

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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