

West Contra Costa Unified School District
Farm to School Program Assessment
OCTOBER 2022



This document includes an overview of the collaboration between the West Contra Costa Unified School District (WCCUSD) and Conscious Kitchen (CK) to assess the status of their Food Service program, identify opportunities to adapt and align with Farm to School program goals, and provide information about the work underway through funding from both the USDA and CDFA Farm to School Grant Programs. This assessment report was drafted as we developed our USDA Farm to School Action Plan.

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DISTRICT HIGHLIGHTS

District Overall Statistics

WCCUSD is a large suburban school district headquartered in Richmond, California. It serves 54 school sites with a 2021-2022 census day enrollment of 30,071 down from a peak in 2019-2020 of 32,143 students. The District schools are cited in priority population zones as evidenced by their high percentages of low income and disadvantaged students. WCCUSD had a pre-pandemic rate of 65.7% of students eligible for free and reduced meals which increased to 66.5% in 2020-2021. A total of 71.1% of students fall in the unduplicated pupil count of free/reduced price meals, English learners, and foster youth. 31.3% are English learners. The District is highly diverse with an Ed-data diversity score of 48.¹

Moving into 2022-2023, the District has been approved for the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) which includes all 54 schools. This designates WCCUSD as a higher need District. The change will help minimize some of the administrative burdens for the Food Service Department team and further reinforce our efforts to improve the meals across all school sites.

The most recent LCAP (Local Control Accountability Plan) further defined the diversity of the student body as being comprised of 54% Hispanic/Latino, 13% African American, 11% Asian, 11% white, 6% Filipino students, 6% two or more races, and less and 1% Pacific Islanders.²

Based on California developed CalEnviroScreen maps, the majority (92.5%) of WCCUSD's school sites fall in the most challenged areas on the priority population investment map. Twenty two of the 54 schools are both disadvantaged and low income, an additional 15 are low income, and another 12 are within ½ mile of challenged areas. The region is further impacted by pollution burdens from local refineries, risks of lead contamination impact from older housing stock, and extremely high regional rates of asthma, and cardiovascular disease.³

Food Service Department Details

WCCUSD runs their Food Service Department from their headquarters, a 24,000 square foot Central

Kitchen at 750 Bissell Avenue in Richmond. The department serves the 54 school sites through a combination of centralized procurement, preparation of scratch cooked meals and meal elements, and distribution to school sites. The Food Service Department is managed by Barbara Jellison, Food Service Director. She oversees a staff of 200 full and part time Food Service Professionals across the Central Kitchen and the school sites.

The District serves students through four key food service programs:

- i. NSLP - National School Lunch Program
- ii. SBP - School Breakfast Program
- iii. Seamless Summer Option (SSO)
- iv. Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP)

In 2021, California established a Universal Meal Program that provided a wider pool of students access to meals during the school day. WCCUSD has adopted this approach and is working on continued messaging and engagement with students as they adapt the meal plan under new federal and state guidelines. The Universal Meal Program offers the District further opportunities to provide healthy meals to students and is much appreciated and supported by the Food Service Department.

The Central Kitchen serves as the hub for all school food preparation across the District. The team plans all menus, places orders for food and supplies, organizes product distribution to school sites, prepares scratch cooked meal components, packages food for each school, and coordinates all activities with staff at school sites. Prior to the pandemic, the District did not have a focus on organic or local procurement outside of obvious opportunities to engage with local providers. The Central Kitchen has been making a concerted effort since the pandemic, through learnings from the pandemic food box program to increase organic procurement and scratch cooking across the District. This provides the opportunity to incorporate more fresh, local, organic products that inspire the creation of healthier food and culturally appropriate menus that can be made closer to the time of service.

The District is actively engaged in a modernization plan. WCCUSD's Food Service Department received minimal KIT-Funds to upgrade District kitchens. They are also currently using a cafeteria

¹ Ed-Data.Org: <https://www.ed-data.org/District/Contra-Costa/West-Contra-Costa-Unified>

² County Approved 2022-2023 LCAP (Local Control Accountability Plan): <https://www.wccusd.net/site/default.aspx?PageType=3&DomainID=961&ModuleInstanceID=21605&ViewID=6446EE88-D30C-497E-9316-3F8874B3E108&RenderLoc=0&FlexDataID=101098&PageID=4328>

³ CalEnviroScreen (CA Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment): <https://oehha.ca.gov/calenviroscreen>

excess fund balance to expand their scratch cooking and more efficiently operate their hub and spoke system. The opportunity to make physical and equipment changes has further motivated the team to review ways to best leverage and layout the new equipment to optimize scratch cooking and expanded integration of fresh, local, organic products into the school meals. The District will have some impacts on operation while the improvements are implemented but the final timeline for those changes has not been determined.

School Site Details and Meal Attendance

WCCUSD's Food Service Department serves 54 schools and 23 additional institutional partners with meals and/or educational materials. Turning Green's Conscious Kitchen has helped the District streamline the communication materials and highlight the Food Service Department changes including adding organic menu items, seasonal products, and culturally relevant recipes.

In order to summarize meal program statistics and guide in our USDA action planning efforts, our team categorized schools by the age of students participating (elementary, elementary and middle school, middle school, high school, and other), and by tier type (Tier 1 indicating schools that met one or more of the low income and disadvantaged criteria and Tier 2 indicating schools that did not fit into those categories). The following tables include meal participation across several variables to help understand where the participation is strongest and which categories of students and/or sites offer the greatest opportunity to draw in new meal participants.

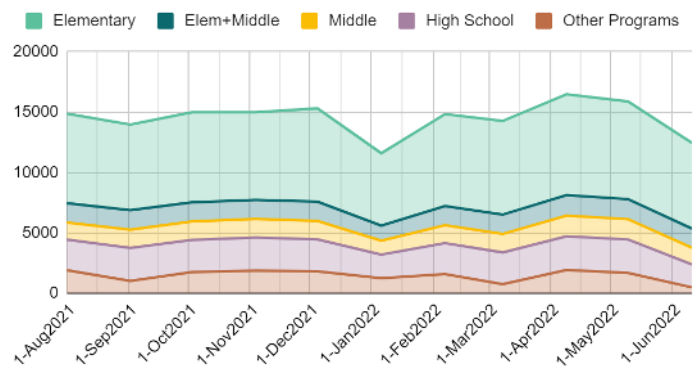
Enrollment was at a peak with the early 2020 data.

Grades Served	Number of School Sites	SUM of Enrollment
1. Elementary	38	16,969
2. K-8	2	1,041
3. Middle	7	4,199
4. High	7	7,809
Grand Total	54	30,018

Schools were closed to in-person learning throughout the pandemic, reopening to in-person learning in the fall of 2021. The initial back-in-school attendance numbers were much lower than prior to the pandemic and for much of the 2021-2022 school year the attendance was in the 27,000 range.

When the state of California opened up the opportunity for students to participate in Universal Free Meals, the District was permitted to make breakfast, lunch, and snacks available for all students. Due to heavily fluctuating attendance and continued student and family concerns about possible pandemic outbreaks, the student volumes did not increase initially despite Universal School Meals availability. The District distributed 2,620,685 meals to students across the District during the 2021-2022 school year. The following figure shows meal participation rates by school type during 2021 and 2022.

Figure 1. Daily participation totals over time by school type.



[Click to enlarge](#)

All daily numbers are derived from the total number of meals in a given month divided by the number of school days during that time period. This normalizes the data so that meal swings based on school holidays are not included since this only reviews the days the school is open in each month.

Elementary Sites

Generally, elementary sites all serve meals in a central setting but one that has limited to no cooking equipment for local scratch cooking. Elementary sites generally receive fully prepared meals based on their pre-selection from a blend of 2-3 menu items each day. Food Service personnel at the elementary school sites place their order a week in advance and identify the number of each menu item they will take. The individual elementary school sites plan the menu selections based on typical enrollment and local student preferences. The school sites are all responsible for managing leftover food locally so that they provide extra meals or backup food on days when there are more students eating.

All elementary sites have warming ovens and refrigeration to accommodate the meals they receive for that day. Some of the larger sites have freezer storage if there are leftover meals that they can add

to the line in a subsequent day. While most elementary sites do not have food preparation equipment, there are a few exceptions to this including Peres, Nystrom, and Madera Elementary Schools. Michelle Obama Elementary is a newly renovated school and it has a new set of more sophisticated warming and refrigeration equipment than at some of the older school sites. Obama Elementary is still not set up for scratch cooking locally.

Elementary students generally eat at outside tables around the school or in their classrooms when the weather is unfavorable. Many have a central cafeteria space that allows for communal eating. With several of the elementary sites, the District has started a “plated up” program. Peres, Nystrom, and Madera Elementary Schools serve from warming trays and are looking at lower waste serving opportunities such as fully compostable or eventually, washable dishware. This initiative was started in 2021-2022 in an effort to reduce packaged foods, reduce waste, and establish a mechanism to get more fresh cooked items to students.

Secondary Sites

The middle and high school sites operate on more of an a la carte system where students can make meal choices from a pre-set selection of items. The middle and high school sites can prepare a wider variety of meal options locally and order meal elements from the Central Kitchen based on their site needs (as opposed to full meal bundles in the elementary model). There are more menu choices at the high school sites, but less week over week variation. All schools have closed campuses at lunch time.

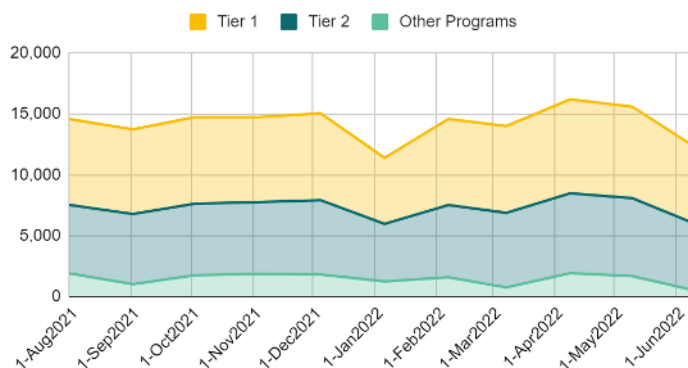
Attendance

Since attendance at school meals drives Food Service Department planning, the District opted to review attendance patterns as students came back to school and the District started making Food Service changes. While there was some movement in the numbers, this provides a solid baseline of post-pandemic return to school meal behaviors.

Meal plan participation for the 2021-2022 school year was fairly steady. The most meals served while school was in session occurred during April and May. The fewest meals served while school was in session occurred during September, March, and June. Predictably, participation decreased during winter, spring, and over the summer (Figure 1, above).

The Food Service Department distributed approximately 15,000 meals per day on average across schools with slight variation by month. Elementary student participation accounted for close to 7,400 daily meals, or about half of the total meals distributed. The remaining average meal distribution was comparable across school types. Tier 1 schools distributed close to 1,000 more meals per month on average than Tier 2 schools (Figure 2). The District worked around pandemic flare-ups and subsequent decreases in attendance and meal participation. These declines occurred during winter, spring, and summer breaks.

Figure 2. Daily participation totals over time by tier type.



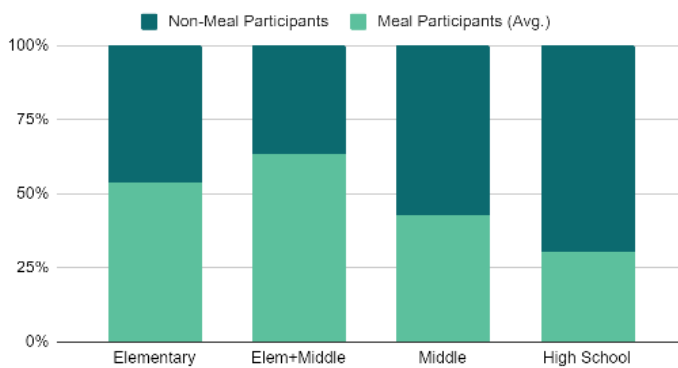
[Click to enlarge](#)

Note that schools designated as “other programs,” mostly consisting of adult education institutions, made up a very small portion of distributed meals: just 16,000 total meals for the academic year, out of the 2,620,685 total meals distributed.

There were more non-meal students than meal plan participants across the entire WCCUSD, however, the difference between non-meal students and participants is small: 54% did not participate, and 46% did participate. Elementary and middle schools had the highest percentage of student participation in the meal plans. In elementary schools 54% of children participated, and in elementary + middle schools 63.5% of students participated. Stand-alone middle schools only had 43% of their students participate. High schools saw the lowest participation, with 30% of students receiving meals (Figure 3). As students age they are less likely to participate in the meal programs offered at their schools.

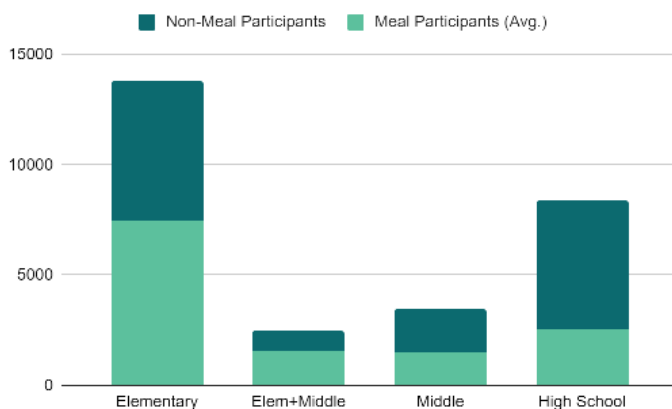
Part of the effort of reviewing attendance and participation trends is to identify the largest opportunities to reach new students with Universal Meals. In aggregate, elementary school students made up the majority of students within the WCCUSD. Elementary schools include 13,766 students

Figure 3. Ratio of meal participation (%) by school type.



enrolled per month on average, with the majority of them participating in the meal program. There were 5,390 more students per month in elementary schools than in the next largest category, high schools (Figure 5). The distribution of students between Tier 1 (underprivileged families) and Tier 2 schools was almost equal. Both had roughly 14,000 students. Tier 1 showed slightly higher meal participation than Tier 2 which aligns with expectations since Tier 1 notes those students and families with higher need, although participation for each tier also hovered close to 50%.

Figure 5. Comparison of meal participation by school type.



Ancillary Sites and Services

In addition to serving standard school sites, the food service department provides snacks and supper services to several after-school program sites and community organizations. Through the summer, the team also provides summer meal service at local parks, libraries, and other gathering sites for students. Meals for the ancillary sites are created in the central kitchen and delivered around the community. The District received equipment grant funds in 2017-2018 for a food truck that enables more effective site-based food service. The truck is



WCCUSD Food Service team serving scratch cooked organic burritos from the food truck over the summer

used for summer meal programming, special events, taste testing around the District, and other opportunities for the food service team to engage directly with students and families.

Attendance and Participation Impacts

With the new California Universal Meal allowance, the District has the ability to serve more students with healthy school meals and support the families in our community. Our focus on adapting purchasing, preparation, and meal service is to not only improve our offerings, but increase the attendance at school meals. Knowing where the best opportunities are for reaching students can help frame how best to proceed in achieving participation increases.

Pre-pandemic District Baseline Data

The overall meal program participation rate for 2018-2019 was 50% or 15,768 students (of a total 31,760 enrolled) or 60% of the average daily enrollment of 26,407 students.

WCCUSD served the following meals during the 2018-2019 program year:

- 2,838,174 National School Lunch Program Meals
- 1,337,833 School Breakfast Program Meals
 - 191,260 School Breakfast Program: Breakfast in the Classroom Meals
 - 658,916 School Breakfast Program: Breakfast After the Bell Meals
- 532,422 Child and Adult Care Food Program Meals
- 249,128 Seamless Summer Option Meals

WCCUSD also participated in the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program

Farm to School activities are not new to WCCUSD. The District has three Farm to School phases:

1. Shifting Focus

The District has been transitioning its food service over the last twelve years, motivated by the federal focus on nutrition and serving fresh foods. Early on, the only fresh foods WCCUSD served were carrots, apples, or oranges. Over time, the District has shifted and makes salads in the Central Kitchen, prepares sides and fruit, and has added salad stations at school sites. In 2021-2022, the District removed juice as a fruit and vegetable equivalent and replaced that with fresh fruit. Still, in a 2017-2018 Good Food Purchasing Baseline Assessment, WCCUSD only sourced 15% of its food locally and 2.4% sustainably with no meats purchased from vendors meeting high animal welfare standards. The District used this Good Food Purchasing Report to begin to rethink its approaches.

As WCCUSD worked on food service improvements, a group (Principal, Teacher, Parents) approached the District and made a clear and compelling case to further adapt their site's food service practices and try a scratch cooking effort at their partially equipped school site. The group had learned of Conscious Kitchen's Marin County pilot and wanted to try something similar in West Contra Costa County. WCCUSD ran a test week in 2017 and agreed to host a pilot for the 2018-2019 school year.

Paralleling the food service changes, the District has seen growing interest in and support for school gardens. Approximately 30 WCCUSD schools have gardens that range from a few very small planters or beds to more extensive sites. Numerous community organizations support the garden activities and educate students on ecology, biodiversity, horticulture, and nutrition through hands-on learning. Many of these newer garden sites have been developed since the pandemic as an effort to create outdoor learning sites for schools, starting with after-school programming, but with efforts to engage with classroom teachers as well.

2. Program Piloting

In 2018-2019, WCCUSD worked with Conscious Kitchen on a pilot at Peres K-8 School (536 students; 100% free and reduced) to provide fresh,

local, organic, scratch cooked meals and associated student and school engagement activities. The District tested how they could serve students from site kitchens combined with the Central Kitchen. Peres was selected because it had some site food preparation equipment with space to expand, a garden site, and key stakeholders enthusiastic to make meaningful change.

The Peres pilot project was featured in a 2020 report on transitioning school meals: Organic, Plant-forward, Scratch Cooked School Meals: A California Case Study⁴ which outlines the myriad benefits children and families achieve through a systemic, equity focused approach to solving hunger issues including optimizing academic potential, reducing waste, supporting a climate friendly food system, sustaining quality jobs, and engaging students.

The WCCUSD pilot created an opportunity to improve school programs and practices. Peres procured organic food for less than NSLP daily average food costs. They achieved this through modifying recipes to plant-forward and plant-based options and more effectively used sustainably raised meat. Peres served plant-forward lunches 58% of the time versus 20% for the District overall. Peres engaged students with a popular Ambassador program that created student roles and leveraged student insights in adapting menus to create culturally appropriate and well-loved meals. In other programs where schools do not have 100% free and reduced population, these changes increase student (and teacher) interest in the program and schools are able to increase meal program participation rates which helps create a more viable food service.

As an important engagement element, Peres expanded garden activities, with grant funding for a garden educator linking the meal program to educational opportunities, and increased use of and appreciation for the garden as part of school programming.

After the pilot, Peres continued serving fresh plated and plant-forward meals. The District has steadily increased salad bars in school cafeterias which promotes the use of and easy access to fresh fruits and vegetables. The planning process includes a review of how the District can convert more Central Kitchen activities to incorporate fresh products and further increase the meals that are prepared locally. The Food Service Department has identified numer-

⁴ Organic, Plant-forward, Scratch Cooked School Meals: A California Case Study www.consciouskitchen.org/casestudy

ous opportunities to bring new local California produce and minimally processed products into school meals.

3. Pandemic Response

WCCUSD continued the focus on procurement and process changes by adapting their response to the pandemic by setting up a food box program in lieu of in-person meals. The boxes started as prepared third party food, then transitioned to whole food that met all components and requirements for a week's worth of food for each child whose family picked up the box. With Conscious Kitchen's support, the District transitioned boxes to be 100% USDA Certified Organic with a focus on local procurement. The District was able to achieve this sourcing shift by leveraging the flexibility of procurement due to waivers during the pandemic and through that opportunity they connected with many new local vendors including small climate friendly farms. Taking on this challenge proved that it was possible to cost effectively source local organics at scale and bring fresh, local, organic products to the school community. Details of the box program are provided in a later section.

WHAT IS ORGANIC?

Organic food is certified through robust standards governed by federal law under the USDA National Organic Program. These standards prohibit synthetic pesticides, including an estimated 17,000 pesticide products allowed in non-organic agriculture.

The standards also prohibit GMOs (genetically modified organisms), synthetic fertilizers, irradiation and sewage sludge (treated toilet waste, which is allowed in non-organic farming as a fertilizer). In organic dairy and meat, the use of antibiotics, growth hormones or arsenic-based drugs is strictly prohibited, while over 450 drugs are allowed in non-organic production. The organic standards also require farmers to manage their land in ways that protect soil, water, and biodiversity.⁵



In 9 months during Covid we purchased 10.7M pounds of organic food to serve 18.7M meals to nourish WCCUSD students.

Over the course of school shutdowns and the pandemic, many school gardens were neglected. WCCUSD has worked with various community partners including Growing Together to help bring gardens back to life, expand them, seek opportunities for greater food production on school sites, and starting to establish stronger links between garden programming and the Food Service Department offerings.

While the pandemic provided an interesting opportunity to adapt the meal program, this assessment and action planning process is looking directly at what it will take to bring the procurement, school food preparation, and educational connections from our various farm to school experimentation into a more comprehensive and sustainable long term District program.

Stakeholder Support: Superintendent, Community Partners

The District has identified and worked with numerous interested stakeholders as it begins to adapt the school food programming. This includes working directly with the Superintendent and District Administration. We have identified key sites that are interested in piloting other elements of the program (Ambassador educational opportunities, school gardens, after-school education) and work with those networks. At the same time, the Food Service Department is committed to creating

⁵ "Genetic Engineering Archives," Friends of the Earth, accessed May 15, 2020. <https://foe.org/projects/genetic-engineering/>; Benador, Damewood, and Scooby, "Roadmap to an Organic California: Benefits Report."

change across the District so many of the more centrally operated opportunities from the food service team can be offered to a wider set of schools.

District Plans and Policies: LCAP and Wellness

In California, the Local Control and Accountability Plan for each District provides a policy framework that can help detail and document priorities for the District. In WCCUSD the LCAP plans are currently focused on increasing and improving services for high needs students by focusing on three goals:

1. Achieving students
2. Thriving employees
3. Caring schools

After the pandemic, much of the focus has been on student safety, addressing learning loss resulting from the pandemic, and supporting parents during transition back to in-person learning. There are no specific actions around the school food services in the LCAP at this time though there might be opportunities to leverage the school food programs to achieve existing LCAP goals.

The WCCUSD website has wellness policy materials and a road map that appear to be in initial state of review and not fully customized nor adopted. This may be an opportunity to highlight nutrition and wellness policies across the District. There are general wellness materials on the WCCUSD Food Service Department website that are general in nature and don't specifically reinforce the changes that the District is making to its school food programming. The Food Service Department does incorporate social media and newsletter postings that highlight changes in the meal programming including the availability of universal free meals.

In 2022, the United Teacher's of Richmond adopted a Healthier Foods Resolution with an ask to improve the food from WCCUSD Food Service Department. The goals are: "Be it resolved: the United Teachers of Richmond calls on the Director of Food Service to publicly commit to reduce by 20% the amount of disease-promoting foods (such as animal-source protein, dairy and egg products, and ultra-processed foods) purchased and served by WCCUSD, and replace them with fruits, vegetables, legumes, whole grains, and other plant-source proteins over the next 2 years." This initiative directly supports and promotes many of the same focus areas the Food Service Department are seeking so they look to work with this group and others to make changes but also develop policy to institutionalize and systematize these changes.

KEY FOOD SERVICE ASSESSMENT AND PLANNING ROLES

WCCUSD Food Service Department

WCCUSD's core Food Service Department staff have been involved in identifying needs and opportunities for Farm to School programming. They have sought out pilot and grant funds to test initial programming concepts as they adapt pandemic learnings about making more fresh, local, and organic offerings available to students at scale. The partnership with both Conscious Kitchen and Growing Together has allowed the District to leverage outside support to perform key research and startup activities as we assess future needs and develop a long term Farm to School plan.

The District, prior to the pandemic, purchased many of its products through a series of distributors catering to the school food marketplace. These vendors have been traditionally selected through a periodic bidding process that allows the District to identify who they will purchase various products from and includes a list of products.

During the pandemic, waivers were established that gave school districts more flexibility in their ordering process. This allowed them to make purchases from local vendors when products were available and aligned with their overall school budget. One of the key learnings from the District's pandemic food box program was that when purchasing large enough volumes of fresh, local, organic, seasonal products, there were cost efficiencies. This included placing large orders through distributors and also giving the District the opportunity to buy directly from farmers and establish new relationships that brought business to more local organic providers.

Throughout the pandemic, WCCUSD worked with over 40 new suppliers to test and procure more fresh, local, organic products. Our team has reached 50% of our spending on organic products within our overall food budget. We are focused on cost effective organic procurement of products in addition to produce needs. Organic purchases included:

- Fresh fruits and vegetables
- Meats: beef and chicken, raw and some minimally processed products
- Dairy products: cheese, yogurts, and milk
- Grains: rice, pasta, oats, cereals, and quinoa
- Other protein sources: dry beans, tofu, eggs

- Snack products
- Spices and condiments

Our goal as we develop the action plan is to identify how we can systematize and maintain our focus on improved procurement. This includes not only working directly with farmers and producers, but also revisiting our bidding process to include organic options, working with distributors to source organic products, and finding ways to leverage USDA funding allocations for organic and local products.

Good Food Purchasing Baseline Assessment Study

WCCUSD had a baseline assessment of their procurement and other food service practices done by the Center for Good Food Purchasing. WCCUSD's 2017-2018 Good Food Purchasing Baseline Assessment indicated that the District with its \$6.58M food spending met two of five baseline standards and earned 10 total points.⁶ Note that this was all assessed prior to the pandemic so does not include the efforts to achieve 50% organic procurement nor increased purchases directly from local farms and producers.

While the 15% of local sourcing met the minimum baseline, the threshold for distance was within 250 miles for most produce and 500 miles for meats. Only 2.4% of the food (\$160K) was sourced sustainably with no meats purchased from vendors meeting high animal welfare standards. This percent all came from medium sized providers that the District purchased from.

The ten points that WCCUSD earned in this baseline assessment included the following:

Standard points:

- 1 local economies point for meeting the 15% procurement from local economies minimum threshold. WCCUSD had 15% local purchases.
- 3 valued workforce points for every 5% of food sourced at level 3 fair labor practice businesses (union contract/worker-owned cooperatives). WCCUSD had 6.37% fair food purchases.
- 2 nutrition points for meeting 68% of applicable nutrition goals (in areas of healthy procurement, healthy food service environment, and health equity)



Good Food Purchasing Executive Summary

West Contra Costa Unified School District
School Year 2017 – 2018 Baseline Assessment

\$6,577,943 In Total Food Spend	Self-operated Enrolled since 2019	2 out of 5 Baseline Standards Met	Total Points Earned 10
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Progress Toward Baseline Goal and Qualifying Purchases by Value Category

		Baseline Goal ¹	Standard Points	Extra Points	Baseline Met
Local Economies	15% or \$983k	15% (\$990k)	1	0	✓
Environmental Sustainability	2.4% or \$160k	5% ² (\$329k)	0	1	-
Valued Workforce	6.4% or \$419k	5% (\$329k)	3	1	-
Animal Welfare	0% or \$0k	15% (\$990k)	0	0	-
Nutrition	68% of applicable items met	51% met	2	2	✓
		Total	6	4	

⁶ The 10 points yields a score of two stars out of five maximum. In order to achieve five stars, a school district must have earned 25+ points. <https://goodfoodpurchasing.org/program-overview/#implementation-process>

Extra points:⁷

- 1 extra environmental sustainability point for running a Meatless Monday program
- 1 extra nutrition point for having a worksite wellness program for employees and patrons
- 1 extra nutrition point for offering culturally appropriate menu items

No points were earned in the Animal Welfare category.

This report provided another catalyst to rethink the procurement and Farm to School approach.

Conscious Kitchen (a Program of Turning Green)

Conscious Kitchen's mission is to address food equity, education, and access by shifting school food service approaches, while cultivating a local, ecological food system, and building nutrition literacy. Through a collaborative, replicable approach, Conscious Kitchen partners with schools and communities to break the cycle of conventional, packaged, overly processed food, transitioning to meals based on five foundational attributes: fresh, local, organic, seasonal, nutritious (FLOSN). Once built, schools own and operate on-site Conscious Kitchens as hubs for community resilience.

By providing all children with healthy, organic food in school and community settings, Conscious Kitchen seeks to overcome health disparities that unfairly impact children living in low-income households. School supported ecological agriculture

strengthens farms, ranches, soil and urban and rural communities, while deepening school and community connection with the social and cultural relevance of food.

In 2017, Conscious Kitchen began working with WCCUSD to test their model and blueprint in a large school district where a majority (70%) of students live below the poverty line. With the strong support of the WCCUSD Food Service Director and team, teachers, parents, school leaders and administration, the West Contra Costa County Board of Education voted to approve Conscious Kitchen to begin a year-long program to transition food service at two public schools, Peres and Madera, as an initial step in their District. The first phase of the pilot launched at Peres Elementary and Middle School in Richmond on August 20, 2018 with a one year demonstration model. The program was a tremendous success with 536 students enjoying scratch-cooked organic meals daily. Conscious Kitchen Ambassadors also flourished, offering students the opportunity to go deeper through field trips to local farms, menu planning, food preparation with chefs and kitchen staff, service, clean up, monitoring of the zero waste station, and hands-on mentorship. To promote equity and reduce stigma, Conscious Kitchen also redesigned the physical food environment to make the dining hall aesthetically pleasing, including eye-catching photos and informative illustrations of healthy food. (Short film about the WCCUSD pilot year [here](#)).

In the face of school closures during the pandemic, WCCUSD partnered with Conscious Kitchen to help them pivot from in-school dining to pre-packaged individual meals for pickup to [food boxes](#) with whole, fresh ingredients for families to cook nourishing meals. WCCUSD and Conscious Kitchen joined forces in late October, 2020 to transition produce and other food products from conventional to organic, with increasing quantities each week.

Although it's commonly assumed that organics are far too expensive for large food operations like school meals, here was an opportunity to challenge that belief.



WCCUSD Central Kitchen team packed up to 23,000 food boxes every week throughout the height of the pandemic.

⁷ Note: while the executive summary table of the report indicated an extra valued workforce point, the detailed section does not indicate that point



A moment of inspiration and celebration at Soskin Farm to honor National School Lunch Week and the launch of Project Salad

In October of 2020, the ongoing partnership proved that sourcing fresh, local, organic food was cost-effective, benefited the climate, supported farmers, and contributed to resilient communities. As Edible East Bay wrote, this is “changing the math on organics.”⁸ In addition to items sourced directly from local organic farms, ranchers and suppliers, educational materials and recipes ensure families understand not only how to make the most of box contents, but also why this paradigm-shifting program matters for the health of people, communities and economies.

Conscious Kitchen has been working with WCCUSD on the USDA assessment and action plan grant as we collectively identify a longer term plan for how to sustain and build upon the momentum achieved in the last several years.

Growing Together

Growing Together had been providing after school garden programming at many sites and has since expanded to connect a network of school gardens across the District to more deeply engage the student audience, reinvigorate school gardens, and start work on a school-based production farm. They have helped assess the state of the gardens (details in a later section) and identify educational opportunities to expand farm to school educational activities.

Ongoing farm to school work has clearly demonstrated that school food systems can be a positive force for creating a more resilient community food system to benefit students and the local agricultural infrastructure.

VISION AND GOALS

The District worked with Conscious Kitchen to craft a vision for the WCCUSD Food Service Department through our USDA grant work.

WCCUSD’s Food Service Department’s Post Pandemic Vision is to cost-effectively optimize locally-procured organic foods as a way of supporting climate-smart agricultural practices and local economies. Our food service team will scratch-cook menu offerings and meal components as much as is practical and possible, incorporating organic ingredients to meet student tastes, preferences, and cultural identities while introducing delicious foods they might not otherwise try or enjoy. By prioritizing fresh, local, organic ingredients, we can not only invest in the health and development of the next generation, but also in the stewardship of natural resources, agricultural lands, and climate resilience. The District will support all food service shifts with a comprehensive educational program focusing on student wellness, life and culinary skills, and nutrition and health.

The District is aiming to achieve this vision over the next five years (2023 - 2028) by working towards the following goals:

1. Optimize organic and local procurement

- a. Increase procurement of organic ingredients for school meals and snacks from our current baseline of 50% to 90% of total food served by 2028
- b. Support local economies by prioritizing the purchases of meal components from local farmers, ranchers, and producers when available (Local: food grown/produced 0

⁸ <https://edibleeastbay.com/2021/06/01/changing-the-math-on-organics/>

to 150 miles from the District, California grown: food grown/produced greater than 150 miles from the District but within California, and Non California: Food grown or produced outside of the state, increasing local purchases from 20% to 40% of total procurement. Expand purchasing to broader California food producing regions when local is not feasible so that our focus on purchasing within the state increased from 50% to 70%

- c. Improve the Districts' ability to track procurement results across a variety of suppliers
- d. Continue to expand relationships and purchases from small and medium sized farms and suppliers with an effort to prioritize BIPOC businesses

2. Increase scratch cooking and plated meal service

- a. Increase the number of scratch cooked menu items made in the Central Kitchen and school site kitchens from the current baseline of 20% to greater than 75% by 2028
- b. Improve infrastructure and equipment in the central kitchen and school site kitchens to reach scratch cooking targets and expand plated meal service



WCCUSD Chef Randal adding pepitas to the Fall Roasted Cauliflower & Persimmon Salad for our Project Salad event

3. Operate low/no waste kitchens

- a. Reduce food waste through increased scratch cooking
- b. Reduce single use plastic by incorporating "plate-it-up meals" in over 75% of the school sites, a minimum of three times a week, served on reusable or compostable materials
- c. Convert 100% of single use plastic dishware, utensils, and packaging to compostable goods (required by 2025)
- d. Compost 100% of central kitchen and school site kitchen food scraps and waste by end of SY 2023/24
- e. Perform regular waste audits to align with SB1383 reduction requirements

4. Increase levels of student participation in meal services

- a. Promote universal free meal opportunities to increase student meal participation rates from a District average of 54% to 65% by 2025 and 85% by 2028
- b. Leverage taste testing and Ambassador engagement opportunities to have students help promote new and enhanced menu items two times per semester
- c. Updating District policies to prioritize student wellness through a concerted food service program focused around healthy and delicious food and a positive community eating experience
- d. Enhance communication to inform students and families about exciting, new weekly meal offerings and to enlist regular community feedback to guide continued improvement

5. Improve WCCUSD Food Service Department job opportunities

- a. Support the Food Service Department team with training opportunities that will increase knowledge of the value and benefits of organic agriculture and develop the skills required for scratch cooking; by 2028, 100% of staff participates in at least one training per semester
- b. Improve internal data and process systems to better enable us to track progress against these goals to support staff pride of accomplishments
- c. Improve staff experience by scheduling one team menu tasting a week along with lunch, prioritizing tasting of meals the students are eating

- d. Gather more regular feedback from Food Service Department staff and incorporate that into meal program adaptations

6. Increase student engagement through educational opportunities

- a. Continue to grow the Conscious Kitchen Ambassador program to build leadership skills, engage students in food related activities for learning, conduct taste testings to provide feedback for the Food Service Department, and discover the impact food and agricultural practices have on health and climate change from 100 to 3,000 students
- b. Distribute turn-key nutrition and garden education programming that is linked to District curriculum and teaching goals from 4 to 35 District sites
- c. Investigate opportunities to expand vocational education and training through an after-school culinary institute for example looking to expand the current work with the 18-22 year old student transition program which offers them opportunities for on the job training in our central kitchen and cafeterias.



Soskin Farm Manager, Matthew Lin tending to his bountiful fall harvest

PROCUREMENT PRIORITIES: LOCAL AND ORGANIC

Defining Local

WCCUSD's work during the pandemic focused on "local" providers as we sought ways to support the agricultural companies in our own region who were hard hit by market changes. In addition, we focused on broadening the use of organic products beyond the initial fruits and vegetables to incorporate dairy products, grains, meat, non-meat protein sources, staples, and snacks. In the process, we identified the value of having a tiered system for how we report on local purchases. This includes:

- **Local:** within 150 miles of District headquarters; this category by definition is all within California
- **California:** 150 miles or more from District headquarters and within California
- **US Outside of CA:** US based products that come from outside of California
- **International:** Products purchased from outside the US (as allowed by USDA school requirements such as the lack of ability of a specialty product from within the US at a given time of year or products that are not grown in the US like bananas)

Defining Organic and Climate Smart Procurement

In addition to defining local procurement, our District has been heavily focused on optimizing organic procurement. By supporting climate smart agriculture, local, small and disadvantaged farmers, and providing the best quality nutrition for our students, the District wants to both support the needs of California's kids and the opportunity to support California's climate smart, organic farmers.

Organic products must meet the National Organic Program (NOP) standards to be sold as organic. The District is seeking organic products where possible. In some cases, we have made purchases of transitional products that are organically raised but have not yet been certified (example: grass fed beef grown on organic range land but not yet certified) but do not officially count those items in the organic tallies.

One of the challenges of actively trying to add organics is finding suppliers that work within our purchasing networks, making certain those suppliers (particularly small and disadvantaged local businesses) can meet school food service requirements, and identifying organic products that work within our Food Service Department budgets. Our team is seeking to identify new suppliers, further engage when we have suppliers that meet our requirements, and establish standard bid packages that seek requests for both conventional and organic products.

PANDEMIC FOOD BOX EXPERIENCE: TESTING AT SCALE

The WCCUSD community was hit hard by the pandemic. Through 2020, Contra Costa county saw unemployment soar from 3.2% to a high of 14.5% in March, settling at 7.9% in December. Household enrollment in CalFresh was up 30% in August 2020 and remained high.

In the face of school closures during the pandemic, the District pivoted from in-school dining to pre-packaged individual meals for pickup to food boxes with whole, fresh ingredients for families to cook nourishing meals. Conscious Kitchen and WCCUSD joined forces in early November 2020 to transition produce and other food products from

conventional to organic, with increasing quantities each week. The partnership between Conscious Kitchen and WCCUSD proves that sourcing fresh, local, organic food is cost-effective, benefits the climate, supports farmers, and contributes to resilient communities.

Organic Impact

In nine months (data encompasses November 4, 2020 through August 5, 2021), the collaboration between Conscious Kitchen and WCCUSD channeled \$17 million into local economies to purchase 10.7 million pounds of organic food for 18.7 million meals to nourish the students and families across West Contra Costa County. Curbside box pickups for approximately 23,000 children featured 100% USDA certified organic fruits, vegetables, dairy, grains, protein and more to prepare up to 644,000 meals each week.

Throughout the program, the team shifted to organic products and achieved the first 100% organic food box starting March 4, 2021. In addition to items sourced directly from local organic farms, ranchers and suppliers, educational materials and recipes ensure families understand not only how to make the most of box contents, but also learn about why this paradigm-shifting program matters for the health of people, communities and economies.

ORGANIC VS. NON-ORGANIC

ORGANIC



Provides higher levels of nutrients & antioxidants



Raises animals with lower stress & access to outdoor spaces



Conserves & protects water



Builds healthy soils



Protects farmers, farmworkers & eaters from toxic pesticides



Protects wildlife, bees, & butterflies



No antibiotics & growth hormones

VS.



3,000+ food additives & manufacturing agents



Common use of GMOs



Synthetic pesticides & fertilizers



450+ synthetic livestock drugs, routine use of antibiotics & growth hormones



Pollutes air, water and soil



Factory farms

NON-ORGANIC

Click to enlarge

Black History Month

SOME FOOD HISTORY

Historically, Black foods in the south were based in highly nutritious, seasonal vegetables.

Foods like sweet potatoes, dark leafy greens, and legumes were commonplace, and meat was mainly used as seasoning.

These are some of the healthiest foods around, recommended by nutritionists.

Modern soul food can get a reputation for being unhealthy, but fried foods were mainly celebration foods.

"Soul food" is a fusion of American, Western European, and West African cuisines, traditionally representing African American cuisine.

It wasn't until the rise of civil rights movements in the '60s that soul food got its name, as Black folks established their cultural legacy.

Soul food and Southern food are just a small part of the cuisine of the African diaspora.

THE BLACK PANTHERS BREAKFAST PROGRAM

In 1969 here in the East Bay, the Black Panthers began their Free Breakfast for Children Program at a church in Oakland.

With all donated food, the program expanded across the country to feed tens of thousands of kids.

This was just one of many social programs created by the party, and helped to create the national free breakfast program today!

WCCUSD NUTRITION & WELLNESS CENTER AND CONSCIOUS KITCHEN

HISTORY OF TOMATOES

The earliest record of tomatoes are in Ancient Mesoamerica, specifically by the Aztecs.

Many historians believe that the Indigenous peoples used tomatoes often in cooking and even gave them as wedding gifts.

Tomatoes were brought to Europe by Spanish conquistadors in the early 16th century. Eventually the Europeans brought them to the West Indies, the Caribbean, and Asia!

By the early 1700's, tomato seeds were brought to the U.S. and became a part of the American diet.

MEET JAVIER ZAMORA

Tomato Farmer at JSM Organics

Javier Zamora grew up in Mexico and learned about organic agriculture working on his family's farm. He brought this knowledge with him when he came to the United States at age 20. Today, Javier owns 200 acres of land in Monterey County where he grows tomatoes, berries, flowers and more!

consciouskitchen @consciouskitchen @wccusdfoodservices

LET'S TALK CITRUS

Why citrus?
BECAUSE EATING SEASONALLY IS HEALTHY FOR PEOPLE AND PLANET, AND CALIFORNIA IS NOW THE #1 CITRUS PRODUCER IN THE COUNTRY!

BUT CITRUS WASN'T ALWAYS SO POPULAR...

- The first citrus trees were planted in Los Angeles in the late 1700s, but it wasn't until navel oranges were born in the late 1800s that California orange business spread like wildfire.
- At its height in the early 20th century, the citrus industry employed 1/3 of the local workforce.
- The citrus industry faces many challenges these days, from dwindling water resources to pests and wildfires, but we're lucky to still enjoy access to this delicious local fruit.
- And it's even better when we can support local farms with our purchases, especially those with deep connections to the land.

THAT'S WHY WE SUPPORT

AND CITRUS HAS LOADS OF HEALTH BENEFITS!

- One serving of citrus can provide 90% of the recommended daily value of Vitamin C, keeping us healthy throughout the winter.
- Vitamin C is a powerful antioxidant, which prevents cell damage and boosts the immune system.
- Citrus fruits contain an impressive list of essential nutrients, including potassium, folate, calcium, thiamin, niacin, and vitamin B6.

FRUIT WORLD, CO.

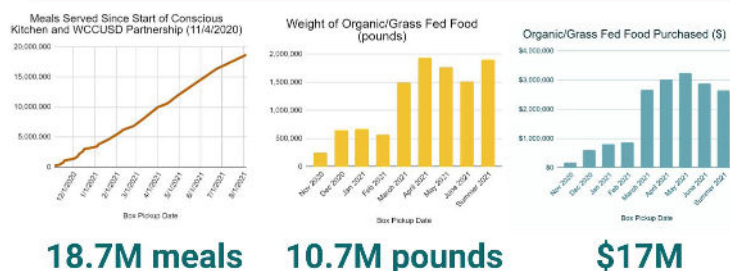
Bianca Kaprielian and CJ Burman come from farming families in Redding, CA, and together founded Fruit World to get back to their roots. They've made it their mission to restore family farmers' connection to the soil, reinvigorate the public's relationship with produce, and ensure the sustainability of agriculture.

consciouskitchen @consciouskitchen @wccusdfoodservices

Infographics created weekly to educate and inspire the WCCUSD community. Click to see more

West Contra Costa Food Box Results Data from Nov 1, 2020 through Aug 4, 2021

WCCUSD's Organic Impact



Click to enlarge

In addition to providing organic food in the boxes, the team created infographics to highlight recipes using products served that week, educated family members about local and organic options, and focused on nutrition facts that were engaging for students and families across the District.

Procurement Learning

The food box program during the pandemic provided an unprecedented opportunity for WCCUSD to test out the purchase of fresh, local, organic products at scale. With our earlier pilot program, the District had contacts with local vendors but had not sought out large scale orders. The food box program with its ability to compile a whole week's

worth of products into a box provided opportunities to purchase large volumes of fresh products as well as organic staples. With up to 23,000 boxes curated and packed each week, the volume was highly impactful to local businesses who had seen significant drops in their own supply chains as a result of restaurant and other pandemic closures. With USDA waivers providing for flexibility in ordering at this time of challenge, the District was able to identify that many organic products purchased at scale could be procured at or very close to the price of conventional products. The team worked with suppliers to develop a list of frequently asked questions about how to work with the School District (sizing and quantities, meeting District nutritional and food safety requirements, and distribution needs for the central kitchen hub and school site spoke arrangement).

During the pandemic food box program, WCCUSD purchased from more than 40 new suppliers and expanded direct farm-to-school opportunities.

TRANSITIONING BACK TO SCHOOL

After schools reopened to in-person learning and meal preparation, the Food Service Department decided that they wanted to maintain the momentum they had built through the pandemic. The District's goal is to retain the integrity and scale

of a more fresh, local, organic supply chain. By purchasing more food locally, the District has seen the positive impacts on businesses who have been very challenged during the pandemic through a wide range of supply chain disruptions. As school re-openings started and trucking costs and supply chain availability raised new challenges, the District saw continued benefit of supporting a more local and resilient food system through continued purchase from local vendors. The pandemic disruption clearly demonstrated that school food systems can be a positive force in creating a more resilient community food system to benefit students and the local agricultural infrastructure.

Procurement Adaptations

The Food Service Department identified those vendors and products that they could continue to purchase from as the team shifted from raw ingredient food boxes back to prepared school meals. The District scratch cooks about 30% of the menu items and meal components and many of those can benefit from continued use of organic products. This has included raw ingredients such as Lundberg Family

Farms Organic Rice, organic beans and grains. We have also worked with organic local producers who make organic products locally such as tortillas and breads that meet school meal requirements, salsa from fresh ingredients.

Our region has a strong organic dairy industry and we have started to migrate away from packaged milk in favor of bulk milk machines in several of our food service locations. The milk machines provide numerous benefits including less product waste because students can self-serve the amount they desire after choosing a complete meal. Bulk milk can be kept at appropriate temperatures and reduces waste from containers that are unopened but not consumed. Packaging waste from individual milk containers is not compostable through our waste hauler and thus goes to landfill. We aim to have reusable cups for milk in the future.

Integrating whole fruits and vegetables allowed us to continue to serve students supporting the vendors we had worked with throughout the pandemic. Students appreciate a wider variety of fruits and the District was able to provide “free choice” fruits as part of the menu so students could eat fresh organic fruits for both snacks and as a meal component.

Our procurement team worked with Conscious Kitchen to plan menus and purchases to align with seasonal availability of products.

Decisions around when to purchase organic products over non organic were based on the product availability, how products align with the menus that are often planned well in advance, vendor ability to meet volume and delivery needs, and pricing.

As the District started to make changes to our procurement process we worked to track the amount of food we were able to procure both locally and organically. Both of these tracking efforts were challenging so one of our recommendations is to improve the process for longer term sustainability and awareness of our progress.

Local Procurement Results

During the pandemic, the goal for WCCUSD procurement was to purchase as many fresh, organic products as possible from local vendors, 150 miles



This CK Ambassador is so excited to dig into his seasonal, organic bounty – his face says it all!

from District headquarters. This was particularly important during the wide range of supply chain impacts and as a way to support local economies.

In order to assess the efforts to purchase local products, we reviewed the details of all purchases made in 2021-2022. The 65 vendors we worked with were categorized by type, based on what sort of goods and services they provided.

- Farmers/ranchers sold fresh food items directly to WCCUSD
- Producers made items from purchased goods, such as cheese from dairy products
- Distributors sold finished products and fresh items
- Local farm distributors sold finished products and fresh items sourced exclusively from farms local to their offices
- There were 12 non-food distributors that provided goods such as packaging for meals

Vendors were also categorized by how local they were to WCCUSD. As much as possible, distributors and producers were assessed based on where they acquired the goods that they then provided to WCCUSD. If that information was not known, they were categorized based on where their primary office was located. Categories for distance from WCCUSD included: less than 150 miles, greater than 150 miles but still within California, outside of California, and various, which includes distributors and producers who procure goods from local and nonlocal sources. Close to half of all purchases (48%) were made with vendors that were within California (see Figure 6).

In total, WCCUSD spent \$8.57M on vendor purchases from August 2021 to June 2022. Farmers, ranchers, and local farm distributors provided 22% of purchased goods (see Figure 7).

WCCUSD worked with 26 vendors who operated solely within California. The majority of these farmers, ranchers, and producers were mostly within 150 miles of WCCUSD headquarters; all local farm distributors also worked in and sourced goods from a 150 mile radius from WCCUSD (see Figure 8). In many cases, WCCUSD developed close relationships with local farmers that allowed them greater discretion and access to tasting goods pre-purchase.

About half of all food purchases (\$3.9M) came from vendors operating within California (see Figure 9). Although distributors sold goods from various

Figure 6. Spending by vendor locality.

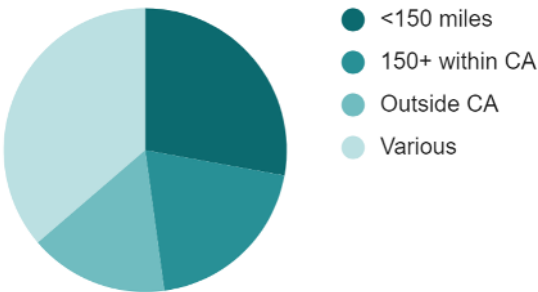


Figure 7. Spending by vendor category.

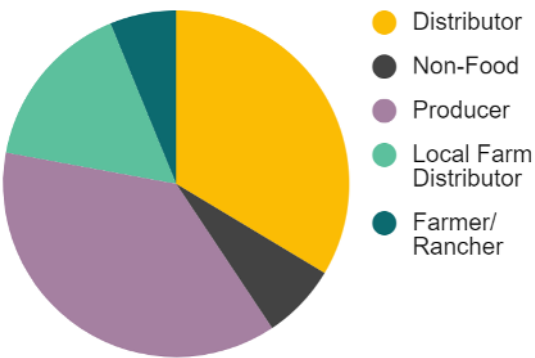


Figure 8. Count of vendors based on their locality.

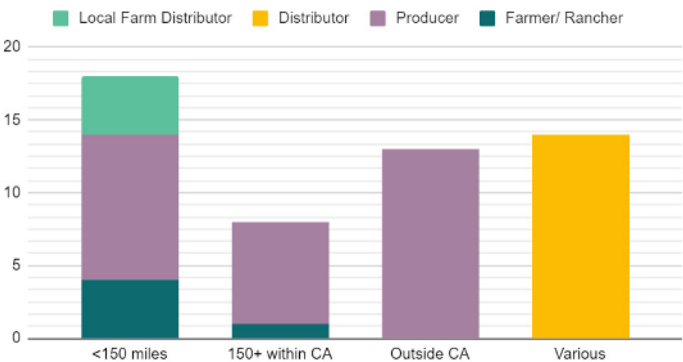
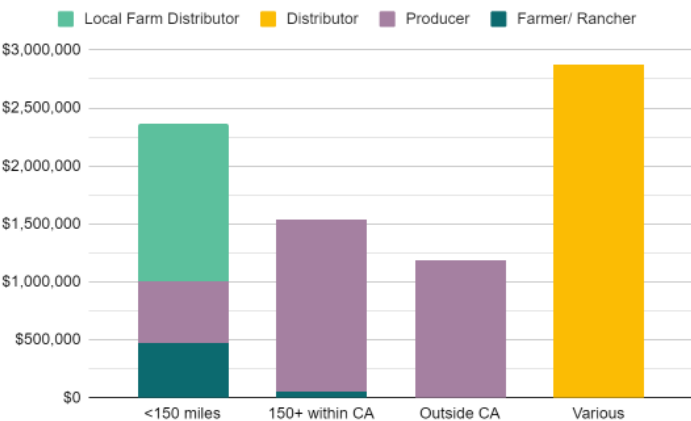


Figure 9. Amount purchased from Aug. 2021 - June 2022 based on vendor type and distance from WCCUSD headquarters.



sources, WCCUSD worked to prioritize local purchases from these vendors. Earl's Organic Produce, a distributor who only sells 100% organic products, is one example of a relationship that WCCUSD benefited from because it provided focused procurement and helped identify interesting and available organic products that the school could purchase at scale.

All distributor offices were within broader California; however, current data systems do not allow us to track where distributors purchase their goods. There is not a strong mechanism to differen-

tiate between local and non-local goods purchased from these distributors. Moving forward WCCUSD hopes to work with distributors to enhance reporting so that we are able to determine source farm locations for goods purchased from distributors.

Organic Procurement Results

Prior to the pandemic, WCCUSD had purchased local, organic products as part of small pilot projects, taste testing events, and educational promotions. Shifting to a more sustainable volume of organic products required careful review of best pricing, distribution availability, and timing. While WCCUSD knew that they could not continue with the 100% organic of the food boxes, they set a target of maintaining 30-50% organic purchases. Since the pandemic, they have been able to continue to pursue 50% organic purchases with outside support from Conscious Kitchen team members. Their goal going forward is to systematize that process as pandemic waivers and adaptations shift to new post-pandemic allowances.

While organic fruits and vegetables were the starting point during the pandemic response, we added many additional products into the procurement pipeline and are continuing to expand those relationships with the present day food service program including the products in the table to the left.

Currently, WCCUSD has worked with 69 regular vendors. Conscious Kitchen helped us identify and work with many of those vendors to bring in available products and overcome various hurdles to making organic purchases. Out of all items purchased from our vendor pool, roughly 50% were organic during the 2021-2022 school year. Our organic percentage was determined by analyzing the products available from each vendor. There were three categories of vendors that we worked with: those from whom we only purchased organic products (e.g. Nana Mae's Organics, Nature's Path Foods, Earl's Organics, La Tortilla Factory), those from whom we purchased some organic and some conventional products (e.g. Coast Tropical, Crystal Creamery) and those from whom we only

Vendor	Product
Acme Bread Company	Breads (focaccia, rolls)
Alvarado Street Bakery	Breads (bagels, loafs, buns)
Applegate Farms	Hot dogs/sliced turkey
Catalan Family Farms	Produce
Clif Bar & Company	Snack bars
DiNapoli	Tomato sauces
Earl's Organic Produce	Produce
Edison Grainery	Sunflower seeds, whole grains
Frog Hollow Farm	Stone fruit, pears
Fruit World	Produce
Hikari Farms	Produce
Horizon Organic	Cheese
Humbolt Creamery	Milk
JSM Organics	Strawberries, other produce
Lundberg Family Farms	Rice
Marin Cheese	Various cheeses
Mariquita Farm	Produce
Mary's Chicken	Poultry products
Mindful Meats	Beef
Morinaga Nutritional Foods Inc	Tofu
Nana Mae's Organic	Apples/Pears
Nature's Path	Cereal & Granola
Organic Valley	Cheese
Rudi's Organic and Gluten Free Bakery	Gluten-free bread
RW Garcia	Crackers and Snacks
San-J International Inc	Soy sauce
Spicely	Spices
Sfoglini	Pasta
Straus Family Creamery	Yogurt, butter and milk
Veritable Vegetable	Dairy

purchased conventional products (e.g. Revolution Foods, Tyson Foods, Pilgrim's Pride). We use several vendors for non-food only items and have separated those from the food items. Mixed organic vendors were analyzed by assessing receipts and inventory logs to determine what ratio of organic to non-organic products was purchased. The dollar amounts of organic and non-organic products were summed for each vendor. The percent of organic products purchased was calculated from the total amount spent.

We have identified that there is a lot of room for improvement in this process. Calculating the amount of purchased organic products is not part of WCCUSD's existing data structure, which means that all amounts must be calculated manually. In the future, it would be beneficial to come up with a more automated system for tracking this number. This could include a tagging system for intake processes that would allow us to mark products as organic or not as they come in, or some process the vendors can complete before they ship products to WCCUSD. We have met with the data tracking tool provider that has helped build our internal Food Service Department tools and have identified some potential ways to improve our processes to help improve our tracking and reporting capabilities.

USDA/CDFA Opportunities

The California organic market has grown significantly in the past several years and as such, the national market has also grown. Much of the growth in organics is based around the broader commercial market, but it also reflects growing interest in resilient agricultural practices. At a time when the California organic market has grown 14%⁹, school participation in that growth needs to keep pace. This is best done through education and awareness building, helping Districts understand how to procure organics, and supporting suppliers to sell into the school marketplace.

One of the ways that WCCUSD has been pursuing organic purchases is to leverage opportunities to use USDA funding allocations to make organic and local purchases. Many of those existing USDA funded channels do not currently offer organic options so there are supply limitations. In addition, interested Districts face a series of barriers making certain suppliers (particularly small and disadvantaged local businesses) meet school food service and/or USDA requirements and identifying organic



products that work within the school meal budgets. The USDA has a few vendors in specific regions who are part of organic pilots and/or commodity offers. WCCUSD has worked with these vendors to access organic products and demonstrate the benefits and challenges of leveraging these channels. WCCUSD is also looking at ways to work with distributors who could source more organics in their standardized school meal programming.

We have started by purchasing strawberries from JSM Organics as they are one of the few USDA organic products that we could access with USDA funds. Our relationship with the farm has been extremely valuable as we learn more about the strawberries as well as other products that Javier Zamora, farmer and owner, want to get into the USDA pipeline. We also worked with JSM to help streamline their reimbursement process from the USDA Foods program and discussed organic products we can procure for fall. We met with other local small and culturally diverse farmers who coordinate with JSM to learn more about expanding their own businesses with the school food marketplace. Another opportunity WCCUSD has pursued is to purchase from AgLink, a local USDA approved provider, to expand their portfolio of organic offerings. These network developments are helping to expand the opportunities for more organic products coming into the school food marketplace.

WCCUSD received a grant from the California Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA) to expand its purchase of California grown and minimally processed foods. As part of that program, the District has been developing new menu items, doing preliminary taste testing, and seeking out new sources for local products. The CDFA's "Planting the Seed" report¹⁰ on school meals and farm to school programming includes one of its specific high level goals to: "Leverage school buying power to support California producers and incentivize agricultural practices that promote climate resilience and environmental sustainability,

⁹ CDFA, Planting the Seed: https://www.cdfa.ca.gov/is/organicprogram/pdfs/2020_2021_California_Agricultural_Organic_Report.pdf

¹⁰ CDFA Organics Report, 2020-2021: https://www.gov.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Farm_To_School_Report_20202022-small.pdf

including organic systems, while educating students on the importance of environmental stewardship and agricultural sustainability into the future.”

There is much work to be done to shift the marketplace, grow demand for organic products, and make those products available to our youth. By leveraging state and federal opportunities, WCCUSD sees ways to expand the access points to organic products for its own diverse and climate prioritized students as well as setting an example for other school Districts that local, organic products can be purchased at scale.

Menu Planning

In planning to go back-to-school after the pandemic, WCCUSD set out to review its menu plans to identify ways to incorporate some of the organic and local products that had been part of the food box program into the school meals. This required reviewing those menus that could incorporate direct replacement products, opportunities to create new menu items to test with students, and potential new scratch cooked items to add to the meal cycles. The team meets weekly to review upcoming menus, taste testing results, and food service feedback.

As the central kitchen team tested menu items, they added organic scratch cooked items as special items, highlighted those in weekly infographics, and gauged interest in the new items. This includes items like Fried Rice (with Chicken or Tofu) and Caesar Salad, both of which are organic menu items prepared in the central kitchen. In the case of the Fried Rice, the bulk of it is prepared at the central kitchen and it is reheated and then plated or packaged at the school site. The Caesar Salads, because they stay cold, are packaged at the central kitchen and delivered to the school sites.

Some of the most popular organic scratch cooked meals were culturally focused or celebrated a special event. WCCUSD created a vegetarian Soyrito Breakfast Burrito, Calentado, Enchiladas, and Chinese Chicken salad. The team leveraged opportunities to work with new culturally relevant items as a way to bring familiar menu items into the meal program while incorporating organic products in those releases.

Taste Testings and Family Feedback

As part of the pandemic food box program, the District surveyed families who participated in the fresh organic food boxes. When the District first



Sample portions of the Mexican Taco Salad for WCCUSD students to taste and provide feedback

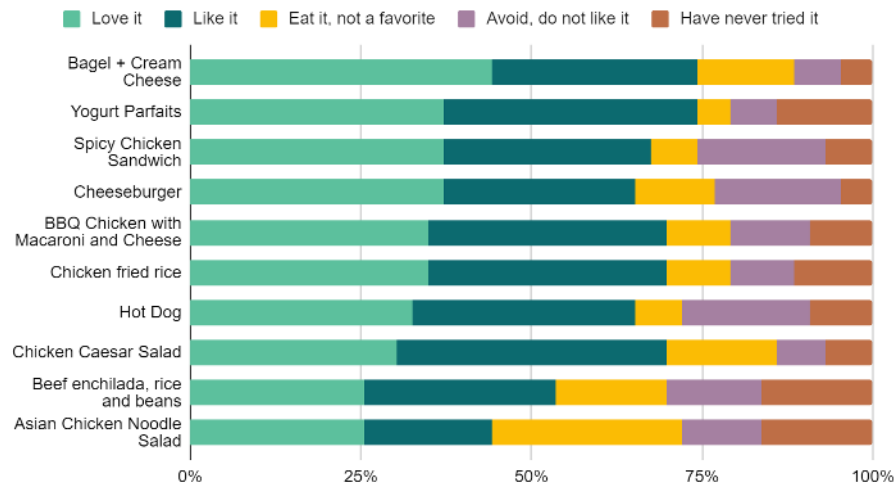
switched to whole and fresh products, 70% said they preferred whole fruits and vegetables and another 28% said they would like a mix of whole and portioned. 42.5% said they preferred fresh products and only 4% preferred the packaged, with the rest preferring a combination. Many were pleased with the quality and variety of products in the boxes.

Throughout the 2021-2022 school year, WCCUSD and Conscious Kitchen performed periodic taste testing activities with the Ambassador program participants, after school garden program groups, and at special events at specific school sites. These taste tests were helpful in supporting changes to the menus, gathering student and family input, and helping to empower Ambassador students to share their positive experiences of new menu items with other classes and students. The District used the taste testing results to help identify favorite cereals and fruits for the Project Cereal breakfast program. Taste tests were performed at after school Ambassador classes and as part of local school events.

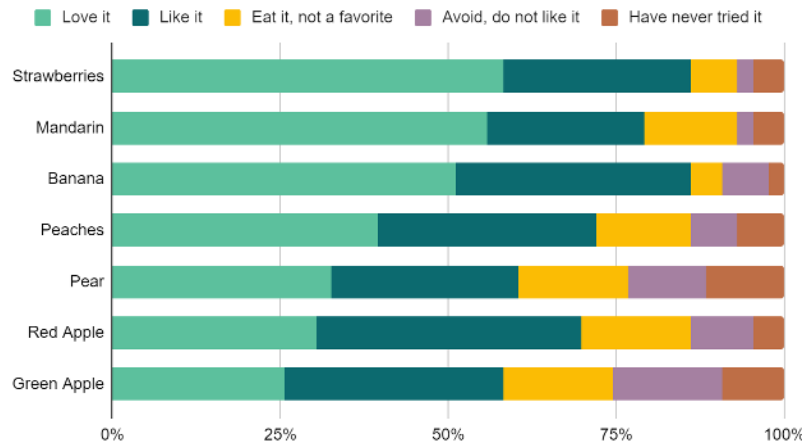
Community Feedback from Students, Parents, and Food Service Staff

Prior to the end of the 2021-2022 school year, the District launched a series of surveys to identify the community responses and reactions to the initial piloting of the back-to-school focus on fresh, local, organic, and scratch cooked menus. These surveys were gathered in the spring of 2022. They asked about the program changes that the Food Service Department rolled out through the year so the results are based on early changes to the meal programming. We were able to receive helpful insights and comments from the community that we used to refine the programming over the summer and start into the 2022-2023 school year.

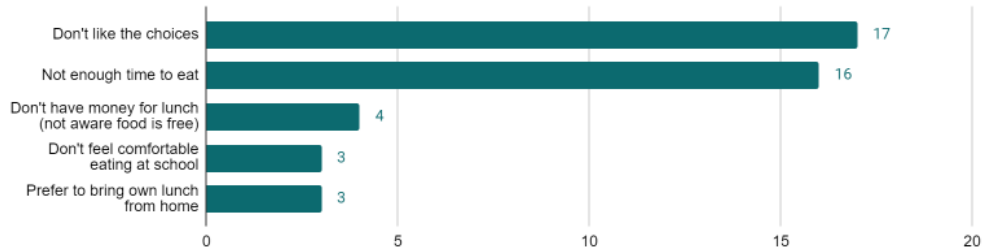
Student feedback came from middle and high school students and they provided input into the range of products that they liked. The survey combined some well liked (but not fresh, local and organic) existing items such as the spicy chicken sandwich alongside some of the new organic menu items for comparison. *(Click to view enlarged graphics.)*



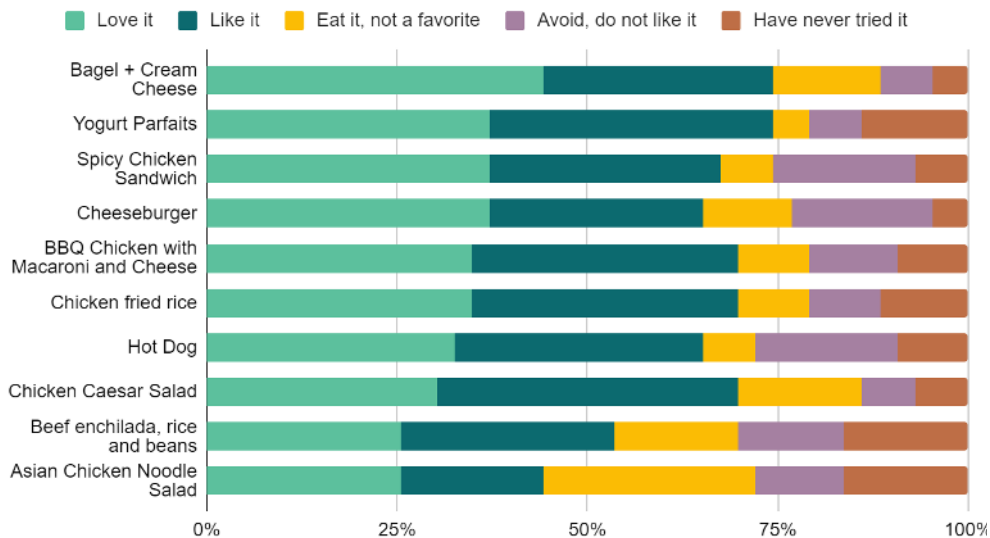
Since students were being introduced to new fresh organic fruits as part of the programming, we asked their fruit preferences. The District was working to make more fresh fruit available for students to select from in the food service lines.



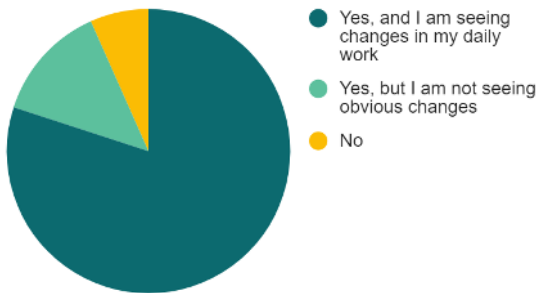
With the availability of Universal Meals, food was more accessible to all students. We asked students to describe what stops them from eating school lunches.



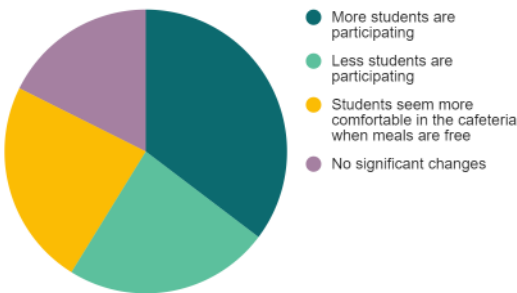
Staff were also asked about their sense of the most popular items that the students prefer. Many of their assessments closely mirrored that of the students. Our experience has shown that many times the preferences vary widely between schools so one school may really like one new menu item while another prefers a very different item.



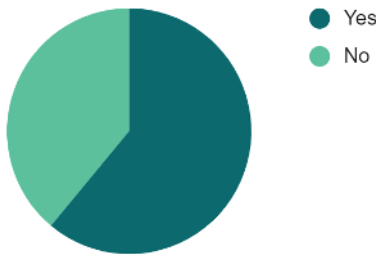
Staff were also asked about their awareness of the changes that the District was undertaking to adapt the meal program. While the sample size was relatively small, there was a strong awareness among the respondents.



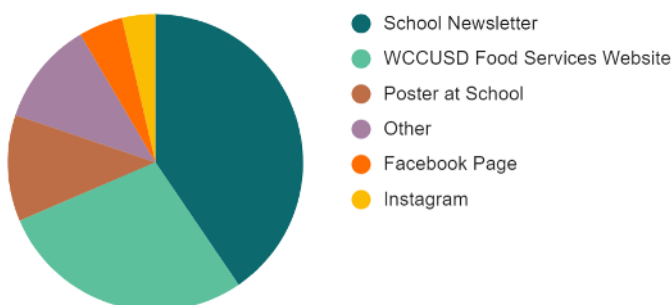
Staff reported that the universal meal program seemed to be having an impact on participation as well as on the level of comfort of students in the dining areas.



At least two thirds of parents were aware that the District is making efforts to increase local, fresh, organic food choices for the meal program.



When asked how the Food Service Department should communicate changes and educational materials, parents reported a range of options they use to connect with the school.



Special Projects

One of the ways that WCCUSD is introducing farm-to-school opportunities is through campaigns that introduce and test new ideas and menus that we can share with other districts as a blueprint to expand organic procurement.

This included campaign launch events such as:

- Project Cereal, a week long all organic set of breakfast offerings to kick off National School Breakfast Week, promote the value of eating breakfast at school, and promoting organic products – including a new product, organic cereal as we work with Nature's Path to create a "compliant" organic cereal.
- To educate the school community, we created an [informational story map for the school community about "Why Organic"](#) featuring National School Breakfast Week and Project Cereal.

WCCUSD & CONSCIOUS KITCHEN

2021/22 SCHOOL YEAR

Certified organic for the students of WCCUSD

NATIONAL SCHOOL BREAKFAST WEEK

Launching this week, our new Project Cereal campaign sets students up for health and success, while transforming school food supply chains to feature more fresh and organic. See the menu below!

PROJECT CEREAL

Kids healing the planet,
one organic bowl at a time

Organic milk is rich in protein and healthy fatty acids, has no antibiotics or synthetic growth hormones, and comes from sustainably-managed pastures.

Organic grains are not sprayed with pesticides or herbicides that harm people, animals, natural resources and the environment.

Organic farms restore soil health, promote biodiversity, and release 30% less gas emissions than conventional farms.

We are building a movement that supports the health and sustainability of our children, farmers, workers, soil, and planet!

consciouskitchen

@consciouskitchn

@wccusdfoodservices



Working with partners like Alice Waters elevates the opportunities to shift a system.

- Project Salad a campaign that CK & WCCUSD launched in Oct 2022 to celebrate [National School Lunch Week](#) featuring fresh, local, organic, seasonal salads sourced from organic farmers. School district can opt into this campaign as an entry point to sourcing local organic produce. The call to action is to serve one organic salad a week. Conscious Kitchen will support local supply chain opportunities in and around school districts who opt in.
- Summer Meal Event was a highlight for families and our farmers featuring an organic meal served from the WCCUSD food truck attended by USDA, CDFA, and California Department of Education to showcase local organic farmers and their seasonal bounty, and provide students and families with an opportunity to try a fabulous organic school lunch.
- New products
 - Developing new products with long time partners like [Mindful Meats](#), a partner of Conscious Kitchen for a decade. They developed a new burger patty using local organic and grass-fed beef seasoned, packaged, and pre-cooked to align with District needs.
 - Working with organic businesses to create compliant organic products currently not available in K12 and prompting new



Farmer Al Courchesne serving up stonefruit from Frog Hollow Farm with Good Earth Natural Foods owner, Al Baylacq, partners with CK and WCCUSD

demand to expand organics in the school food marketplace.

- Identifying local organic businesses to transition current conventional recipes to organic like; Focaccia Pizza with Acme Bread Company focaccia launched during National School Lunch Week, organic mozzarella from Marin Cheese and a special tomato sauce recipe created by Alice Waters made with donated surplus tomatoes from JSM Farms.

Equipment

The District has a well established Central Kitchen that has over time added tools and equipment to enable direct packaging of scratch prepared menu items that can then be distributed to school sites. This allows for fresher menu elements. Some of the equipment that the District has to assist in this process includes:

- Packaging conveyor to streamline fulfillment of individual servings
- Robot Coupe to slice, chop, and process fresh fruits and vegetables
- Steam Kettles to cook beans, rice, meat

WCCUSD recently purchased a slicing machine that will help process fresh fruits and vegetables. Students will often prefer to have individual servings of fruits and vegetables and eat more fruit when it is cut up. However, existing prepackaged items are limited in what is available. The slicing machine will make it easier to process fruit locally to reduce packaging and food waste. WCCUSD hopes to integrate the new equipment into recipes in the 2022-2023 school year.

Training

Food Service Department staff are regularly trained on new menu items, food preparation techniques, and new equipment or system operations. The training focus around the pandemic had to focus on additional food and student safety considerations as well as process changes to accommodate changing local and national requirements. As the team moved back into school meals, WCCUSD has shifted focus to highlight diversity, equity, and inclusion topics as well as the focus on new fresh, local, and organic menu options.

Our team has continued to engage with students and families through regular newsletter, social media, and other school sponsored communications channels. The goal of our materials in the last two years has been to highlight the local farmers, ranchers, and food producers who are providing new products in the student meals as well as to provide educational materials about the benefits of local, organic food. These educational materials are core and the base upon which the District seeks ways to deliver direct student education and training opportunities.



Behind the scenes: CK Ambassador/Server takes a lunch break at the Project Salad event

STATE AND LOCAL REQUIREMENTS

Health requirements: As our staff scratch cooks more items in house and rolls out a “plated up” meal service we are reinforcing specific food safety requirements that align with the specific service changes. This includes fresh product handling, food preparation, and serving. This also applies to our small vendors who may not be familiar with the school food service requirements so we work with them as we onboard new providers to meet all requirements.

Local Waste Reduction requirements: California recently passed SB1383 which requires changes in food waste processing. Our Food Service Department is reviewing the requirements and looking into ways to align school food service regulations with waste reduction goals. We are pilot testing compost programming at a few school sites and using the “plated up” program to help manage food waste offering students the opportunity to more directly select items for their meals.

FARM TO SCHOOL EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

WCCUSD has envisioned and piloted several Farm to School activities during the last several years. The efforts in the 2021-2022 school year included more clearly refining the Food Service Department programming and identified ways to leverage educational opportunities to meet a variety of community needs:

- Nutrition education (healthy eating, the journey of food)
- Environmental education (value of organics, regenerative agriculture, composting)
- Food Service Department program promotion (to support goal of increasing meal participation)
- School garden engagement opportunities (site based gardens/farms and programs)

Garden-Based Learning: Partnership with Growing Together

The District had a number of school gardens prior to the pandemic and offered some farm to school programming, primarily through afterschool programs at select sites as well as some more in-depth high school programming for small cohorts of

students. There are several community based organizations who provide educational offerings in the community and those are often directly or loosely linked to various school sites.

In the 2021-22 school year, collaborating closely with West Contra Costa's Extended Learning Department, Growing Together organized a network of 20 schools with a strong interest in and commitment to develop garden/nutrition education programs at their sites. The year began with a group training session at the Soskin Middle School farm-in-development, attended by 18 programs, and an assessment of each school's garden. Many of the schools did not have a learning garden at all, and most of the gardens that did exist had been abandoned during the pandemic. Over the course of the year, Growing Together staff provided an array of support services that were needed by each program in order to begin programming

1. Designing, installing, and repairing existing *garden infrastructure* (raised beds, seating, irrigation, etc.);
2. Purchasing and delivery of *supplies, tools, and materials*;
3. Extensively field-tested *curriculum*, created by expert local garden educators;
4. Running *introductory hands-on classes* for new program staff & school sites, as needed;
5. Providing *technical assistance* with garden maintenance issues;
6. Offering ongoing *professional development* through bi-monthly group training, and site consultations as requested.

These support services have resulted in 9 new school gardens built, 5 more abandoned gardens fully restored and brought back into use, and the involvement of 2,070 WCC K-5 students at Title 1 schools in hands-on garden-based learning on a regular basis. Of our participating programs, every

single one expressed a high level of interest in continuing and expanding the program next year. Cultivating this network of sites with committed lead stakeholders/educators, fully built and well-maintained facilities, and regular technical support available when needed is completing the foundation for District-wide program growth over time.

Here are some representative comments from educators about the ways garden/nutrition education benefited their students:

"Gardening got students more excited about coming to after school programs where they learned more about healthier options"

School-Based Farm and Education/Training Program

In the 2021-2022 school year, a local ecological farming business (Tendy 43) has been collaborating with Growing Together to transform the former baseball field at Soskin Middle School into a 1-acre production farm. Every day, groups of students participate in the development of the farm by digging beds, weeding, laying mulch, planting seeds, and harvesting seasonal crops. The farm is interwoven into the school's programming through collaboration with the CTE class, science classes, elective enrichments, and after-school cooking class while offering fresh organic produce to students, families, and staff on a weekly basis. The intent is to support hands-on learning experiences and training/leadership opportunities for all students, provide access to fresh foods for students and families, and create a shared space on campus to grow and strengthen the school community.



Harvesting



Intensive Production



Community Distribution

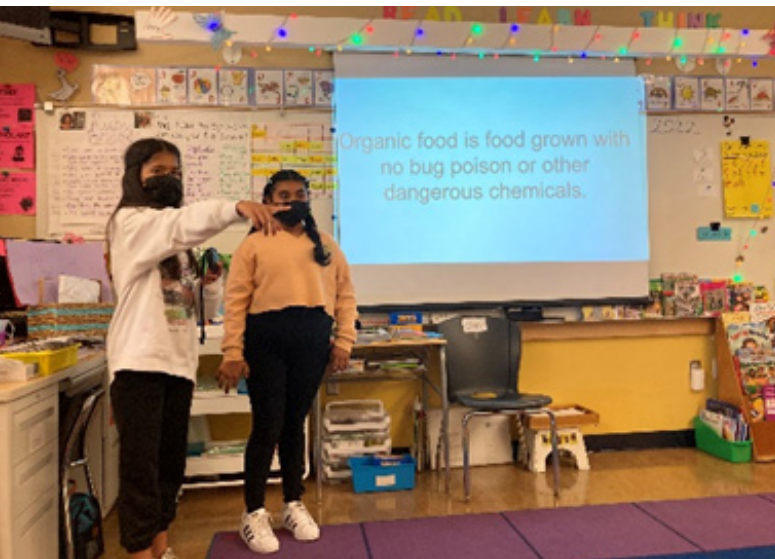
Leadership Training Program: Conscious Kitchen Ambassadors

In the Spring of 2022, through a collaboration with Turning Green (Conscious Kitchen), the King, Obama, and Ford Elementary programs organized and led an after-school enrichment program for grades 4 through 6, focused on training future leaders in transforming our food systems. The curriculum consisted of a series of hands-on, project-based learning and field study activities, giving students the foundation of direct experience needed to make the content engaging and relevant to their daily lives. Examples of activities included: mapping food ecosystems, learning about seasonal/local foods, interviewing elders and school stakeholders, cooking traditional recipes with family members, visiting local farms and talking with farmers, and creating presentations about organic foods and giving them to classes of younger students. Throughout the semester, the pilot program had a waiting list of students wanting to join, demonstrating the depth of interest students have in opportunities to become leaders of food systems change.



Garden Ecosystem Observations

clearly link the Food Service Department menu and procurement changes with the educational offerings, and create opportunities for students to directly experience, value, and participate in a more resilient local food system.



Student Peer Presentations

Educational Goals and Future Opportunities

WCCUSD knows from the CDFA Planting the Seed report, USDA Farm to School program reports and case studies, as well as our own experiences that getting students into the garden, engaging them with food system choices, and providing a variety of fresh, local, organic meals can help reinforce positive eating habits while nourishing community. The educational programming is at a starting point with the action plan including steps to improve access to farm-to-school opportunities for more students,

EVALUATING OUR RESULTS

WCCUSD's farm-to-school initiatives have created several policy, systems, and environmental changes that we are working to better track, report on, and improve. Our 2021-2022 school year included manually assessing ways to gather relevant program data and using that to establish post-pandemic baselines as well as goals. Our teams performed a series of often manual assessment tasks to gather the data to create this baseline assessment and understand the opportunities to better leverage our existing tools as well as extend those to better monitor our impact and results.

The District is not currently set up to easily quantify and track sourcing as it relates to distances traveled, organic versus conventional sourcing, or whether a product is 100% from California. Setting up that process and system is a key step to making a shift from pre-packaged foods to local, fresh, and organic since with better data we can more effectively analyze our efforts and adapt.

Our assessment efforts have indicated that 50% of the food coming into the WCCUSD Food Service Department is organic. Our teams estimate that 25-30% of our meals use scratch cooking for the entire

menu item or for key portions of that item. We have been able to better measure the percent of food that comes from local sources and have refined our definition of local. All of these data tracking and reporting efforts have helped motivate our teams as they see the direct impact of their transformation efforts with the procurement and meal programming.

WCCUSD has incorporated survey input from students, parents, and Food Service Department team members. These inputs first helped us understand how the pandemic box program was working and what improvements we could make to streamline that new and adaptive program. As students returned to schools, we tested new fruits and other meal items with small groups of students. We taste tested targeted menu items as well as gathering input on specific new menu items and even some new products that local suppliers had crafted to align with our program needs (organic beef burger, organic baked goods, and cereals). As we neared the end of the school year we performed a series of surveys to students, parents, and Food Service Department staff to understand which of the organic menu items were most popular, thoughts on participation, and insights about the meal program changes.

SUSTAINABILITY CONSIDERATIONS

Food system sustainability requires a focus on the quality and distance food travels, the farming and processing methods, the ability to reduce waste, the economic viability, and user acceptance of the final product. Food systems are complex webs where the school serves as a critical player. WCCUSD acknowledges a need to continue to make its school food programs financially and programmatically sustainable using all of the resources at its disposal, but also identifying and sourcing local products when possible. Our Good Food Baseline Assessment (2017-2018) outlined many areas for improvement which we have started to assess, pilot, and plan for substantive long term change. Our recent District efforts have proven that it is possible to make impactful progress and our hope is to continue to get the systems and practices in place to build upon our momentum.

Our assessment process as well as the change management work that we have done within the District were all supported through our partner relationships with both Conscious Kitchen and Growing To-

gether. Conscious Kitchen in particular has helped identify local California sourcing and overcome challenges in onboarding new suppliers. Once we can reliably purchase products from new suppliers we transition procurement to our existing Food Service Department staff. This discovery, testing, and systemization process is what we have piloted and what we hope to refine as we fully implement our plans to achieve broader school food transformation goals.

Our educational sustainability comes from guiding teachers on how to use the garden in ongoing activities and lessons. Growing Together started working with after school programs and segued from those smaller setting opportunities to developing a plan that can provide broader cross-District educational offerings.

By using the Conscious Kitchen Ambassador model, we train student leaders who will continue to rise through the District and support healthier, more equitable meals. The students also educate faculty and their families.

WCCUSD is looking to hire a sustainability team member within our Food Service Department as we have identified the need to analyze the food service activities related to various climate, food equity, and environmental goals. In addition, with new SB1383 waste reduction laws coming into play, we need to increase our focus on waste reduction in our food preparation and food service operations. We see this role as a gap now that we hope to fill so that we can facilitate more compliance with and promotion of climate smart practices.

One of the innovative ways that the WCCUSD and Conscious Kitchen partnership has grown in the past year is through work with local university undergraduate and graduate students. Our program is of great interest to students studying food systems, nutrition and wellness, and public health and policy. Through internships, students from local universities as well as some further afield (ie: UC Berkeley, San Jose State, Dominican University, and UCLA), support our work with in-depth research through capstone projects, teaching Conscious Kitchen Ambassador lessons, creating educational infographics and sharing their own wisdom. The connection between college age students and elementary / secondary school students has been rewarding for all and identified the value of maintaining a strong connection with university students who are seeking ways to experience field work and support exciting food systems projects. These part-

nerships strengthen local support and opportunities for our students to interact with and be mentored by university students.

State and Federal Program Participation

In seeking ways to leverage ongoing and sustainable funding sources, our team identified gaps and opportunities within the USDA commodities, pilot programming, and special projects funds. This has helped WCCUSD create new connections and opportunities to source local and organic products but has also helped support local farmers who are seeking inclusion in the various federal and state programs. By purchasing organic strawberries from JSM Organics, a Hispanic owned and operated farm in Monterey County that had one of the few organic items available for purchase using USDA funds, we have started to understand the hurdles that JSM needs to overcome to offer some of their other products into the USDA channel.



Farmer Javier Zamora and farmer partners with CK team in Monterey to work on crop plans and ways to reduce barriers for entry into the USDA Food System

Our work on systems has extended to state programming as well. Our team has provided insights to the CDFA Farm to School programming team about our experiences adding more climate smart agricultural products that schools can easily access. In some cases this includes helping to connect farmers to CDFA funding opportunities so that they can seek solutions (refrigerated trucking, site improvements, and other start up costs) to help them access the school marketplace.

While our efforts have uncovered many challenges as we have tried to meet our core values and goals, WCCUSD has been able to embrace the learnings and leverage our partners in the federal, state, and nonprofit sectors to continue to propel the momentum. The pandemic helped increase the prioritization and awareness of need in our school food system and we are pleased to see policies, programs, and political support making impactful change. Our plan will seek ways to set up systems to sustain the changes we have started so that our District can continue to serve our community while providing an example to other Districts who seek opportunities to add scratch cooking and organic products to their portfolios.

Grant Opportunities

This work was supported by a USDA planning grant which allowed our team to assess gaps in our programming, develop new menu items, train staff on transition plans, and identify a plan for building upon the pilot momentum. We hope to craft a compelling action plan and obtain support for that through USDA's implementation program.

The USDA Farm to School project has three components:

- Assessing the Districts' baseline and potential scratch cooking opportunities
- Mapping the existing supply chain, identifying new suppliers and products that would fit with the Districts updated menus, and setting up revised bidding and general procurement documents and procedures for local farm to school procurement
- Incorporating more local food into meals with back to school planning and supporting the District with their adaptation of menus and team training

Our Farm-to-School efforts were also supported by CDFA funds that helped us prioritize specific work with local CA farmers and ranchers to source and incorporate fresh and minimally processed, local, organic foods and educate students about the farm-to-school changes we are making. The Farm to School Incubator Grant Program had more specific opportunities to purchase and test California fresh, local, and minimally processed products and our CDFA goals include four components:

- Procuring fresh minimally processed local products for the Food Service Department recipe taste testing, in support of school-based cooking programs

- Integrating changes in the Food Service Department menus with the curriculum through a student Ambassador programs, supporting school-based cooking programs, and assessing connection points with the school gardens across the District
- Purchasing equipment to enable onsite production of fresh fruits and vegetables
- Developing farm to school procurement materials to highlight program results and successes, gathering and reporting on procurement process changes, and supporting local direct product purchases

With all the changes and adaptations that Food Service Department teams have had to make during the pandemic, these grants as well as in-kind support from our Conscious Kitchen partner has made it possible for us to adjust to pandemic necessities while still making substantial changes to our food service programming.

USDA ACTION PLAN

This assessment document is a companion to our USDA Action Plan. The Action Plan is our proposed approach to further our food service and educational changes to strengthen the farm-to-school opportunities and expand upon the work we have accomplished in 2021-2022. Please see that document for our specific recommendations.