

2022–2023

Recommendations to Improve School Meals & Increase Food Education at Seattle Public Schools

A report from the Seattle School Meals and Food Education Working Group, a collaboration of school district staff, public agencies, community organizations, and student leaders



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Cover Photos

Left: Students in the garden at Highland Park Elementary during EarthGen’s Day of Service.

Photo Credit: [EarthGen](#), licensed under [CC BY-ND 4.0](#)

Top Right: Gyoza, sushi, and yakisoba noodles served on a lunch plate at Seattle Public Schools.

Photo Credit: [SPS Culinary Services Instagram](#)

Bottom Right: At the Seattle World School, SPS Culinary Services kitchen staff Lan Huynh mixes a tray of salmon pasta alfredo featuring salmon from Muckleshoot Seafood Products.

Photo Credit: Carmen Hom, [International Examiner](#)

About the School Meals and Food Education Working Group

This report is a product of the Seattle School Meals & Food Education Working Group (Working Group), a diverse, multi-sectoral group formed in 2022 with the shared goal of supporting high-quality school meals and access to food education for students who attend Seattle Public Schools (SPS).

The Working Group was convened by the City of Seattle Office of Sustainability & Environment (OSE) Healthy Food in Schools initiative and the SPS Culinary Services department. This report includes recommendations from the Working Group for future actions intended to increase access to high-quality school meals and enhance food and garden education programming across SPS.

Working Group Participants

The Working Group included staff from multiple departments within SPS, City of Seattle, and King County, and representatives from community-based organizations that partner with SPS on school food, school garden, or food education initiatives. Community-based organizations were led by and/or serve Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color, and serve students attending SPS. Working Group participants from community-based organizations were provided stipends to compensate for their time and expertise and reduce barriers to participation. Working Group participants, organizations, titles and affiliations are listed below. More details about each organization can be found in Appendix A.

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Other Acknowledgements & Contributions

Thank you to Priya Saxena from [Equitable Future](#) for their expert, thoughtful, and highly skilled facilitation of the Working Group's process in support of our values and goals.

Thank you to the youth leaders from [FEEST](#), InterimCDA's [WILD Program](#), and [Y-WE Grow](#) for sharing their priorities for school food and food education during 2022 listening sessions. This input was instrumental in developing the Working Group's priorities.

This report was prepared by Chris Iberle and Gurdeep Gill from the City of Seattle Office of Sustainability & Environment, with contributions from Priya Saxena. Thank you to Working Group participants and Bridget Igoe from the City of Seattle Office of Sustainability & Environment for their review, edits, and contributions to the report.



Executive Summary

School meals are a crucial food access point in our communities, especially for low-income families and Black, Indigenous, and communities of color. Seattle Public Schools (SPS) provides 20,000 meals per day to students across the district through the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and School Breakfast Program (SBP). At least 34% of SPS students are eligible for Free or Reduced Price (FRP) meals through the USDA school meal programs because their families qualify based on their incomes.

Offering school meals at no cost to all students in a school or district, known as “universal school meals,” is a key strategy for increasing youth access to food in schools. School meals that are fresh, cooked from scratch, culturally relevant, and made from local ingredients help increase student participation in the school meal program. Students are more likely to eat food and meals served at school that taste good, appeal to students, and meet their needs and preferences.¹ Eating school meals improves students’ mental and physical health² and learning outcomes.³ Hungry students have trouble focusing at school and may have behavioral⁴ issues. School meal programs can improve students’ overall success in school and prevent students from entering the [school to prison pipeline](#). School meal programs are also prime opportunities to reduce food and food-related waste,⁵ support environmental sustainability, and advance racial and social equity.⁶ School-based nutrition, food, and garden education are key strategies to connect students with where their food comes from, support student health and learning, and engage teachers, school staff, and community partners.

The City of Seattle Office of Sustainability & Environment (OSE) and SPS Culinary Services formed the **Seattle School Meals & Food Education Working Group (Working Group)** in 2022 to help guide existing and new efforts aimed at increasing equitable access to high-quality school meals, school gardens, and food education across the district. The development of the Working Group built on recent progress to [improve school meal quality](#), [reduce waste](#), and enhance [school garden education](#) in Seattle. The Working Group is a collaborative effort between SPS, City of Seattle, King County, and community-based organizations that are led by and/or serve Black, Indigenous, or People of Color (BIPOC) and serve Seattle students.

This report, authored by the Working Group, provides three “Priority Action” recommendations to improve school meal quality, increase student access to school meals, and enhance food, nutrition, and garden education in SPS. The recommendations were developed by the Working Group using a collaborative process that included learning about key issue areas, identifying potential actions, and prioritizing the most strategic actions, aligned with the priorities of youth leadership. This report is intended to guide and inform community leaders, policymakers from SPS, City of Seattle, and other local or state entities on strategies and actions to increase access to better school meals and enhance food and school garden education programming at Seattle Public Schools.



Gyoza, sushi, and yakisoba noodles served on a lunch plate at Seattle Public Schools

Photo Credit: [SPS Culinary Services Instagram](#)

Acting on these recommendations will require collaborative next steps by Working Group participants and their networks, along with support from SPS staff and administrators; local, state, and federal policymakers; Tribes; and community leaders. Through 2023, Working Group participants have continued to collaborate on this shared vision for improving school meals and increasing food and nutrition education for SPS students.

Priority Actions

What follows are the three Priority Actions recommended by the Working Group to improve school meal programs, increase student access to school meals, and enhance food and garden education within Seattle Public Schools.



1. Provide more high-quality school meals, developed with student input, by increasing staff capacity at Seattle Public Schools Culinary Services.



2. Make school food free for all students by pursuing districtwide universal meal policies.



3. Integrate more food and garden education districtwide by advocating for policy change and creating a district-level School Garden Coordinator position.



Priority Action #1: Provide more high-quality school meals, developed with student input, by increasing staff capacity at Seattle Public Schools Culinary Services.

SPS Culinary Services is working to [transform the school meal program](#) to meet these priorities. Since 2019, SPS Culinary Services has prioritized menu items that reflect diverse cultures and cuisines, cooked more school meals from scratch using more fresh ingredients, and increased purchases of locally produced foods. Increasing staff capacity by **funding new staff positions within SPS Culinary Services, increasing kitchen staff hours and pay, upgrading kitchen equipment, and providing additional kitchen staff training** are needed to support the meal program transformation, prepare and serve more high-quality meals,⁷ and increase student access to these high-quality meals.⁸ Students are more likely to prefer and eat high-quality meals, which means the food does not go to waste and students get the nutrition they need. By focusing on ingredients purchased from BIPOC-owned food businesses and local producers that use environmentally sustainable practices, school meal transformation also contributes to a more equitable and sustainable local food economy.

Students, the broader school community, and SPS Culinary Services staff have defined **high-quality school meals** as freshly prepared “from scratch,” delicious, culturally relevant, using local ingredients produced with environmentally sustainable practices, and supporting an equitable food system by purchasing ingredients from underrepresented farmers and food producers.

Increasing SPS Culinary Services’ staff capacity would result in the following outcomes and impacts:

Short-term Outcomes	Medium-term Impacts	Long-term Impacts
SPS initiatives to improve school meal quality are expanded and scaled up across the district, providing more fresh, scratch cooked, culturally relevant, and locally sourced meals to students	Increased staff capacity and retention through training and professional development opportunities	Improved academics outcomes ⁹ and attendance, physical and mental health, ¹⁰ and food security for students due to increased student participation in SPS meal programs
Frontline culinary and kitchen staff receive more training, technical assistance, and coaching	High-quality school meals are offered daily to students districtwide to support increased student participation	Improved program stability due to increased staff capacity and retention
More student feedback is collected and incorporated into menu planning	Meals meet student preferences for freshness, cultural relevance, and local sourcing	Increased program revenues from federal reimbursements for meals served
Improved marketing and communications of the SPS school meal program to students, parents, and the broader community	Increased awareness and understanding of the SPS meal program by students and parents	New opportunities for program improvements due to increased staff capacity
New and more consistent purchasing relationships are established with local & BIPOC farms and food producers	Increased spending and contracting for food purchases from local & BIPOC farms and food producers	Equitable growth of the local food economy due to SPS’ increased food purchases from local, BIPOC food producers and resulting multiplier effects ¹¹



Priority Action #2: **Make school food free for all students by pursuing district universal meal policies**

Many low and middle-income families do not qualify for the federal Free or Reduced Price (FRP) school meal program, or face barriers to applying for the program. School meal fees can be a major barrier to participation and lead to school meal debt when students and their families are unable to pay for meals. Providing universal school meals ensures all students have access to fresh, high-quality, and nutritious meals, at no cost to the students, so students can focus on learning and thriving at school.

In the 2022-2023 School Year, SPS increased student access to universal school meals by expanding the number of schools that participate in the USDA Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) from six schools to over 40 schools. CEP is a meal service option that allows qualifying schools in low-income areas to serve breakfast and lunch at no cost to all enrolled students without collecting FRP meal applications.¹² The 2022-23 expansion of CEP at SPS made universal school meals available to over 24,000 Seattle students. However, even after Seattle expanded universal school meals to all its CEP-eligible schools, and even with a state law passed in 2023 ([HB 1238: Providing free school meals for all](#)¹³) that will allow SPS to offer universal school meals at approximately four additional Seattle schools by the 2024-25 School Year, over 60 schools in SPS are still unable to provide universal school meals to their 27,000 students. Local, state, or federal policy changes would be necessary to provide universal school meals to all Seattle students districtwide regardless of income, benefiting low and middle-income students most.



SPS students are served lunch at Nathan Hale High School in March 2022. *Photo credit: City of Seattle*

Continuing to expand universal school meals districtwide would result in the following outcomes and impacts:

Short-term Outcomes	Medium-term Impacts	Long-term Impacts
Remove barriers to accessing school meals for low-income Seattle students and families, such as household FRP meal applications	Increased student participation in high-quality SPS meal programs	Improved academic outcomes, ¹⁴ physical and mental health, ¹⁵ and food security for students due to increased access to school meals, especially BIPOC or low-income students
Refocus SPS Culinary Services staff time on school meal quality improvements, such as scratch cooking and student engagement, instead of FRP program administration	More equitable access to high-quality SPS meal programs, which predominately serve low-income and BIPOC students	Increased staff capacity to develop new opportunities for meal program improvements
	Increased revenues for the school meal program from federal reimbursements for meals served	

12. Some non-nutrition educational funding programs, such as Title I and the Learning Assistance Program, require schools to provide data about families' income levels to allocate funds to eligible schools. Currently, many schools rely on FRP meal applications to collect and provide that family income data. When those applications are no longer being collected due to a school providing universal meals, schools must use a different method to collect data on families' incomes for those educational programs.

13. HB 1238 will require public schools to provide meals at no charge to requesting students at schools that serve kindergarten through grade four, where 30% or more students are eligible for FRP meals.



Priority Action #3: Integrate more food and garden education district-wide by advocating for policy change and creating a district-level School Garden Coordinator position

Students and community partners have shared that empowering youth with knowledge and skills related to food, nutrition, and food system topics is a priority. Topics of interest include where our food comes from, food and health, growing food, cooking, food waste prevention, food cultures, and food justice and food sovereignty issues. Around 77% of schools in Seattle have school gardens, but garden usage and upkeep vary greatly depending on the time, funding, and resources of each schools' teachers, staff, parents, students, and community members. SPS offers very limited food and nutrition education, especially for elementary and middle schools students, and offerings have declined since 2015 without any formal requirement to provide this programming at the local, state,¹⁶ or federal level.¹⁷ SPS does co-facilitate the School Learning Garden Network (SLGN) with IslandWood and Tilth Alliance, as a resource for teachers, families, and community members. However, SLGN is not funded, which limits the support it can provide to teachers, students, and schools interested in expanding or enhancing their school garden and food systems education offerings.



SPS students in the garden at Orca K-8 School.
Photo Credit: [Orca K-8 School Garden Blog](#)

This action includes two interconnected recommendations. The first is to implement policy changes to expand or enhance food and nutrition education at SPS. The second is to create a district-level position to coordinate and support access to school gardens, ensuring equity by prioritizing schools in SPS [Equity Tiers 1 and 2](#). Together, these actions would result in the following outcomes and impacts:

Short-term Outcomes	Medium-term Impacts	Long-term Impacts
Improve district-level coordination and support to develop and expand food and garden education offerings	More equitable access to school gardens for students at priority schools and districtwide	Improved student knowledge and attitudes towards food and nutrition, supporting students' mental and physical health ^{18, 19}
Increase resources and support for school gardens to enhance learning opportunities	Increased access to food and nutrition education for students at priority schools and districtwide	Increased fruit and vegetable consumption by students
Increase capacity for SPS staff to apply for external funding and pursue partnerships to support school garden, food, and outdoor education	Expanded partnerships with community-led initiatives and organizations to provide food education	Improved lifelong skills for students around food, nutrition, health, culture, and food systems
	Increased curriculum resources and professional development opportunities to successfully implement school garden, food, and outdoor education	Increased sustainability for ongoing community partnerships to provide school garden, food, and outdoor education districtwide

16. Environmental education is a mandatory area of study in Washington State, required by WAC 392-410-115. Providing garden education is one way schools can meet this standard.

17. Federally, districts participating in the NSLP or other child nutrition programs are required to establish a local school wellness policy for all schools under its jurisdiction, that includes "goals for nutrition education and promotion". See Seattle Public Schools [Wellness Policy No. 3405](#).

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Prologue

Progress Update on Priority Actions

An overview of Working Group activities in 2023 to advance the Priority Actions and recommendations.

This report was developed by the Seattle School Meals & Food Education Working Group (Working Group), a diverse, multi-sectoral group that worked from March to December of 2022 to identify Priority Actions and recommendations that would increase student access to high-quality school meals and access to food and garden education for students who attend Seattle Public Schools (SPS).

While this report was being written during 2023, the Working Group continued to meet and collaborate on how to advance these actions and recommendations. Participants organized into Priority Action Teams to discuss strategies and work plans that would advance each of the Priority Actions. The Working Group also invited new community partners to collaborate, and coordinated with other related initiatives, such as Seattle Green Schoolyards.

An update on the 2023 activities and goals of each Priority Action Team is summarized below.



Priority Action #1: Provide more high-quality school meals, developed with student input, by increasing staff capacity at Seattle Public Schools Culinary Services.

Activities: Action Team #1 has been assessing specific gaps and staffing needs at SPS Culinary Services to sustain school meal improvements and identifying future funding opportunities.

2023 Goals:

- Finalize assessment of SPS Culinary Services staffing needs.
- Meet with SPS district leadership to discuss needs assessment and approaches for increasing staff capacity within Culinary Services.



Priority Action #2: Make school food free for all students by pursuing districtwide universal school meal policies.

Activities: Action Team #2 met with advocates to discuss how the Working Group could support [HB 1238: Providing free school meals](#) for all during the 2023-24 Washington State Legislative Session, and other federal policy in support of universal school meals. The team circulated action alerts and developed advocacy letter templates for the Working Group to submit in support of HB 1238, and in support of a proposed rule change to the USDA's Community Eligibility Provision that could expand universal school meals to additional Seattle schools.

2023 Goals:

- Continue mobilizing Working Group participants to advocate for state and federal policy to expand universal school meals.



Priority Action #3: Integrate more food and garden education districtwide by advocating for policy change and creating a district-level School Garden Coordinator position.

Activities: Action Team #3 developed an environmental scan of food justice and food systems education happening within SPS, focused on BIPOC and community-led educational partnerships. The team began meeting regularly with SPS staff in the Department of Liberatory Education to explore effective strategies for supporting and expanding food, garden, and nutrition education offerings at the district.

2023 Goals:

- Explore opportunities to support food systems education networking with SPS staff, teachers, and community-based educators.
- Advise SPS staff developing a three-year Outdoor Education Strategic Plan on ways to support school gardens and food education.

Accomplishing the Priority Actions described in this report will require work beyond 2023. Working Group participants will continue to seek opportunities and partnerships to collaboratively advance their recommendations and align them with existing and emerging efforts.

Background

School meals are a crucial food access point in our communities, especially for low-income families and Black, Indigenous, and communities of color. Seattle Public Schools (SPS) provides 20,000 breakfasts and lunches per day to students across the district, at least 34% of whom are eligible for Free or Reduced Price (FRP) meals. A [recent survey in Washington State](#) found that school meal programs and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) were the food assistance programs used most frequently by low-income and Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) families before and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Offering school meals at no cost to all students, known as “universal school meals,” is a key strategy for increasing access to food at school. During the COVID-era 2020-21 and 2021-22 School Years, universal schools meals were provided to all SPS students districtwide under temporary federal program waivers. This expansion increased student participation in school meals²⁰ and increased food security for families during the COVID-19 crisis. It also illustrated the feasibility and positive impacts of implementing universal meals in more schools permanently.



Grab and go southwest salad at
Seattle Public Schools

Photo Credit: [SPS Culinary Services Instagram](#)

School meals that are fresh, cooked from scratch, culturally relevant, and made from local ingredients help increase student participation in the school meal program. Students are more likely to eat food and meals served at school that taste good and meet their needs and preferences.²¹ Eating school meals improves students’ mental and physical health²² and learning outcomes.²³ Hungry students have trouble focusing at school and may have behavioral issues.²⁴ School meal programs can improve students’ overall success in school and prevent students from entering the [school to prison pipeline](#).

School meal programs are prime opportunities to support environmental sustainability by preventing food and packaging waste²⁵ and purchasing food produced with sustainable practices. School meal programs can also advance racial and social equity by increasing access to nutritious, culturally relevant meals for BIPOC and low-income students,²⁶ while equitably supporting the local economy by purchasing ingredients from local, BIPOC-owned food businesses. School-based nutrition education, school gardens, and food systems education are also key strategies to connect students with where their food comes from, increase fruit and vegetable consumption, support student health and learning, and engage district administrators, teachers, staff, and community partners.

SPS students, parents, and community organizations have identified access to cooking classes focused on culturally diverse recipes, nutrition education, school gardens, and food justice curricula as high priorities. Offering school-based food education would provide students with more tools for healthy eating and empower them to make informed food choices. Food and garden education makes it more likely that students will eat fruits and vegetables,²⁷ and develop taste preferences and eating habits focused on nutritious foods, which can improve health outcomes over the long term.²⁸

Recent Efforts to Improve School Meals in Seattle

Community-based organizations, parent and student associations, SPS staff, and public agencies are working to improve school meals at SPS with currently available resources. Students and community organizations have been advocating for school food to better respond to student needs and preferences. SPS has started improving district operations to prioritize better school meals. Community organizations, City of Seattle, and state agencies have provided some funding and assistance to help improve school food programs at the district.



FEEST “Healthy Food Round Table” Report released in 2019

In 2019, FEEST, a Seattle-based youth empowerment organization, released its [Healthy Food Round Table](#) report outlining recommendations developed by youth to improve the school food environment for students at SPS. The recommendations were based on a study led by FEEST youth organizers and students from high schools in Seattle and Highline Public Schools. The study assessed youth experiences with the food available at school and identified strategies to increase student participation in school meal programs and increase access to fresh, healthy foods throughout the school day. The youth’s short-term recommendations included providing weekly fresh food snack boxes, increasing culturally relevant items on the lunch menu, making school food free for all students in more schools, and adding more salad bars. In the long term, FEEST recommended reestablishing scratch cooking in all Seattle schools through central kitchen renovations and support and trainings for kitchen staff.

[SPS Culinary Services](#) has made significant progress to improve school meals. In November 2018, the district hired chef Aaron Smith as Director of Culinary Services, who developed a proposal for changes to the program with a new vision for the department.

Culinary Services held community listening sessions and created a departmental strategic plan that aligned with both the district’s overall goals and community feedback. As a result, Director Smith was approved to create an Executive Chef position for the district, and he hired [Chef Emme Collins](#) for the role. Supported by Director Smith and Chef Collins, the Culinary Services department worked to start [transforming SPS school food](#), guided by feedback from students, parents, and the broader community. Transforming the SPS meal program includes shifting menus, kitchen equipment, staffing, and overall meal production away from pre-made, processed foods to prioritize meals that are freshly made, use local ingredients, and include more culturally relevant dishes.

Culinary Services introduced new initiatives like “Taste of SPS” which features culturally diverse menu items freshly made with local ingredients. Items like Vietnamese pho, East African misir wot served with locally made injera, and Pacific Northwest salmon bowls have been featured on the menu. During the 2022-2023 School Year, they began offering weekly “Build Your Own” pasta, burrito, and Asian noodle bars at all middle and high schools, featuring local, fresh ingredients. Student participation in the meal program increased on days when “Taste of SPS” or “Build Your Own” dishes were featured. Standard weekly menus now also include more dishes freshly made from diverse cuisines, including enchiladas, banh mi sandwiches, chicken tinga, tikka masala, and tofu stir fry.

During the 2022-2023 School Year, they began offering weekly “Build Your Own” pasta, burrito, and Asian noodle bars at all middle and high schools, featuring local, fresh ingredients. Student participation in the meal program increased on days when “Taste of SPS” or “Build Your Own” dishes were featured. Standard weekly menus now also include more dishes freshly made from diverse cuisines, including burrito and bugolgi bowls, banh mi sandwiches, chicken tinga, tikka masala, Thai lettuce wraps, congee, and tofu stir fry.

The SPS Culinary Services department has also provided more training to kitchen staff, focused on culinary skills, culturally relevant recipes, and scratch cooking techniques, supported in part by grant funding from Public Health – Seattle & King County, City of Seattle, and private foundations. In 2022, Seattle voters approved the SPS Educational Programs and Operations Levy, which included a \$20 million budget item to renovate the SPS Central Kitchen and make facility and equipment upgrades necessary to continue shifting away from pre-packaged, processed food items to more meals cooked from scratch using fresh ingredients. The SPS [Resource Conservation](#) department has also worked to implement food and packaging waste reduction efforts, supported by Seattle Public Utilities and the World Wildlife Fund [Food Waste Warriors](#) program.



An SPS student’s burrito from a “Build Your Own” bar.
Photo Credit: [SPS Culinary Services Instagram](#)



Misir wot with local lentils, served with injera from an Ethiopian & Eritrean bakery in Seattle, served at SPS in 2022.
Photo Credit: [SPS Culinary Services Instagram](#)

In its 2018-2019 Budget Recommendations²⁹, the Sweetened Beverage Tax Community Advisory Board advised the City of Seattle to use Sweetened Beverage Tax (SBT) revenue to subsidize SPS Culinary Services to provide more fresh fruits and vegetables to students. As a result, [the Healthy Food in Schools initiative](#) was launched during the 2018-2019 School Year, managed by the City of Seattle Office of Sustainability & Environment (OSE) in partnership with SPS and supported by SBT revenue. The initiative includes a Fresh Fruit & Vegetable Program offered at 28 low-income schools to increase student access to a variety of healthy produce snacks. In 2021, OSE also used SBT revenue to fund the purchase and installation of 20 water bottle filling stations at Seattle schools and began supporting SPS Culinary Services’ transition to more freshly made school meals.

Other public agencies are also increasing their support for school food and meal improvements. In 2021, the Washington State Department of Agriculture (WSDA) started awarding Farm to School (F2S) Purchasing Grants. SPS Culinary Services won multiple WSDA F2S Purchasing Grants between 2021-2023, which supported SPS to increase food purchases directly from local, sustainable food producers and farmers. Private foundations and non-profit organizations, including Share Our Strength and the Lifetime Foundation, have also provided funding to SPS Culinary Services to expand scratch cooking, culturally relevant menu items, and food access initiatives. Other partners providing support have included United Way of King County, Urban School Food Alliance, and the Chef Ann Foundation.

Successes, Gaps, and Challenges

Improving school meals at SPS is still a work in progress. Freshly made items are not served daily nor districtwide yet. Making the shift to produce more meals from scratch using all fresh ingredients relies on the SPS Central Kitchen renovation, which will not be completed until 2025. Beyond equipment needs, transforming the meal program faces other operational challenges. There is a lack of kitchen staff in both the Central Kitchen and at school sites. Food purchasing budgets are limited, making it difficult to buy higher quality ingredients. Kitchen staff at schools need additional time, resources, training and equipment to implement some of the changes in meal preparation. Mealtimes at many schools are too short. SPS Culinary Services continues working to overcome these challenges and achieve its vision for the school meal program, motivated by recent progress. Policymakers, administrators, and leadership from SPS, City of Seattle, community organizations, and other local or state entities should do all they can to maintain this momentum, help scale up efforts, and ensure high-quality school meals are served daily to students districtwide.



SPS Culinary Services Central Kitchen Staff roast salmon from Muckleshoot Seafood Products for a salmon pasta alfredo dish in 2023

Photo Credit: City of Seattle

Recent Efforts to Expand Access to School Meals in Seattle

Schools are a critical food access point for many families, especially for low-income and BIPOC families in Seattle. SPS has been working to expand student access to free breakfast and lunch in more schools across the district within current federal child nutrition programs, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Community organizations, including [FEEST](#), the [Anti-Hunger & Nutrition Coalition](#), [United Way of King County](#), [Northwest Harvest](#), and SPS students have advocated for school meals to be offered to students at no cost at all schools districtwide, particularly through state legislation and federal policy change.

All 51,000 students at SPS deserve access to a healthy breakfast and lunch at school each day. For some students, eating breakfast or lunch at school may be their only reliable meal of the day. According to participation data available at the time of writing, in the 2019-2020 School Year,³⁰ 16,539 Seattle students (32%) were eligible for Free or Reduced Price (FRP) meals through the federal National School Lunch Program. Of these eligible students, only 47% (7,966 students) participated regularly in the meal program. For the 53% (8,963 students) who were eligible but did not participate, barriers commonly cited include navigating the required federal application, real or perceived stigma associated with eating school meals, lack of awareness about the program, and for students from immigrant families, fear that registering for government programs would put them at risk.

30. This is the most recent school year where complete Free & Reduced Price Meal Participation data for Seattle Public Schools is available from OSPI, since COVID-era federal waivers allowed schools provide free school meals to all students during the 2020-21 and 2021-22 School Years, and Free and Reduced Price Meal Participation data was not collected.

What is the “Community Eligibility Provision” (CEP)?

CEP is an option within the USDA school meal programs that allows schools to offer universal school meals at eligible schools in low-income areas, without requiring parents to fill out FRP meal applications. Instead, CEP uses a formula “based on the percentage of students participating in other means-tested programs,” such as families participating in Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF).⁶⁴

The federal [Community Eligibility Provision](#) (CEP) allows schools in low-income areas, where approximately 40% of students qualify for FRP meals, to serve breakfast and lunch at no cost to all enrolled students without collecting FRP meal applications. Prior to 2020, SPS only implemented universal school meals through CEP in six schools, out of 38 that were eligible, due to concerns that expanding CEP to additional schools could indirectly affect some schools’ eligibility for state and federal education funding. This is because some educational funding programs for low-income schools, such as Title I and the Learning Assistance Program (LAP), require schools to provide family income data to allocate funds to eligible schools. Currently, many schools rely on FRP meal applications, schools must use a different method to collect and report family income data for Title I and LAP. In Washington State, schools are required to use an alternative [Family Income Survey](#) in place of FRP meal applications, and school administrators often need support with switching to that data collection method using [best practices](#).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, federal waivers allowed SPS to provide universal school meals from March 2020 through the end of the 2021-2022 School Year. After the waivers expired, SPS maximized the number of schools participating in the CEP program. In the 2022-2023 School Year, SPS expanded participation in CEP from six schools (pre-pandemic) to over 40 schools, enrolling every eligible school and making universal school meals available to over 24,000 Seattle students. After this CEP expansion in Seattle, student participation in the breakfast and lunch programs increased, illustrating how universal school meals increase access to school meals for students. Serving more meals through CEP also allows SPS Culinary Services to claim those additional meals for federal reimbursement, increasing revenues to support the overall financial health of the program.

Successes, Gaps, and Challenges

In 2023, the Washington State Legislature passed [HB 1238/SB 5339](#) to expand universal meals to students in kindergarten through grade four at public schools where 30% or more of students meet federal eligibility requirements for FRP meals. This new state law will allow SPS to offer universal school meals at approximately four additional Seattle schools by the 2024-25 School Year, meaning as many as 44 out of 109 schools will be offering meals at no cost to all their students. Even so, this leaves out over 27,000 students at 60 schools that are still unable to benefit from universal school meals in Seattle. Continued advocacy at the state and federal levels are needed to further expand universal school meals within SPS.



SPS students are served lunch at Nathan Hale High School in March 2022. *Photo credit: City of Seattle*

Recent Efforts to Provide School-based Food Education and Support School Gardens in Seattle

Food, garden, and nutrition education for youth is important for equipping students with knowledge and skills on these topics to build a foundation for their long-term health and well-being. Hands-on educational experiences provided in gardens, farms, and outdoor classrooms are especially effective. Since children and youth spend so much time at school, schools provide a unique opportunity to educate students on food system topics. Providing school-based food and nutrition education also ensures all students in a community can access and benefit from this type of programming. Low-income students and families may not have the time or resources to access food and garden programming offered outside of school. Community-based educators and multiple SPS departments are providing sustainability and garden education



*SPS students in the garden at Orca K-8 School.
Photo Credit: [Orca K-8 School Garden Blog](#)*

through various initiatives, which creates a foundation for expanding food and nutrition education within SPS.

However, school-based food and nutrition education is limited at SPS, especially for students in grades K-8. A 2020 national CDC School Health Survey³¹ found that Seattle students have some of the lowest rates nationally for access to education on food production, preparation, and nutrition, despite numerous community-led food education programs offered to Seattle's youth outside of school. In the past, private funding supported school-based nutrition education for all 4th and 5th graders, but this support ended in 2015. Meanwhile, the City of Seattle's sole investment in school-based food and nutrition education, which only reached four schools, is expected to sunset after 2024. SPS is not currently eligible for national programs like FoodCorps, which provide staffing to implement food education and school meal support in eligible districts. SPS' [Career and Technical Education](#) (CTE) program had limited culinary and agriculture classes offered in the 2022-23 School Year. Some course offerings increased in the 2023-24 School Year, reaching many high schools and one middle school. Some high schools also operate successful greenhouse programs in coordination with their science and horticulture programs.³² Students may access food education through one-time experiences, such as the Islandwood School Overnight Program. Since there is no formal food systems or garden education requirement at the local, state³³ or federal levels,³⁴ the extent of food and nutrition education offered in schools can be highly variable and often depends on external funding and community in-kind support, which are not guaranteed year after year.

While food and nutrition education is limited, outdoor and long running garden-based initiatives are gaining momentum within SPS as opportunities to integrate food and nutrition education as well. Community-based organizations and public agencies are partnering to offer hands-on food waste, school garden, and environmental education programs. The SPS [Self-Help Projects](#) department has worked to support school garden education and community partnerships, such as the School Learning Garden Network (SLGN). About 85 Seattle schools (77%) have a garden or outdoor learning space. SPS Self-Help Projects staff coordinate with teachers, administrators, parents, students, and community members to support garden projects at individual school sites. However, school gardens are challenged by the reality that garden upkeep and the ability to use school gardens as learning spaces depends on the resources of an individual school, such as volunteer capacity and the availability of district or external funding for supplies and materials. This contributes to disparities in access to school gardens across the district, as schools in low-income communities may have fewer resources to support individual school garden projects.

32. One example includes the [Nathan Hale High School Horticulture & Urban Farm](#), and greenhouses at Ballard, Cleveland, and Roosevelt High Schools.

33. Environmental education is a mandatory area of study in Washington State, required by WAC 392-410-115. Providing garden education is one way schools can meet this standard.

34. Federally, districts participating in the NSLP or other child nutrition programs are required to establish a local school wellness policy for all schools under its jurisdiction, that includes "goals for nutrition education and promotion". See Seattle Public Schools [Wellness Policy No. 3405](#).



Students plant a rain garden at Leschi Elementary in Seattle. *Photo Credit: Erin Irby*

The [School Learning Garden Network](#) is coordinated by SPS Self-Help Projects staff, [Tilth Alliance](#), and [IslandWood](#) to provide annual events that engage school garden coordinators, volunteers, and educators working to increase outdoor greenspace opportunities for all students. SPS was also a co-Principal Investigator in the “[Learning in Places](#)” (LiP) pilot project. LiP was designed and implemented by university, school district, and community partners to create equitable outdoor, garden-based learning opportunities for students and their families that cultivate ethical decision-making and culturally thriving socio-ecological systems learning.

In 2020, the Seattle Public Schools Board of Directors created an [Outdoor and Community Education Task Force](#) to conduct a feasibility study and make recommendations related to community-based learning and outdoor education in Seattle Public Schools. In 2021, the Task Force submitted their recommendations to the Seattle School Board aimed at

improving student access to outdoor education within the district, including school gardens. SPS and City of Seattle leadership have also signed the [Green Schoolyards](#) pledge, committing to advancing equitable access to nature’s benefits in local schoolyards.

A team supporting a Green Schoolyards initiative in Seattle was formed in 2021 to develop SPS’ strategy for ensuring schoolyards provide outdoor education spaces that support play, learning, and environmental sustainability. The initiative is led and coordinated by [EarthGen](#) and includes SPS staff from the Liberatory Education and Self-Help Projects departments, and City of Seattle staff from Seattle Parks & Recreation, Seattle Public Utilities, and the Office of Sustainability & Environment, with support from the national Children & Nature Network.

The Department of Liberatory Education at SPS (formerly called the Integrated Curriculum Department) is home to Black Studies, Ethnic Studies, and Native American Education programs, and develops curricula rooted in racial justice and stories of resilience in communities of color. SPS [Native American Education](#) staff and partners have provided education to students on first foods (the traditional foods of Native peoples before contact with settlers) and food sovereignty, and the program is increasing teacher training on these topics. Under the Department of Liberatory Education, there has also been a renewed focus on outdoor and community education to uplift and better connect students of color to various school subjects through outdoor education. In 2023, the department hired a consultant to help develop a districtwide approach for outdoor education. Pilot projects in the 2023-2024 School Year will include engaging more secondary students in interdisciplinary outdoor learning projects guided by local community partners collaborating on curriculum development. These projects will include a focus on food and environmental justice, histories of resistance, and public health.

Successes, Gaps, and Challenges

When taken together, all these initiatives and efforts stewarded by some combination of students, teachers, community partners, SPS departments, and other public agencies demonstrate the appetite and energy to improve access to high-quality school meals and increase access to experiential education on food, nutrition, and the environment. This momentum provides exciting opportunities to fill current gaps, grow and sustain the next phase of school meal and food education program innovations in Seattle. But today’s piecemeal or fragmented implementation of these efforts may not achieve systemic and permanent change. A more coordinated and strategic approach at the district level, with public and community support, would enable more large-scale change, and help address disparities in student access to high-quality programming.

Launch of the Seattle School Meals & Food Education Working Group

In 2022, building off the momentum of the last five years and seeing the existing gaps and opportunities described above, the City of Seattle Office of Sustainability & Environment (OSE) and Seattle Public Schools (SPS) developed and convened the Seattle School Meals & Food Education Working Group (Working Group). The Working Group included SPS staff from multiple departments, City of Seattle and King County agency staff, and community-based organizations that partner with SPS on school food or food education initiatives. The Working Group was launched to help guide existing and new efforts aimed at increasing equitable access to high-quality school meals, nutrition, and food education across the district.

Working Group Goals and Objectives

Participants in the Working Group were brought together to work towards the following goals:

- Support community health by improving meal quality and increasing access to nutritious foods for students and families, especially in low-income and Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities.
- Increase food procurement for school meals from local farms, producers, and BIPOC-owned food businesses.
- Increase student participation in school meals through policy change and improved outreach and promotion to students and families.
- Reduce the carbon footprint of school food at SPS by increasing fruit and vegetable consumption and reducing food waste.
- Improve student health and learning through equitable food, garden, and nutrition education.

Within these goals, the Working Group focused on promoting and connecting current efforts to improve school meals, food and nutrition education, and school gardens at SPS. It also assessed needs, gaps, opportunities, and priorities to help plan enhanced and expanded future work in key areas.

Design and Impact of the Working Group's Membership

The Working Group's membership intentionally spanned different sectors and issue areas, bringing together representatives from community-based organizations, public agencies, and SPS staff. All participants had some type of experience or expertise in school meal production and/or policy, school-based food waste reduction, school garden management, or food justice education in partnership with Seattle Public Schools, with diverse roles and areas of influence. The array of participants included direct service program and policy advisors, program leadership and decision-makers, and community organizers and advocates. This range of experience and expertise in the Working Group helped create a collaborative and generative process.

Having representatives from multiple SPS departments at each Working Group meeting was critical to building a shared understanding of existing efforts and district priorities related to school meals, environmental sustainability, and school gardens at SPS.



Working Group members tour the SPS Culinary Services warehouse and Central Kitchen in 2023. *Photo credit: City of Seattle*

SPS staff also provided key insights about challenges and opportunities for support. This institutional knowledge and experience helped the Working Group consider and prioritize potential actions, and ensured group discussions and ideas were consistently grounded in feasible, effective strategies that could best serve Seattle students.

Community-based organizations also informed the Working Group's strategies by sharing their current work and the priorities and perspectives of families in communities they work with. Community leadership was an integral part of the Working Group's process, from assessing the broader landscape of school meals and food education programming, to brainstorming and prioritizing actions, to strategic planning to achieve those priorities. While participants were not an exhaustive representation of community-led work on youth education, empowerment, urban farming, or food and nutrition education across Seattle, they brought important experience connecting these key areas to SPS programming.



Working Group members participate in meeting at the SPS John Stanford Center for Educational Excellence in 2023.
Photo Credit: Priya Saxena

The Working Group's Process

In 2022, the Working Group met 10 times and was guided through an intentional process to collaboratively develop a shared vision and values around school food and nutrition education, assess current work, and prioritize actions to focus future efforts. Appendix B includes a summary of the process the Working Group used to develop the recommendations featured in this report. Expert facilitation was provided by Priya Saxena from [Equitable Future](#), with support from staff at the City of Seattle Office of Sustainability & Environment.

Engagement with Youth Leadership



Youth listening session with InterimCDA's WILD Program in 2022. *Photo Credit: City of Seattle*

Because students are impacted most by school meals, food education, and school garden programs, it was important to the Working Group to center student voices and priorities when planning for future programming. City of Seattle OSE's Healthy Food in Schools staff worked with [FEEST](#), InterimCDA's [WILD Program](#), and the [Y-WE Grow](#) program to conduct youth listening sessions during the summer of 2022. These youth programs develop and support youth leadership in food and environmental justice projects. During the listening sessions, participating youth shared their priorities and experiences with food access, locally grown food, food waste and climate pollution, and the local food economy to inform the City's [Food Action Plan](#) update. The youth also shared their priorities for school food and food education to guide the Working Group's recommendations.

Priorities from 2022 youth listening sessions

Below are the themes and priorities about school food and food education that emerged from youth listening sessions held in 2022 with youth leaders from [FEEST](#), InterimCDA's [WILD Program](#), and the [Y-WE Grow](#) program.

Scratch Cooked Meals

- Increase availability, variety, and quality of scratch-cooked, appetizing, and culturally relevant meals, with ingredients sourced from local producers.
- Provide more agency and ownership to students with school meals by engaging them regularly for feedback about the food being served.
- Schools should provide more resources and support to culinary staff, such as more space to prepare meals, places to sit and have breaks, and better pay.
- Provide more appetizing foods to help decrease food waste in the cafeteria.

Meal Access & Policies

- Provide free meals accessible to all students.
- Improve the environment in school cafeterias so that students have more time to eat and enjoy their meals, have the physical space to sit down and eat, and have access to food and hand washing stations nearby.

Food & Nutrition Education

- Schools should offer more classes focused on nutrition, culinary skills, and food justice, and for students to cook, serve, and eat food with their peers.
- Invite students into school kitchens to learn from culinary staff, create recipes, and to support incorporation of student recipes into the menu.

Food Waste

- Schools should offer more classes that connect cooking to waste management, especially in the cafeteria.



Youth listening session with Y-WE's Grow Program in 2022.

Photo Credit: Y-WE Grow

Top Priority Actions

What follows are the three Priority Actions recommended by the Working Group to improve school meal programs, increase student access to school meals, and enhance food and garden education within Seattle Public Schools.



Priority Action #1: **Provide more high-quality school meals, developed with student input, by increasing staff capacity at Seattle Public Schools Culinary Services.**

SPS Culinary Services is working to [transform the meal program](#) by prioritizing menu items cooked from scratch with fresh, locally sourced ingredients that reflect diverse food cultures and cuisines. However, producing such menu items in large volumes requires more kitchen staff time and positions, training, and upgraded kitchen equipment at the SPS Central Kitchen and individual school sites. Some staff at individual school sites also need more support from SPS Culinary Services' central office to develop and troubleshoot new meal production systems and fully implement scratch cooked meals in their schools. Increasing capacity within SPS Culinary Services by **funding new staff positions within SPS Culinary Services, increasing kitchen staff hours and pay, upgrading kitchen equipment, and providing additional kitchen staff training** are needed to provide more fresh, local, culturally relevant, sustainable, equitably sourced, high-quality meals to students.³⁵

Students, the broader school community, and SPS Culinary Services staff have defined **high-quality school meals** as freshly prepared “from scratch,” delicious, culturally relevant, using local ingredients produced with environmentally sustainable practices, and supporting an equitable food system by purchasing ingredients from underrepresented farmers and food producers.

Why this action?

Increasing SPS Culinary Services staff capacity would:

- **Sustain and advance positive changes already underway at SPS to improve school meals:** Adding staff capacity would help SPS Culinary Services scale up its existing efforts to provide freshly cooked, culturally relevant meals daily to all students, responding to long-time priorities of SPS students and parents.
- **Support frontline culinary and kitchen staff at SPS:** Investing in capacity and support for culinary and kitchen staff across Seattle schools demonstrates to these workers that they are valued, elevates the importance of their work, and helps SPS respond to the needs of on-site school kitchen staff. Supporting kitchen staff with time, fair wages, resources, training, and professional development opportunities also helps with staff retention, motivation, and strengthens the meal program's operations.
- **Amplify student voice in school meal planning and implementation:** Collecting feedback from students and families is key to incorporating student preferences into menu planning. Engagement topics could include new, culturally responsive menu items, improving the cafeteria environment, developing food and nutrition education opportunities, and youth-led strategies to promote school meals.
- **Improve marketing and communications about the school meal program:** Adding staff capacity would enable SPS Culinary Services to increase its communications about the school meal program. Reaching more students, parents, and community members with information about school meals will increase student participation, especially among low-income families.



(Top) Locally grown bok choy, served in (bottom) mushroom shiitake mushroom & tofu stir fry. Photo Credit: [SPS Culinary Services Instagram](#)

- **Increase sustainable, equitable, and local food purchasing:** Purchasing more fresh, unprocessed foods for the school meal program, particularly ingredients from local and BIPOC farmers and food producers, is time consuming. Working with smaller suppliers that only provide certain seasonal ingredients requires extra planning, communication, and coordination on orders. Additional staff capacity would help SPS continue shifting procurement to more ingredients that contribute to an equitable and sustainable local food system, through new and more consistent purchasing relationships with local and BIPOC farmers and food producers.

This priority action echoes recommendations by other community stakeholders who care about school food. Seattle’s Sweetened Beverage Tax Community Advisory Board also recommended funding to increase SPS Culinary Services’ capacity for more scratch cooking, fresh foods, and local ingredients in their [2018-2019](#) and [2020 Budget Recommendations](#).

Action Impacts

Increasing staff capacity within the SPS Culinary Services program would contribute to the following impacts:

- **More high-quality school meals provided daily to students districtwide:** These meals would respond to student preferences for freshly prepared and culturally relevant foods made from high-quality ingredients. Students are more likely to eat meals they prefer,³⁶ which means they get the nutrition they need and less food is wasted.
- **Increased student participation in the school meal program at SPS:** As better meals are served, more students would participate in the meal program. More staff capacity would also help increase outreach and promotion about the meal program to students and families, further increasing participation in school meals. Increasing student participation in the school meal program is critical to addressing food insecurity for youth, and improves students’ academics³⁷ and physical and mental health.³⁸
- **Increased program revenue and improved program stability:** Additional support for Culinary Services kitchen staff would improve staff retention and reduce turnover. Meanwhile, increased student participation in the meal program will increase revenue from federal reimbursements for meals served, further sustaining the program’s growth and transformation.
- **Equitable growth of the local food economy:** By increasing purchases from local and BIPOC food producers, SPS spending would contribute to a more equitable local food economy. Spending on local food also stimulates the broader local economy; for every \$1 that food programs spend on local farm products, anywhere from \$1.25³⁹ to \$1.70⁴⁰ is generated in the local economy.
- **New opportunities to enhance the SPS Culinary Services program:** Increased staff capacity would allow school food service staff and administrators to develop and pursue program enhancements such as offering culinary arts education for students, expanding efforts to prevent food waste, and increasing use of compostable and/or reusable food service ware.



Priority Action #2: **Make school food free for all students by pursuing districtwide universal school meal policies.**

Local, state, or federal policy changes are needed to provide universal school meals free to all Seattle students districtwide, regardless of family incomes. SPS is already maximizing its use of federal and state programs to implement universal meals at over 40 eligible Seattle schools (out of 109 total schools). All Seattle schools are critical food access points for many families, especially low-income and BIPOC families. For some students, eating breakfast or lunch at school may be their only reliable meal of the day. Still, approximately 6,870 low-income students at SPS are eligible for federal Free and Reduced Price meals (FRP) but are not currently participating in the program due to numerous barriers. Furthermore, due to the high costs of living in Seattle, many families with incomes above the federal eligibility thresholds for FRP meals are still food insecure and would benefit from free school meals. In surveys conducted in 2019 and 2021, 30% of children in Seattle were from families with incomes between \$50,000-\$74,999 that struggled to afford food;⁴¹ most of these families, however, would not have qualified for FRP meals due to family income limits.⁴² Providing school meals at no cost to all students would ensure that they have daily access to fresh, high-quality, and nutritious breakfast and lunch, so students can focus on learning and thriving at school. It would remove current barriers for low-income students to access FRP meals, reduce the meal program's administrative costs (since no FRP meal applications need to be collected or daily payments processed with universal meals), and reduce stigma that low-income students face when accessing free meals, making them more likely to participate in the meal program.

Why this action?

Universal school meals is a long-time priority of local, regional, and national organizations that advocate for childhood food security, including [FEEST](#), the [Anti-Hunger & Nutrition Coalition](#), [United Way of King County](#), [Northwest Harvest](#), [Food Research Action Center](#), and the [National Farm to School Network](#). This action was identified by the Working Group to reiterate how critical this policy change is for improving school meal access. Increasing access to fresh, culturally relevant foods served through the school meal program is an important sign of dignity, justice, and respect for students. Continuing to expand universal school meals would:



Students at Denny International Middle School in the lunch line.

Photo Credit: [SPS Culinary Services](#)

- **Remove barriers to school meal access for low-income Seattle students and families:** Barriers include the stigma associated with eating school meals,⁴³ lack of awareness of the FRP program, and the need for families to complete the FRP meal application. FRP meal applications are especially burdensome on low-income families, families who are English Language Learners, undocumented families, and time-strapped parents who hold multiple jobs. Having students from all incomes and backgrounds eat meals together through a districtwide universal school meal program reduces the stigma experienced by students who rely on school meals, also making them more likely to participate.
- **Make school meal access more equitable:** More than half of the students enrolled at SPS identify as Black or African American, Hispanic/Latino, Asian, Native American, Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, or multi-racial.⁴⁴ Families from

42. For the 2023-24 School Year, families of four with an annual income of \$55,500 or less were eligible for reduced price school meals. Families of four with an annual income of \$39,000 or less were eligible for free school meals. See <https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/income-eligibility-guidelines>

these communities experience food insecurity at rates two times higher than their white peers. This means they would also participate in the school meal program at higher rates and that improved access to high-quality school meals would predominantly benefit BIPOC families.

- **Increase availability of Culinary Services staff to focus on meal quality improvements, program sustainability, and financial stability:** Moving to universal school meals districtwide would reduce administrative burdens for school food service staff and administrators, since they would no longer need to collect FRP meal applications or daily payments. This would enable staff to focus their resources on the paramount task of preparing high-quality school meals. Additionally, universal school meals reduces the overall cost⁴⁵ of each meal due to increased operational efficiency, as there is no longer a need to collect lunch payments. Reducing costs also makes the meal program and district more financially sustainable.



*SPS Culinary Services Kitchen staff plate burritos for students in the lunch line.
Photo credit: City of Seattle*

Action Impacts

Expanding universal school meals districtwide would result in the following impacts:

- **Improved academic outcomes, physical and mental health,⁴⁶ and increased well-being and food security for Seattle students and families:** Increased access to school meals is critical to food security,⁴⁷ especially BIPOC or low-income students who are more likely to rely on school meals. When children can eat breakfast and lunch at school for free, this reduces household food costs⁴⁸ for cash-strapped families, especially during periods of high inflation and rising food prices. Students who participate in the school meal program learn better,⁴⁹ have lower rates of suspension, and have improved [test scores](#).⁵⁰ School meals also have high nutritional quality⁵¹ and provide fruits and vegetables to students, which is important for student health.
- **Increased student participation in the school meal program, especially by low-income students:** Universal school meals would have the biggest impact on the approximately 6,870 low-income students at SPS who are eligible for FRP meals but are not currently participating in the program.
- **Increased stability and revenue for the SPS meal program:** Universal school meals would increase school meal program revenue from federal meal reimbursements for meals served, further sustaining the program's growth and transformation.
- **More high-quality school meals and new opportunities for other program enhancements:** Reducing administrative burdens of the FRP meal program would enable SPS Culinary Services staff to focus on providing more high-quality school meals districtwide and developing program enhancements such as culinary arts educations for students and food waste prevention initiatives.



Priority Action #3: **Integrate more food and garden education districtwide by advocating for policy changes and creating a district-level School Garden Coordinator position.**

This recommendation includes two interconnected actions. The first is to implement policy changes to expand or enhance food and nutrition education at SPS. The second action is to create a district-level position to coordinate school garden support and ensure equitable access to school gardens.

Efforts to improve our school food system need to extend beyond the cafeteria. Students should be empowered with knowledge and skills on food, nutrition, and food system topics such as where our food comes from, health and nutrition, cooking, food waste, food cultures and history, food justice, and food sovereignty. Improving food education supports student wellness and the interconnections with students' cultural identities.

Educational initiatives, programs, and policies all have a role in increasing food and garden education. Food and nutrition education can be integrated into classrooms and the core curricula, including in outdoor classrooms at school or community gardens and farms. Alternatively, it can be offered as extracurricular learning experiences, especially in collaboration with community partners. Schools prioritized for budget investments and resources to advance equity, such as SPS' [Equity Tier 1 and Tier 2](#) schools, should be prioritized for future food systems education. Creating a district-level School Garden Coordinator position would provide needed capacity to connect, coordinate, and implement outdoor school garden education and support expanded food systems education across the district.

Why this action?

Expanding and enhancing food and nutrition education at SPS and the creation of a School Garden Coordinator would:

- **Improve district-level coordination and support to expand food and garden education:** For example, Federal Way Public Schools (FWPS) created a School Garden Coordinator in 2021, which increased the garden curriculum and instruction support, including improved alignment with [Next Generation Science Standards](#) and the [Since Time Immemorial: Tribal Sovereignty in Washington State curriculum](#). The position is also tasked with expanding professional development opportunities for teachers, developing teaching materials, and providing technical assistance on garden-based education in FWPS. In Seattle, providing similarly centralized support and coordination would enhance and improve school garden education. Focusing on SPS Equity Tier 1 and Tier 2 or Title I schools would help address racial and economic disparities in access to outdoor education.
- **Enhance learning opportunities through garden and food education connections:** Garden and food education provide natural opportunities for hands-on, robust, holistic learning experiences. Policy changes and improved support at SPS for garden and food education would enhance learning opportunities in any subject area and for all grades, ages, and abilities, especially when teachers have access to age-appropriate lesson plans and resources that



Students in the garden at Highland Park Elementary during EarthGen's Day of Service. Photo Credit: [EarthGen](#), licensed under [CC BY-ND 4.0](#)

use culturally relevant, identity-affirming teaching methods. As shown in multiple districts, garden and food education can connect to and enhance Next Generation Science Standards,⁵² Since Time Immemorial: Tribal Sovereignty in Washington State curriculum, and many other subject areas, and support multidisciplinary education across subjects.⁵³ Garden-based and outdoor education can help meet the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) statewide [Environmental and Sustainability Literacy](#) learning standard and support Social Emotional Learning outcomes that promote students' mental health.

- **Increase resources and support for garden-based education and school garden maintenance:** A School Garden Coordinator would provide many needed supports to schools: strategies and resources for garden upkeep; help activating new green spaces for school gardens in partnership with teachers, school staff, students, and community partners; and support integrating school garden lessons into current curricula. This work would build on the existing school garden movement in Seattle but focus on coordinating efforts that are otherwise decentralized. A centralized School Garden Coordinator would make current school garden operations and education more effective, streamlined, and efficient.
- **Increase access to food and garden education programming:** Integrating food and garden education into existing core curricula or class offerings is one opportunity to ensure all Seattle students have equitable access to such programming. With more coordination and/or funding, numerous community-based organizations and partners could enhance classroom-based education, and also help expand offerings of extracurricular food and nutrition education for youth.
- **Strengthen SPS capacity to pursue and manage grants and partnerships:** A School Garden Coordinator would help the district identify and apply for grants and foster a variety of partnerships to support school garden programming and other outdoor education.

This priority action echoes recommendations by other community stakeholders who care about food and garden education. Seattle's Sweetened Beverage Tax Community Advisory Board previously recommended funding to increase community-led food, nutrition, and garden education in their [2018-2019 Budget Recommendations](#). In 2020-2021, the [SPS Outdoor and Community Education Task Force](#) stressed the importance of outdoor and school garden education for Seattle students. The Task Force recommendations also called for SPS to create a school garden staff position at the district office. Seattle students have also identified a need and desire for increased access to food and garden education and programming.

Action Impacts

Policy changes to expand or enhance food and nutrition education at SPS paired with the creation of a district-level School Garden Coordinator position would result in the following impacts:

- **Improved health, academic outcomes, and lifelong food literacy for students:** Food systems topics can offer experiential and culturally relevant learning opportunities in schools.⁵⁴ These experiences may improve learning outcomes,⁵⁵ especially for BIPOC students. Increased access to high-quality school garden education can also increase student achievements in science⁵⁶ and enhance social and emotional skills.⁵⁷ Food systems and nutrition education also improve students' knowledge and attitudes towards food in ways that improve their health and well-being. Numerous studies have shown⁵⁸ that food education empowers youth to choose healthier school meal options, eat more fruits and vegetables,^{59, 60} try new foods, and increases students' overall food literacy (i.e., understanding how food choices impact health, the economy, and the environment). Childhood and teenage years are also a critical time to build awareness⁶¹ about food systems, which can last into adulthood,⁶² and about how food choices positively or negatively impact personal or community health and the environment, including understanding of how those impacts are not experienced equitably.

- **More equitable access to school gardens and food and nutrition education for students:** Efforts to increase school gardens and food and nutrition education can advance racial equity by prioritizing SPS Equity Tier 1 and Tier 2 or Title I schools to receive programming. Developing more garden-based professional development opportunities for teachers and supporting further integration of gardens into standards-based curricula are proven methods for improving school garden sustainability⁶³ that a School Garden Coordinator could support, ensuring students can access and benefit from school gardens. Food and garden education also provide powerful connections to students' and communities' values, traditions, practices, and identities.
- **Stronger community partnerships to provide food and garden education districtwide:** Increased district coordination, capacity, and support for food and garden education could mobilize resources to expand partnerships with community-based organizations that bring expertise in food justice education for youth. Supporting these organizations to develop, pilot, and implement food and garden programs would reinforce existing community food justice networks and bring valuable expertise in food systems education to SPS.

Other Recommendations

This section outlines additional recommendations and actions identified by the Working Group. Although these did not rise to the top of the Working Group's priority list for immediate action, they still warrant consideration since these actions would also support the goals of the Working Group.

These other recommendations were deemed important but lower priority due to one of the following reasons:

- work on the action is already underway and does not need additional support from the Working Group,
- the action was considered outside the Working Group's sphere of influence,
- the action was not a standalone strategic priority compared to other actions under consideration, and/or
- the action could be integrated as a feature of the top priority actions.

Providing these additional recommendations is intended to reiterate the importance of these activities and programs already underway and express support for other collaboration and initiatives that may focus on them in the future.

	Areas of work		
Recommended Activity	Improving School Meals	Increasing Access to Food Education	Reducing Food & Packaging Waste
Gather input regularly from students, especially younger students, about what foods they want to eat at school, and support SPS Culinary Services staff to incorporate student input into menus.	✓		
Involve students in SPS meal programming by offering for-credit culinary classes in partnership with the SPS Culinary Services department. Classes should include recipe development and providing culinary support in cafeterias and kitchens.	✓	✓	
Focus on food waste prevention upfront in school meal program design and operations.	✓		✓
Advocate for recess before lunch at more Seattle schools to ensure students have time to eat lunch.	✓		
Provide training and resources to empower more teachers to use and integrate gardens as outdoor classrooms in their curriculum.		✓	✓
Introduce reusable plates, cups, silverware, utensils, trays, and other reusable food packaging at mealtime in more schools.	✓		
Provide ongoing training for students and school staff on sorting food and packaging waste.		✓	✓

What's Next?

This report presented the Priority Actions and recommendations from the Seattle School Meals & Food Education Working Group (Working Group). It is intended to guide, inform, and inspire leaders from community organizations and policymakers from City of Seattle, Seattle Public Schools (SPS), and other local or state entities on strategies and actions to increase access to better school meals and enhance food and school garden education programming at SPS. We hope these organizations feel inspired and motivated to implement these actions at Seattle Public Schools and improve the school food environment. Supporting, advocating for, and investing resources in these actions demonstrates a commitment to our youth. By advancing these actions, school food, garden, and education improves students' well-being and ability to thrive during and after their experiences at SPS.

These Priority Actions were developed by the Working Group during 2022. Since then, the Working Group has continued to meet to work on strategies and next steps to advance their recommendations (see "Progress Update on Priority Actions" on page 10 for details). Working Group participants will pursue opportunities to support these actions within current programming, and also seek to develop and collaborate on new partnerships to advance these actions. This could include working with Seattle Public Schools leadership to identify and pursue funding sources for staffing needs or develop commitments or plans to implement work outlined in the Priority Actions. This could also include mobilizing partners and networks to advocate for universal school meals expansion through local, state, or federal legislation. Public agencies, community organizations, and foundations are also key partners to provide funding, advocacy, or implementation support.

Collectively, the Working Group aims to continue working to improve student health and student learning outcomes through the school meal program and food and garden education, focusing on students from BIPOC communities.

For more information on how this work is evolving or to get involved, contact: Chris Iberle, Strategic Advisor, Food Policy & Programs, Seattle's Office of Sustainability & Environment at Chris.Iberle@seattle.gov.

Appendix A

Working Group Participants in Detail

Chinese Information Service Center (CISC)

CISC is a nonprofit organization working to support immigrants and their families by creating opportunities for them to succeed, while honoring their heritage. CISC helps immigrants throughout King County achieve success in their new community by providing information, referral, advocacy, social, and support service.

City of Seattle - Department of Early Education and Learning

The mission of the Department of Education and Early Learning is to transform the lives of Seattle's children, youth, and families through strategic investments in education. We envision a city where all children, youth, and families have equitable opportunities and access to high-quality education services, support, and outcomes.

City of Seattle - Human Services Department

The Seattle Human Services Department invests hundreds of millions of dollars to connect people with resources and solutions during times of need so we can all live, learn, work, and take part in strong healthy communities. The Youth and Family Empowerment Division (YFE) one of HSD's Divisions supports youth and families through strategic investments in food and nutrition. We provide access to nutritious meals, snacks, and CSA boxes through our Summer Food Service Program, Afterschool Meals Program, Child Care Nutrition Program, and Farm to Preschool Program. Our programs support youth food access at Seattle Parks and Community Centers, community-based organizations, family home based early education programs, afterschool enrichment programs, and more.

City of Seattle - Office of Sustainability and Environment

The Office of Sustainability & Environment (OSE) collaborates with a wide range of stakeholders to develop innovative environmental solutions that foster equity, vibrant communities, and shared prosperity. OSE's Healthy Food in Schools initiative works in partnership with Seattle Public Schools to increase access to fresh, local, nutritious, environmentally sustainable, equitably sourced, and culturally relevant foods for Seattle students.

City of Seattle - Seattle Public Utilities

Seattle Public Utilities (SPU) fosters healthy people, environment, and economy by partnering with our community to equitably manage water and waste resources for today and future generations. SPU has worked with Seattle Public Schools to cut waste by recycling, substituting single-use plastics with durable serviceware, piloting food sharing and donation of uneaten, wholesome food, composting food scraps, and integrating these many practices into student curriculum. SPU seeks to expand these practices so that food waste is prevented from the very start with creativity and expertise from staff, faculty, students, and the communities that support them.

District 7 Parent-Teacher Association

District 7 PTA represents schools in Southeast Seattle. PTA's mission is to make every child's potential a reality by engaging and empowering families and communities to advocate for all children. Centering the voices of those furthest from educational justice, the Seattle Council PTSA supports, informs, and advocates for and with school communities all over Seattle.

EarthGen

EarthGen guides and supports youth, educators, and school communities to become leaders for a healthy environment across Washington State. Through culturally sustaining, action-oriented programs, young people gain the knowledge, skills, and experience they need to think critically, act with purpose, and bring others together to address two interconnected crises: climate change and social injustice. With a focus on and demonstrated commitment to the communities most disproportionately impacted by these realities, and with a decade long history of partnership with Seattle Public Schools, EarthGen works to ensure that every young person can learn and take action to create a just and sustainable world.

FEEST

The Food Empowerment Education and Sustainability Team (FEEST) began in 2008 as part of the King County Food and Fitness Initiative. Now, FEEST trains youth of color and working-class youth, including LGBTQ+ youth, to build collective power and organize for transformative and systemic change in their schools. At FEEST, young people organize towards equitable changes that support student health and well-being, cultivating a youth-led movement for social, racial, and environmental justice.

Nourishian for Life

Nourishian for Life provides consulting related to nutrition education and community-based public health evaluation. They have been working in South Seattle for 15 years, providing experiential opportunities for people to learn and share food traditions that support health, connect us to our community, and honor the land our food comes from.

Northwest Harvest

The mission of Northwest Harvest is growing food justice through collective action. Our vision is ending hunger in Washington. Equity is fundamental to ending hunger. Northwest Harvest is committed to operating as an anti-racist, anti-oppression organization. We are unflinching in our work to transform an unjust food system into one that is more responsive and accountable to the communities most impacted by discrimination.

Nurturing Roots

Nurturing Roots is a thriving urban farm and community farming program that values community, self-sufficiency, food empowerment, social justice, and education. Since its establishment, Nurturing Roots has brought the community together by providing volunteering opportunities, hosting various events, and partnering with local restaurants, schools, and CBO's.

Public Health Seattle King County

The Healthy Eating Active Living (HEAL) Program at PHSKC partners with communities most impacted by inequities to develop and implement community-driven solutions to improve healthy eating and active living. HEAL's work has centered on farmers markets, food pantries, health clinics, school districts, and community-based organizations.

Seattle Public Schools - Culinary Services

Our mission is to make a significant contribution to the well-being and academic success of each student by fueling their minds and bodies with healthy meals. The vision of the SPS Culinary Services department is that every Seattle Public Schools student will have access to high quality, fresh ingredients, and scratch-made meals with a focus on exceptional customer service, nutritional needs, and student preference, all while being culturally relevant.

Seattle Public Schools - Department of Liberatory Education

The Department of Liberatory Education exists to deepen academic practices that promote the fullest representation of Seattle Public Schools' diverse identities, cultures, and shared histories through rigorous humanities education. We strive to equip teachers and school leaders with the tools to prompt critical thought about complex issues, while centering our shared humanity and cultivating caring classroom communities. The courses and curricula we currently support in implementation include Black Studies, Ethnic Studies, Filipinx Studies, Latinx Studies, as well as outdoor and community learning projects across the district.

Seattle Public Schools - Native American Education Program

Our goal is to ensure all Native students have a high-quality educational experience and reach the goal of graduation. We work on a case-by-case basis to address the broad scope of needs our Native students face. The program also leads professional development trainings for Seattle Public Schools staff on Since Time Immemorial curriculum.

Seattle Public Schools - Resource Conservation

SPS Resource Conservation Specialists work closely with schools, community partners, and other departments to promote a wide range of sustainability work. Their focus is to manage current utility expenses (electricity, natural gas, water/sewer, food and solid waste) through low-cost/no-cost operating strategies.

Seattle Public Schools - Self Help Projects

The Self Help Program is responsible for coordinating the review, approval, tracking, and oversight of all Self Help and Grounds Stewardship Projects, including school gardens, and partners with the School Learning Garden Network to support school gardens across Seattle Public Schools.

Seattle Restaurants United

Seattle Restaurants United is a coalition of restaurant owners and operators who came together in response to COVID-19 to advocate for the small restaurant community. Since its formation in March 2020, SRU has helped influence legislation at the city, state, and federal level to help restaurants survive the economic consequences of the pandemic.

Solid Ground

Solid Ground works to end poverty and undo racism and other oppressions that are root causes of poverty. Solid Ground's Community Food Education supports the health and wellbeing of communities experiencing poverty. We educate kids and adults about growing, buying, cooking, and eating nutritious foods. To further support this, we help make local, institutional changes that support the health of the communities we work with – and we center food as a tool to build community and work toward social justice.

Tilth Alliance

Tilth Alliance works in community with Washington farmers, gardeners, and eaters to build a sustainable, healthy, and equitable food future. For over 35 years, our learning gardens and farm have brought countless youth and families together to grow, prepare, and eat food in community. Our lessons are informed by [Learning in Places](#) which is founded on equitable, field-based experiences that center young peoples' identities, wonderings, and nature-culture relationships through field-based science lessons. Tilth Alliance supports teachers and informal educators as a professional development provider; and is a co-facilitator of the School Learning Garden Network with SPS Self Help and IslandWood since 2014.

United Way of King County

United Way of King County (UWKC) brings the community together to work towards racial justice by supporting our neighbors and transforming inequitable systems. UWKC works to reduce hunger by disrupting the system to improve access to federal nutrition programs, tax credits and culturally appropriate food.

Y-WE Grow

Young Women Empowered (Y-WE) cultivates the power of diverse youth to be creative leaders and courageous changemakers through transformative programs within a collaborative community of belonging, centering Black, Indigenous, and other youth of color. Y-WE Grow is our farming and food justice program rooted at Marra Farm in South Park. In Y-WE Grow, youth: 1. access joy, connection, and care in reciprocal relationship with the land and each other; 2. develop skills for interdependence, such as gardening, plant medicine, and woodworking; 3. disrupt environmental racism and injustice in the dominant food system; and 4. love on community by sharing the food they grow, gardening resources, meals, and more.

Appendix B

Overview of the Working Group's Process

Phase 1: **Cultivate Trusting Relationships to Align Values with Processes**

March-April 2022

The Working Group developed a shared vision, values, community agreements, and an equitable decision-making process to guide the work. This phase was also important for building relationships among participants.

Phase 2: **Assess the School Meals and Food Education Landscape**

May – July 2022

The Working Group conducted rapid assessments to develop a shared understanding of the school meals and food education landscape in Seattle schools. For each goal area, the Working Group reviewed information on current programs, recent progress and successes, upcoming work, and the biggest needs, gaps, or bottlenecks for future work on this issue. These sessions were led by Working Group participants, including SPS staff and leaders from community-based organizations, who shared their wisdom, knowledge, expertise, and experiences.

Phase 3: **Brainstorm Actions and Identify Top Priorities**

August – October 2022

The Working Group brainstormed potential actions and solutions that could build off of current work and help address the needs identified during the rapid assessments. The group focused on the experiences and expertise of BIPOC community members, SPS staff, and organizations led by and serving BIPOC students. Then, the Working Group used multiple ranking exercises to prioritize their action ideas and align these priorities with those identified by youth leaders (see page 22) to produce the top 3 Action Priorities across all areas of work.

Phase 4: **Priority Action Planning**

November – December 2022

Once the Working Group identified the top Priority Actions and recommendations across all areas of work, it started to plan next steps the group could work on for each priority. Participants self-selected into small groups to develop these action plans and next steps for the Working Group to pursue during 2023 to advance the common goals outlined in the Priority Actions. See page 10 for a progress update on the Priority Actions.

Appendix C

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