

# Healthy Kids First



Why cafeteria workers  
want to cook fresh  
meals in New Haven  
Public Schools

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Real Food Real Jobs is a project of  
UNITE HERE, the primary union  
representing food service workers  
in North America.



UNITE HERE Local 217 is the  
union for food service and hotel  
and gaming workers in  
Connecticut and Rhode Island.

**54% of those surveyed currently have children or grandchildren in New Haven schools.\***

**W**e are the 200 frontline workers who are in charge of feeding New Haven's 20,000 schoolchildren. We prepare over 12,000 breakfasts and 17,000 lunches each day for the children of New Haven in over 45 schools. We are also the concerned grandmothers, grandfathers, mothers, and fathers of New Haven schoolchildren. In this report, we'll tell you about the current state of school food in New Haven and our vision for how to fix it.

New Haven was once nationally recognized for its commitment to fresh cooked, healthy lunches.<sup>1</sup> However, this commitment, along with the overall quality of our program, is in decline. The only long-term solution is to create a plan to bring back cooking to New Haven's schools.

We are asking New Haven Public Schools to make a commitment to cooking with fresh ingredients, and to use the beautiful new kitchens in our schools for what they were intended: cooking, not just reheating food. In order to make this transition, we need and want additional training. We've done it before with community support and we need your help to do it again.

**95% percent of us believe that caretaking is a core aspect of our job. New Haven school children are family to us. It's not just serving a meal; it's feeding our children.**

## **School meals are vital for students to succeed.**

**Weekends and summers are a time of special vulnerability for hungry children in New Haven.**

**T**he meals we serve are an essential source of nourishment for the youngest residents of New Haven. Both childhood obesity and hunger are major concerns in our city – about 80% of New Haven children qualify for free or reduced-price meals under the National School Lunch Program. Nationwide, more than one third of children and adolescents are overweight or obese, which has both short-term and long-term health effects.<sup>2</sup> Just as importantly, hunger and malnutrition affect children's ability to excel in the classroom.<sup>3,4</sup> The meals we serve count for up to half of children's daily calories. We need to make sure those are healthy calories that they will want to consume.

Through creativity and commitment, we work to make sure that hungry children have access to nutritious meals. Chef Tim, our former foodservice director, created a summer meals food truck in 2011. We applaud this effort! Cathy Rubano spent summer of 2013 aboard the truck delivering 1,000 free meals a day to children living in under-served neighborhoods. Cheryl Barbara, New Haven's celebrity lunch lady (in case you missed it, she won the cooking competition "Chopped" back in 2011), runs a backpack program at High School in the Community. On Fridays, she makes sure that none of her students go hungry over the weekend by providing a backpack of food to students in need.



Cheryl Barbara

**74% of us feel that the quality of our program is declining.**

\* All statements from the survey reflect the opinions of 110 workers, out of a total of 186, for a response rate of 59%. Survey responses were collected during February and March of 2013.

## We are worried about the quality of our program.

**Y**ou may have heard about some of the improvements that have been made in recent years. After several decades of serving mainly processed and frozen foods, Will Clark, the chief administrative officer for New Haven Public Schools, told the local newspaper, “We want to stop being experts at the can opener and start being experts on cooking.”<sup>5</sup> Chef Timothy Cipriano (a.k.a. “The Local Food Dude”) was hired to lead this endeavor, based on his prior success with bringing scratch cooking and local sourcing to Connecticut schools.<sup>6</sup> We were inspired by what seemed to be a strong commitment to cooking high quality foods for New Haven school children.

Under Chef Tim’s direction, our program received national media attention for feeding children healthier food. Many of our improvements were made at no cost to the city of New Haven. For example, we secured a grant to install salad bars in all of our cafeterias.<sup>7</sup> During Chef Tim’s time in New Haven, he was named “Food Service Director of the Year” and “one of the Twenty Most Influential People working in Non-Commercial Food Service” by Food Service Director Magazine.<sup>8</sup> Despite this acclaim, after four years as food service director, Chef Tim left abruptly right before the beginning of the 2012-2013 school year. He has not yet been replaced. This lack of sustained leadership has put the quality of our program in jeopardy.

Operating without a food service director during this past year has been extremely challenging. The Healthy Hunger Free Kids Act of 2010 ushered in new regulations for the National School Lunch Program at the beginning of the 2012-2013 school year. This was a time of major transition for schools across the country, yet we were left to make this transition with no foodservice director and an understaffed management team. **We ask that the New Haven Board of Education actively solicit and incorporate our input as it selects a new foodservice director and decides the future of our of our program.**

## We want New Haven Public Schools to let us cook.

**O**ver the years, cooks have been eliminated from most of our kitchens. Out of 45 public schools in New Haven, only 12 have on-site cooking kitchens. The rest use the “central kitchen” model, where food is prepared off-site at a large facility, chilled, transported, and finally reheated in “warming kitchens.”

We believe that on-site kitchens are the best model of school food preparation. However, the city began to centralize production

of school meals in the early 1970s, when it needed to rapidly expand meal service to all of the city's schools. Many of the schools had been built at a time when children typically walked home for lunch. These schools didn't have kitchens and the city didn't have money to build so many new facilities at once.

During this moment of crisis, we began serving meals in many of our elementary schools out of "closet kitchens," which were basically any unused space that



Courtesy of Bridgeport Public Schools



Courtesy of Bridgeport Public Schools

could hold both a desk for paperwork and an oven for reheating pre-packaged meals. We used "closet kitchens" out of necessity because we wanted to make sure that no child went hungry. Cities all over the country were doing the same thing, purchasing meals from suppliers with names like "Mass Feeding" and "Morton Frozen Foods." Instead of cooking fresh meals, we reheated the packaged meals and handed them to the students as they walked through the lunch line.

But this isn't what we wanted for New Haven's children. We wanted to cook for them – we were used to cooking balanced meals from scratch, with five equally tasty components: meat, grain, vegetable, fruit, and milk. With heat-and-serve meals, we lost the ability to use our expertise to make sure the foods were prepared properly and according to local taste preferences. Instead, an "expert" in a lab coat got to make the decisions. Not surprisingly, our children didn't really like these foods.<sup>9</sup>

Our biggest goal as child nutrition professionals is to make sure children eat the food we serve. We knew this wasn't happening



Courtesy of Bridgeport Public Schools

### ***Why do we want to cook at every school instead of warm up food?***

"We can put TLC into our kitchens"

"You can put more love in the food"

"They like when they smell the food being cooked"

"The food is fresher and care is key"

"They are always complaining about the food and they ask me if I cook it"

"It's prepared right there; fresher, not too dry"

"Better variety, better tasting, more healthy, seasonal"

"Fresh is always better"

"The food would be seasoned more to their taste"



with the frozen mealpacks and that the city was sending public funds out of state to frozen food manufacturers in Virginia and Illinois. We thought there must be a better way. Along with concerned parents, we launched a campaign to bring cooking back to New Haven. We conducted a one-month comparison and found “the meals that [were] being locally produced in New Haven [were] cheaper in terms of operating costs than frozen, prepackaged meals purchased from outside suppliers.”

They city agreed to use a “satellite system,” where all meals would be produced in New Haven at cooking kitchens and distributed to schools that lacked on-site kitchens. This was still a pre-packaged system, but we gained more control over the food quality and freshness, while creating more work for New Haven residents. These pre-pack meals were produced at New Haven’s largest high schools, until 2003 when our central kitchen facility on Barnes Avenue was opened.

The central kitchen was built under the direction of Aramark, the private for-profit food service management company that managed our food service program for 14 years. At the central kitchen, we use what is known as a cook-chill process. Meals are cooked typically one or two days before service, “blast-chilled” to a temperature just above freezing, and delivered cold to the schools. With this further centralization of production, many of New Haven’s remaining cooks were removed from their on-site schools. Although the central kitchen was built with the promise of saving money, it has failed to do so.

Since 1995, the City of New Haven has rebuilt or renovated over 35 schools, many with excellent kitchen facilities, yet just over a third of our public schools currently serve fresh-cooked meals to students.<sup>10</sup> We started centralized production in the 1970s out of necessity. In 2013, we are no longer stuck with “closet kitchens.” **Nearly all of our schools have cooking facilities – it is time to make a commitment to cooking again.**

**99% of us say that in schools that have kitchens, we should cook fresh foods.**

**87% of us believe that children prefer foods made in cooking kitchens.**

**100% of central kitchen workers want to serve children fresh vegetables.**

**83% of central kitchen workers want to return to cooking raw, rather than pre-cooked meat.**

## **We want children to eat the food we serve.**

**A**s cafeteria workers, many of us have a clear view of what is left on the children’s plates when they finish eating. Despite our unique perspective and years of experience, only 23% of us have been able to give input on either the recipes or foods we serve. This needs to change if we want to make sure the children eat nutritionally balanced meals.

Of particular concern is whether children eat the fruit and vegetable components of their meals. Research shows that worker engagement makes a huge difference.<sup>11</sup> Having the time to verbally

encourage students to try fruits and vegetables increases the likelihood that they will consume these nutritious foods. Verbal encouragement is one strategy for increasing students' consumption of fruits and vegetables. However, this is not enough. We must also ensure that all of the foods we serve are presented in an appetizing manner. After all, as many of us say, "Children eat with their eyes."

At over 80% of our schools, we observe that at least half of the food is thrown out uneaten. We think that students waste some of this food because particular items do not look or taste good after being pre-cooked, chilled, and kept cold for 1-2 days. As one general worker explained, "The lunch trash is always heavy because I have a warming kitchen." Others, in cooking kitchens, complain that when ingredients arrive frozen and pre-cooked, they cannot use their knowledge of the children's food preferences to cook dishes they will want to eat. **We believe that more cooking from scratch would reduce the amount of food wasted in our schools.**

**79% of us think kids would throw away less food if New Haven schools cooked more food from scratch instead of using frozen or processed food.**

## **We have a lot of potential.**

**T**here will only be a solid career path for women (and men) in school foodservice, if we make a commitment to cooking. We need job advancement opportunities; 74% of us are the primary providers for our families. A return to cooking in schools would require us to learn to work with fresh ingredients, to bake our own bread products, and to educate students about the foods we prepare. Each of these things would provide important professional training and job advancement opportunities.

Our younger members are particularly in need of additional training and career advancement pathways. They haven't yet learned to cook on the job because



New Haven lunchroom workers celebrate Thanksgiving in 1982. Courtesy of Kathy Traub.



"I've been working in the cafeterias for 21 years. I learned to cook fresh food as I came up in the system, food that the kids and teachers wanted to eat. I want young women to have the opportunities I had.

**We need more cooks!"**

**–Betty Alford, Cook at Truman School**



“I have worked at Troup School for three and a half years and have two kids in New Haven Public Schools. I send my kids with lunch every day because I worry they won’t eat the food. I want to learn to cook food at school that students will enjoy.”

– Maria Hernandez, General Worker

they entered the system during an era of reliance on frozen and pre-made food. Just as importantly, many have never had the opportunity for formal training, like the Quality Food Operator certification, which the city used to offer to all workers.

The future we want for ourselves is also what is best for New Haven’s children. Rather than waiting for a manufacturer to eliminate unwanted food additives, or to incorporate more fruits and vegetables into processed foods, skilled community-based cooks will be better able to respond in a timely and context-specific manner.

We ask New Haven Public Schools to invest in our potential.

**67% of us want to learn about healthy eating, 43% about cooking, 42% about food prep and 50% about food safety.**



We used to prepare fresh breads and cakes in the bakeshop at Hillhouse High School. Courtesy of Kathy Traub. c. 1970.



## Cooking is possible, even with a tight budget.

The City of New Haven began to invest in fresh cooking when it built kitchens in nearly every school. Now the Board of Education and the community of New Haven face a choice. Do we stop here, with kitchens, but no cooks? Or do we choose to move forward and take on the challenge of bringing fresh cooking back to our schools?

If we make this choice to transition back to scratch cooking, we would be in good company – even in times of financial austerity, an increasing number of school districts across the country are making the choice to invest in cooking.<sup>13</sup> One of the reasons that so many districts are transforming their programs is that the federal government has chosen to invest in cooking. For example, First Lady Michelle Obama created a program to bring community-based culinary expertise to schools.<sup>14</sup> We are encouraged by the success of these programs and by the enduring legacy of those districts that have always done fresh cooking.

We believe the return to fresh cooking in New Haven Public Schools should be gradual, starting in our kitchens that already have cooking facilities and expanding over time to include satellite schools. This transformation will require additional investment in the ingredients we use to cook, as well as the workers in the kitchen, but the costs are manageable.

We want to start by increasing participation, which will bring more federal reimbursement dollars into our program. In January of 2013, average daily lunch participation was 93% in the K-8 cooking schools, but only 45% in the cooking high schools. Similarly, average daily breakfast participation was 70% in the K-8 cooking schools, but only 21% in the cooking high schools. We urgently need to do something different in New Haven's high school kitchens.

In a national survey conducted by the School Nutrition Association, high school students stated that they would be, "most likely to participate if they saw improvements in the following attributes: overall quality of the food, variety of menu items from day to day, and time spent waiting in line."<sup>15</sup> These are all challenges we can address, if given the opportunity.

We must create a food service program that high school students want to participate in, if we want to make sure that they are eating nutritious foods. Unlike in our K-8s, where students all receive free meals, a significant number of students at our largest high schools pay for their meals. With conscientious menu planning and additional training, we could cook meals from scratch that high school students—and staff—would choose to purchase.

Based on data from January 2013, the high schools have enough labor-hours to do scratch cooking. The K-8 cooking schools will

**Food activist Michael Pollan recommends, "To change our children's food culture, we'll need to plant gardens in every primary school, build fully equipped kitchens, train a new generation of lunchroom ladies (and gentlemen) who can once again cook and teach cooking to children."**<sup>12</sup>

**100% of central kitchen workers want to use the central kitchen for summer processing.**

need to add additional hours, but we have an efficient team in place to tackle the challenge. We are able to produce more meals with one hour of labor than would be expected based on national projections.<sup>16</sup>

School	New Haven Meals per Labor Hour	Expected Meals per Labor Hour
Fair Haven	24	21
Nathan Hale	22	18
Troup	20	19
Truman	29	20

If we make the commitment to bring cooking back to our school kitchens, numerous resources exist to help us along the way. We will pursue:

- **Federal funding** to support research and education to increase the presence of regionally grown food in schools, particularly in collaboration with community partners.<sup>17</sup> We will also take advantage of free technical consultations from the National Food Service Management Institute.
- **State-level grants** from the Connecticut Department of Agriculture. Districts as near as Connecticut’s Regional District 4 (Deep River, Essex and Chester) are receiving support from the state of Connecticut to use their school kitchens to process local produce during the summer months.<sup>18</sup> We have the capacity and the desire to use New Haven’s central kitchen in a similar manner.
- **Partnerships with local non-profits and unions.** We have access to a wealth of resources here in New Haven that could help us win grant money, as well as provide training for our workers. The food service workers at Yale made the transition to fresh cooking in the early 2000s, to widespread acclaim.<sup>19</sup> City Seed, the organization responsible for our farmers’ markets, recently won a farm-to-school implementation grant for over \$100,000.

We stand ready to work with the Board of Education to bring cooking back to our schools, but we can’t do it alone. It’s going to take a village. **We invite students, parents, chefs, and food activists to join us in our campaign. Let’s cook!**

**In summary, we recommend  
that New Haven Public Schools:**

1. Actively solicit and incorporate our input as it improves school food. We have a unique perspective and a lot of experience.
2. Make a commitment to cooking, which means that NHPS needs to:
  - a. Avoid replacing cooked food with processed food.
  - b. Use the kitchens in New Haven's beautiful new schools for what they were intended: cooking, not just reheating, food.
3. Help us reach our full potential as caretakers for New Haven's children. Schools are an important place for children to learn about nutrition. We want comprehensive training on cooking, serving, and eating healthy food.
4. Create and protect good jobs for New Haven Residents. Nearly 70% of cafeteria workers live in New Haven and depend on these cafeteria jobs.
5. Demonstrate fiscal responsibility as well as innovation and creativity to make this dream of cooking a reality for New Haven's school children.

## Notes

1 Hirshey, G. (2008). "Whole Grains, Fresh Corn: School Menu on a Mission." The New York Times. New York.

2 Ogden, C., M. Carroll, et al. (2012). "Prevalence of obesity and trends in body mass index among US children and adolescents, 1999-2010." *Journal of the American Medical Association* **397**(5): 483-490.

3 Alaimo, K., C. Olson, et al. (2001). "Food Insecurity and American School-Aged Children's Cognitive, Academic and Psychosocial Development." *Pediatrics* **108**(1): 44-53.

4 Kleinman, R. E., S. Hall, et al. (2002). "Diet, breakfast, and academic performance in children." *Annals of Nutrition and Metabolism* **46**: 24-30.

5 Bass, P. (2009). "On The Menu: Baked Chicken." New Haven Independent.

6 Hirshey, G. (2007). "Local Food 101, With a School as His Lab." The New York Times.

7 Seymour, J. (2011). "New Haven Schools Grow Healthy Kids with Access to Salad Bars and School Gardens." Let' Move Blog  
<http://www.letsmove.gov/blog/2011/09/22/new-haven-schools-grow-healthy-kids-access-salad-bars-and-school-gardens>.

8 Cipriano, T. (2012). New Haven School Food Initiatives,  
[http://www.nhps.net/sites/default/files/NH\\_School\\_Food\\_Initiatives\\_1.pdf](http://www.nhps.net/sites/default/files/NH_School_Food_Initiatives_1.pdf)

9 The Hartford Courant reported that there had been numerous complaints about the frozen meal packs since they were instituted in 1971. "[Home Cooking Recommended for New Haven Schools.]"

10 "School Construction," New Haven Public Schools Website  
<http://www.nhps.net/SchoolConstruction>.

11 Schwartz, M. B. (2007). "The influence of a verbal prompt on school lunch fruit consumption: a pilot study." *International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity* **4**(6).

12 Pollan, M. (2008) "Farmer in Chief." The New York Times.

13 From coast to coast, reports on pioneering school districts demonstrate that fresh cooking programs can provide excellent nutrition for students and be fiscally sound. Brandt, S. (2013) "Minneapolis expands its menu for school lunch." *Minneapolis Star Tribune*; Bursleson, A. (2012) "School lunch from scratch – cooks learn ins and outs of food prep at boot camp." *The Bakersfield Californian*; Buzalka, M. (2010) "Meeting the Nutrition Challenge." *Food Management; The Edible Schoolyard Project* (2013). "DC Central Kitchen: Locally sourced, scratch-cooked school meals." <http://edibleschoolyard.org/program/dc-central-kitchen-locally-sourced-scratch-cooked-school-meals>; Johnson, K. (2011) "Schools Restore Fresh Cooking to the Cafeteria." *The New York Times*; Modlin, L. (2013) "Healthier choices on school lunch menus." *The Fairfield Sun*.

14 Chefs Move to Schools: <http://www.chefsmovetoschools.org>

15 Asperin, A. E., M. F. Nettles, et al. (2010). "The Non-Participation Survey: Understanding Why High School Students Choose Not to Eat School Lunch." *Journal of Child Nutrition & Management* **34**(1).

16 Higher meals per labor hour denotes efficiency of operations. These numbers were calculated for the eight cooking high schools, as well as the four cooking K-8, and are available upon request. Average daily participation was calculated over a 20-day period – this data was supplied by the accounting office at Central Kitchen. To calculate meals-per-labor hour, we used a standard formula for converting breakfast and lunch into meal-equivalents. Under this system, each lunch counts as 1 meal equivalent, while each breakfast counts as 1/3 meal equivalent. Some districts count breakfast as 2/3 meal equivalent, but since we do not prepare breakfasts in-house, we felt the 1/3 factor more accurately represented our program. For comparison, we used staffing guidelines published by the Iowa Department of Education published by the Iowa Department of Education for on-site production with "convenience" and "conventional" models.



“Conventional” systems produce more foods from scratch and require more labor per meal equivalent than “convenience” systems, in which more heat-and-serve items are used. New Haven’s on-site cooking kitchens currently use a “convenience” model. For more info, see:  
[http://educateiowa.gov/index.php?option=com\\_docman&task=doc\\_details&gid=8895&Itemid=830](http://educateiowa.gov/index.php?option=com_docman&task=doc_details&gid=8895&Itemid=830)

17 The USDA farm-to-school grants and the Sustainable Agriculture, Research, and Education grants are opportunities worth pursuing. In addition, there are numerous private foundations and industry-sponsored programs that we can apply to for small equipment grants. The Connecticut Department of Agriculture also solicits calls for proposals related to increasing local produce in schools. Current grants include the Specialty Crop Block Grant, intended for fruits and vegetables, and the CT Grown Joint Venture Grant Program, which provides marketing materials for CT-grown foods.

18 They will freeze local produce during the summer months for cooking during the year. This is meant to be both economical (fresh produce is cheapest during the summer during the peak of the growing season) and time-saving (by doing advanced peeling and slicing, preparing meals during the school year will be much easier). Spiegel, J. (2013) “Bringing local food to schools: a hard nut to crack.” The CT Mirror. <http://www.ctmirror.org/story/19759/new-push-bring-local-food-schools-faces-balky-hurdles>

19 Yale Sustainable Food Project Website. “Yale Sustainable Food Project Testimonials 2003-8.”  
[http://www.yale.edu/sustainablefood/food\\_testimonials.html](http://www.yale.edu/sustainablefood/food_testimonials.html)