well as steps NYC should aim for within the ten years. Following these goals is a short background section that provides additional information on the benefits to schools, the Department of Education's (DOE) Office of Food and Nutrition Services (OFNS), and communities.

GOAL ONE: Increase the amount of freshly prepared meals made from unprocessed ingredients on the OFNS menu.

In Year One

OFNS should develop an implementation plan with concrete steps to expand scratch cooking city-wide. The plan should outline facilitators and barriers related to infrastructure, labor, ingredient availability (with an emphasis on local vendors), communication, and community input.

Within Ten Years

One district, where access to healthy foods is a priority, should be cooking from an entirely scratch menu. All other schools should be serving fresh meals made from ingredients in their most basic form, prepared at or near the site of consumption, at least weekly. Specifically, a city-wide school meal menu should include:

- **More fresh fruit:** Students should have access to fresh fruit every school day, not just to fruit canned or packed in syrup.
 - *Metric:* In every school, OFNS offers servings of fresh fruit daily at two of students' eating occasions (breakfast, lunch, or snack).
- **More fresh vegetables:** To help ensure students eat the vegetables available to them, OFNS should serve more fresh vegetables, prepare those vegetables in more appealing ways, and offer a daily salad bar with dressings made from scratch.
 - Metric:* For lunch, every school has a salad bar or grab-and-go salads with dressings made from scratch.
- **More healthy grains:** OFNS should prioritize whole grain pasta, bread, and rice.
 - *Metric:* Serve refined grains for culturally-specific uses only.
- **Less meat:** OFNS should reduce its reliance on cheese-based items on Meatless Mondays. School meal menus should incorporate more meat alternatives such as beans, lentils, split peas, tofu, tempeh, and soy yogurt, as well as scratch-made products such as falafels and veggie burgers.

- *Metric:* Increase the number of days beans, lentils, split peas, tofu, tempeh, and soy yogurt, as well as scratch-made products such as falafels and veggie burgers are served. Replace 50% of cheese-based items served on Meatless Mondays with these alternatives.
- **More locally-sourced items:** Sourcing local ingredients unlocks economic benefits for farmers and public health benefits for students.
 - *Metric:* OFNS purchases at least 30% of total ingredients from New York farms, increasing the reimbursement the district receives for lunches from 5.9 cents per meal to 25 cents per meal under the state's *No Student Goes Hungry Initiative*.
- **No harmful ingredients:** Students deserve real, healthy food. OFNS should commit to removing harmful ingredients like hydrogenated oils, high-fructose corn syrup, hormones, antibiotics, processed and artificial sweeteners, artificial colors, artificial flavors, artificial preservatives, and bleached flours from school meals.

Metric: No school meal contains any of the harmful ingredients listed above.
- **Access to water:** Schools should promote and increase access to safe drinking water.
 - *Metric:* Every school provides students and employees with access to clean, safe, palatable drinking water free of charge. Safe drinking water is available in the cafeteria and other eating areas, classrooms, hallways, gymnasiums, play yards, athletic fields, and faculty lounges throughout the school day, as well as at before- and after-school activities.

GOAL TWO: Improve cafeteria culture in every school.

In Year One

As part of its strategic planning process, OFNS should develop a plan with concrete steps and timeline to persuade principals to schedule adequate time to eat; expand sustainable cafeteria practices; and support comprehensive food and nutrition education. Creating a physically attractive, caring, and calming cafeteria environment makes meals more enjoyable.

Within Ten Years

To increase participation and consumption, schools should adopt the following strategies:

- **Adequate time to eat:** Strategies to increase school meal participation and consumption include serving meals at appropriate times of the day; allowing students ample time to eat; and scheduling recess before lunch.
 - *Metric:* Every school schedules at least 30 minutes for lunch. In schools with recess, meals occur after recess.
- **Support for sustainable cafeteria practices:** Schools' priority is to get students to eat the meals served rather than throw food away. To increase consumption, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends school nutrition programs train staff to efficiently move children through the meal line, offer grab-and-go style service

throughout the school building, and prepare fruits and vegetables that are easier to consume. For food students do not eat, schools should have a robust composting programming.

- *Metric:* ZeroWaste Schools is operating in every cafeteria city-wide.
- **Comprehensive food and nutrition education:** To have a lasting effect, food and nutrition education should be integrated with high-quality meals, healthy food choices outside the cafeteria, well-implemented local wellness policies, and reinforcement in the home and community.
 - *Metric:* OFNS provides a school-based framework and annual training for school foodservice personnel, teachers, family members, and other community members to work together to ensure healthful food environments.

GOAL THREE: Institute workforce development programs to support scratch cooking in schools.

In Year One

OFNS is requesting 60 additional school food managers in the coming fiscal year; all 60 should be required to complete intensive training to gain the skills necessary to oversee scratch cooking.

A report from the Tisch Food Center on OFNS's scratch cooking pilot found that additional schools would be able to successfully scratch cook meals with a leader who has some food service and culinary expertise. Training topics would include, but not be limited to, leadership skills, storage and organization, knife skills, tool and equipment use, basic cooking techniques, menu planning, and food preparation. Several training programs already exist that could be scaled up.

Within Ten Years

Every school food manager, old or new, will have completed an intensive training program to support scratch cooking. With training on leadership, culinary skills, and menu planning, these managers would be equipped to oversee preparation of scratch-cooked items for the OFNS city-wide menu or to seek higher paying positions within OFNS or other kitchens.

GOAL FOUR: Invest in community food hubs that expand schools' access to cold storage, processing space, and preparation capacity.

In Year One

Identify school districts where access to healthy food needs are highest and where cafeteria infrastructure is lacking (the latter should be achieved in the scratch cooking implementation plan recommended as a "Year One" step for Goal One, above).

Within Ten Years

Support the development of three community food hubs to serve school districts identified as having the highest need. Schools lack the space to store, process, and prepare many of the fresh ingredients needed to scratch cook. Retrofitting every school cafeteria would be very difficult

given space and budget constraints. Community food hubs could help schools overcome barriers to scratch cooking and support community food needs. For example, these spaces could include additional cold storage and processing equipment for local businesses to rent, as well as kitchen space for city workforce development programs and community events.

STRATEGIES TO INCREASE SCRATCH COOKING WILL BENEFIT MULTIPLE STAKEHOLDERS

To ensure our communities are stronger, safer, and healthier moving forward, NYC should work to improve the quality of school meals through scratch cooking. Incorporating concrete steps to improve school meal quality will benefit students, OFNS, and communities.

Benefits to Students

Healthy school meals are important for all children, but especially for low-income children and children of color. School meals typically make up one-third to one-half of many students' caloric intake in a given day.¹ With many schools closed, more students are at risk of going hungry. Approximately one in three households with children are currently experiencing food insecurity.² Black and Latinx families have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19; national rates of food insecurity among these families are roughly double the rates of White families.³

While food insecurity rates have recently skyrocketed, childhood obesity rates have been steadily climbing over the past three decades,⁴ so much so that 40% of NYC public school students ages 6 to 12 are now overweight or obese.⁵ As with food insecurity rates, rates of overweight and obesity risk are higher for students of color.⁶ And experts are now predicting that school closures “may exacerbate the epidemic of childhood obesity,” making school meal quality an equity issue.⁷

Regular consumption of school meals can improve dietary intake, as students who eat school meals every day consume more fruits and vegetables, fiber, and whole grains compared to

¹ Story, M. The School Food Environment, Children's Diets and Obesity: Findings from the Third School Nutrition Dietary Assessment Study. *J Am Diet Assoc.* 2009;109(2), Supplement 1.

² Bauer L. *Raise the SNAP Maximum Benefit to Reduce Food Insecurity*. Brookings Institute. September 30, 2020. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2020/09/30/raise-the-snap-maximum-benefit-to-reduce-food-insecurity/>.

³ Schanzenbach D, Pitts A. *How Much Has Food Insecurity Risen? Evidence from the Census Household Pulse Survey*. Northwestern University, Institute for Policy Research. June 10, 2020. <https://www.ipr.northwestern.edu/documents/reports/ipr-rapid-research-reports-pulse-hh-data-10-june-2020.pdf>.

⁴ N.Y.S. Department of Health. *Obesity Prevention*. <https://www.health.ny.gov/prevention/obesity/>. Accessed March 2020.

⁵ N.Y.C. Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. *Childhood Overweight, Physical Activity and “Screen-time” in New York City*. October 2010. <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/doh/downloads/pdf/epi/databrief1.pdf>. Accessed March 2020.

⁶ U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *Childhood Obesity Facts*. June 24, 2019. <https://www.cdc.gov/obesity/data/childhood.html>.

⁷ Rundle AG, Park Y, Herbstman J, Kinsey EW, Wang YC. COVID-19 Related School Closings and Risk of Weight Gain Among Children. *Obesity*. 2020.

those who do not.⁸ Reducing the amount of highly-processed items students consume and replacing those items with scratch-cooked foods, would increase their diet health further.⁹ Research shows that meal participation is highest in schools with the healthiest meals,¹⁰ meaning additional improvements to school meal quality could help solve the dual problems of student food insecurity and diet-related disease risk.

Benefits to the Department of Education

Because school meal participation is highest in schools with the healthiest meals,¹¹ investing a little more upfront to improve meal quality will help alleviate OFNS's budget stresses long term. NYC has long been a leader in school nutrition. Thanks to our city's food standards and OFNS's dedication to providing foods that exceed federal standards,¹² public school students in our city eat meals with less salt and more whole grains, fruits, and vegetables. But there is still room for improvement.

As the largest public school system in the country, NYC DOE typically serves 940,000 meals a day,¹³ reaching 750,000 low-income¹⁴ and 114,000 of homeless students.¹⁵ With COVID-19 school closures, participation in school meals has plummeted to roughly 30% of what it was pre-COVID. Reduced participation threatens the Department's budget which relies on per meal reimbursements from the federal government. In May of last school year, just two months into this crisis, school food service directors across the country reported losses up to \$2.35 million.¹⁶ As the largest district in the country, OFNS is likely facing the largest losses, losses that are in the tens of millions at this point. Investing in a continuum of scratch cooking strategies could help increase participation, preventing longer term financial loss, and ensure that OFNS continues to be recognized as a leader in school nutrition.

Benefits to Communities

Many NYC communities lack access to the resources that enable them to feed their families well. Low-paid jobs are a barrier, as is community infrastructure. Helping individuals

⁸ Au LE, et al. Eating School Meals Daily Is Associated with Healthier Dietary Intakes: The Healthy Communities Study. *J Acad Nutr Diet*. 2018;118(8):1474-1481.e1. doi: 10.1016/j.jand.2018.01.010.

⁹ Costa CS, et al. Ultra-Processed Food Consumption and its Effects on Anthropometric and Glucose Profile: A Longitudinal Study During Childhood. *Nutr Metab Cardiovasc Dis*. 2019;29(2):177-184. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/30660687/>. doi: 10.1016/j.numecd.2018.11.003.

¹⁰ U.S. Department of Agriculture. *School Nutrition and Meal Cost Study: Volume 4*. April 2019. <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/resource-files/SNMCS-Volume4.pdf>.

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² N.Y.C. Department of Education. *School Meals*. <https://www.schools.nyc.gov/school-life/food/free-meals-for-all>.

¹³ N.Y.C. Department of Education. *Welcome to the Office of Food and Nutrition Services*. <https://www.opt-osfns.org/schoolfoodny/AboutUs/aboutus.htm#:~:text=SchoolFood%20serves%20around%20850%2C000%20meal%20the%20students%20or%20their%20parents>.

¹⁴ N.Y.C. Department of Education. *DOE Data at a Glance*. <https://www.schools.nyc.gov/about-us/reports/doe-data-at-a-glance>.

¹⁵ Shapiro E. 114,000 Students in N.Y.C. Are Homeless. These Two Let Us into Their Lives. *New York Times*. November 19, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/11/19/nyregion/student-homelessness-nyc.html>.

¹⁶ School Nutrition Association. *Impact of COVID-19 on School Nutrition Programs: Part 2*. May 2020. https://schoolnutrition.org/uploadedFiles/11COVID-19/3_Webinar_Series_and_Other_Resources/COVID-19-Impact-on-School-Nutrition-Programs-Part2.pdf.

develop the skills for higher-paid jobs like those OFNS offers is one way the city can potentially support healthier food choices. Increasing schools' and communities' access to localized food hubs is another way that NYC can help ensure that healthy foods are available in the communities that need them most.