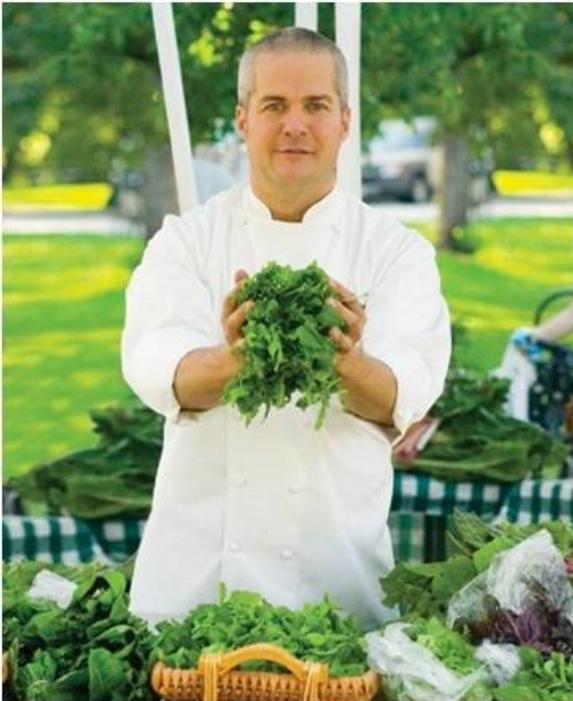


By Beyond Green Sustainable Food Partners president and founder Greg Christian



I asked Anika, a third grade student at a public school in the Midwest, why it's important for kids to eat healthy. After a moment of contemplation she responded, "Because if kids grow up eating unhealthy food they will feed their kids unhealthy food." Stunned silence followed.

With this statement this eight year old girl summarized what very few parents, food service employees, school administrators, and teachers truly realize. And what demonstrates not only the failing of our school food system, but also the most significant barrier to changing it.

I work across the continent in institutional food service operations - schools, hospitals, and museums - to transform food systems into scratch-cooked, community-driven, sustainable programs. With the commonly held mindset that says "this is the way we have always done it", it's hard to see another way.

Few remaining food service staff nearing retirement age remember when knives were used daily, freezers and pantries were empty, and kids enthusiastically lined up for lunch. Now two generations later, homes and cafeterias are filled with people disconnected to their food source, and who no longer consider meals a priority in a world where food comes in packages and can be prepared in an instant, and where the farmer is nowhere to be seen.

As a result, cafeteria food sales are down, food waste is up, and food service employees exhibit apathy at work. Classrooms, cafeterias, playgrounds, and offices do not intersect. Sickness, disease, and food insecurity run rampant.

Pulling carrots from the ground and laboring over grandma's lasagna recipe are two of many simple ways that we remember to value our food and in turn, our health. Without these connections I find people everywhere more interested in making excuses than finding solutions. The reasons school personnel most frequently cite as obstacles to better food include cost, time, regulations, distributor contracts, and kitchen equipment.

With the determination to serve healthy food comes the ability and the promise to continue the cycle for future generations. El Capitan, a vertical rock formation in Yosemite National Park, long thought impossible to climb, was first conquered in 1958 by three men who took 47 days to complete the arduous ascent. The record set in 2012 for this very same climb stands at 2 hours, 23 minutes, and 46 seconds.

In the United States, pioneers such as Alice Waters' Edible Schoolyard Project started a vision to reconnect children to the food system with a garden at the school. Before long, every school will not only have a garden from which teachers will develop curriculum, but cafeterias will be full of locally grown, scratch-cooked food, the cafeteria will serve as a learning laboratory for project-based education in the classrooms, and kids will spend time cooking and designing menus for the school meal program.

Uncovering the money, time, and ways to serve healthy food are in every kitchen right in front of us. By measuring waste in several different areas both from the cafeteria and the kitchen, the means to serve locally grown fresh food becomes apparent. The waste I measure includes food and beverages from the plates that are taken and not eaten or drank, what gets thrown in the garbage, production waste from making too much food for the number of people served, over-production waste including that which labor prepared and cannot reuse, cardboard, plastic, metal, and spoiled food that gets throw away before use.

In this measurement process we can also identify the labor practices that waste time. Most importantly through the measurement process, we develop a data-driven baseline to engage stakeholders in the process of change, and we gain the ability to determine what works in the food program.

While every cafeteria differs in cultures, union contracts, local food available, and in various other ways, there are many similarities in kitchen inefficiencies. Production waste typically presents the number one waste of money and time. The labor and ingredient costs to prepare meal quantities greater than what is needed amounts to significant losses for districts serving thousands of lunches daily.

For example, hand-patting 325 burgers when 300 are purchased results in a budget loss of

8% and wastes eight percent of the staff time that could be otherwise used to wash real dishes, peel garlic, or a myriad of other responsibilities of a kitchen using raw agricultural products. In a typical school, children throw away forty percent of their meals daily.

For example, in one school district with 784 number of students I discovered 50% percent of milk was thrown in the trash daily without being consumed amounting to nine gallons per day or 180 gallons per month. For this visual search the internet for a 180 gallon fish tank. We added water as an option for students to drink and the milk waste was reduced by 45% in the first month.

At schools everywhere the practice of cupping wastes time and money that could otherwise be reinvested in fresh, local produce. Cupping involves the preparation of individual servings. For example, scooping fruit from a can into two ounce plastic cups with lids or making individual salads instead of serving them in bulk.

I worked at a school district with five schools that included 1450 students where the elimination of cupping freed up enough time to cook three-quarters of the meals from scratch with no additional labor hours needed. Schools follow this process to ensure correct portion size, but in one recent school assessment the food service employees portioned individual servings of spaghetti into Styrofoam containers at a variance between 3.8 and 5.4 ounces, not meeting the intended goal of uniformity while wasting time and resources.

When kids are served fresh meals prepared from scratch in schools, they eat more fruits, vegetables, and other healthy foods that children need to grow up strong and nourished. The local community wins as the dollars to purchase local food stays in the local economy. And people reconnect with their food source.

The first shipment of local fruit came to a school newly transitioning to scratch-cooking and the delivery driver was met for the first time by the kitchen team excited to help unload the local fruit into the cooler, soon to be devoured by happy kids, grateful for the delicious food.

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