



**CENTER FOR
CITIES+SCHOOLS**
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA BERKELEY



Executive Summary

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One way to serve healthier school meals is by incorporating “scratch-cooking” techniques, whereby many or most of the ingredients are prepared onsite from a raw and/or minimally processed form, into school food service programs. However, the vast majority of public school kitchens across the U.S. and in California are not designed and/or equipped to scratch cook. Raw and/or unprocessed food ingredients have shorter shelf lives and fewer added preservatives, thus requiring specialized kitchen infrastructure and equipment for receiving, storing, and preparing.

To understand the opportunities and challenges to increasing healthy school meals across California, this study investigates the scratch-cooking readiness of the state’s public schools’ kitchens. We conducted a web-based survey of food service directors in California public school districts. Two hundred directors from 200 school districts responded, self-reporting their opinions and observations about their district’s food service program and kitchen facilities,

Key Findings

- Scratch cooking is happening in all types and sizes of public schools in California: small, large, urban, rural, and suburban.
- Nearly one-third of all responding school districts report high levels of scratch cooking in their district while only 16% report that they do little-to-no scratch cooking currently.
- Rural school districts are more likely to report high levels of scratch cooking. Suburban districts report the lowest prevalence of scratch cooking.



The Center for Cities + Schools (CC+S) at the University of California, Berkeley conducts high-quality, non-partisan policy research, engages youth in urban planning, and cultivates collaboration between city and school leaders to strengthen all communities. CC+S works to advance policies and practices that create opportunity-rich places where young people can be successful in and out of school. **Learn more:** <https://citiesandschools.berkeley.edu>

- Majority non-white school districts report less scratch cooking than majority white districts: 27% and 40%, respectively.
- Districts with high levels of scratch cooking employ more food service workers and more full-time employees compared to districts that do some or little-to-no scratch cooking.
- Key challenges to expanding scratch cooking are having skilled staff and the necessary facilities and equipment to scratch cook.
- School districts rely heavily on local funding for kitchen facility and equipment upgrades.
- More than one-quarter (29%) of school districts report serving at least some organic / pesticide-free foods; the highest income districts are more than twice as likely as the lowest income districts to report serving at least some organic / pesticide-free foods.
- An estimated \$5.81 billion is needed to make all California public school kitchen facilities scratch-cooking capable.

Recommendations

Although some school districts are already serving scratch-cooked foods, often this is occurring against the odds and in spite of funding and facility/equipment challenges. As California aims for transformational changes to school food that support California's farmers, increase equitable food access, and create a more resilient and climate smart food supply, it is clear that school kitchens are likely to be an important element of local and regional food systems infrastructure strategies.

We propose the following recommendations to increase scratch cooking and healthier food options in California public schools. California's Office of Farm to Fork (OFtF) could potentially be a "hub" to help lead and coordinate this work.

- **Invest to catalyze change.** Strategic investment is needed to build scratch cooking capability across the state, prioritizing areas where key funding barriers exist.
- **Establish a statewide task force on healthy school meals.** A concerted effort is needed to establish a plan for expanding access to healthy meals in California public schools.
- **Learn from existing ingenuity.** We need to better understand successful scratch cooking strategies already underway.

Full Study:

<https://citiesandschools.berkeley.edu/publications>

This study was conducted by UC Berkeley's Center for Cities + Schools in collaboration with Conscious Kitchen and The Edible Schoolyard Project. Contributing thought partners included: Food | Climate | Strategies, California Farm to School Program, San Francisco Unified School District, Friends of the Earth, Natural Resources Defense Council, Community Alliance with Family Farmers, Center for Ecoliteracy, Food Insight Group, and Nutrition Policy Institute.

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