CENTER FOR Science IN THE Public Interest
Your Food and Health Watchdog

Ill-Equipped

WHY THE U.S. MUST INVEST IN SCHOOL KITCHEN EQUIPMENT & INFRASTRUCTURE

Almost 30 million children in the U.S. receive school meals through the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and the School Breakfast Program (SBP).[1] These meals must meet rigorous, evidence-based nutrition standards.[2] As a result of major legislative and regulatory changes over the last 15 years, school meals are now the healthiest meals kids eat.[3] Yet outdated kitchen equipment and infrastructure limit schools' ability to provide freshly prepared meals that emphasize a variety of produce. To support schools in serving nutritious, appealing meals while reducing harmful processed foods, policymakers must:

- Fund kitchen equipment and infrastructure modernization through legislation and appropriations
- Support complimentary culinary technical assistance and training through Team Nutrition and Institute for Child Nutrition
- Maintain culinary skill-training and infrastructure investments at the state level

The Case for Investment

Children consume as much as half of their calories at school; school meals are a substantial part of daily nutrition while also serving as a frontline defense against childhood food insecurity.[4,5] In 2025, of the 30 million students participating in the NSLP, 73% of these children lived in households with low incomes.[6]

With more fruits, vegetables, and whole grains, and less sodium and added sugars, school meals look (and taste!) a lot different than they used to. These improvements, thanks to the Healthy Hunger Free Kids Act (HHFKA) of 2010 and the 2024 U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) final rule establishing added sugar limits, are a resounding success.[7] After HHFKA, a 2019 USDA study found that the nutritional quality of school meals increased significantly between SY 2009-10 and SY 2014-15.[8] A 2021 study assessing the nutritional quality of food also found school meals to be the most nutritious source of food for children.[9]

Despite this progress, the prevalence of harmful processed foods in kids' diets has gained national attention, prompting calls for school meals to move away from prepackaged, prepared foods despite no investments to facilitate this.[10] In a 2025 survey of school nutrition professionals, 71% of respondents reported serving some scratch-cooked menu items, but to reduce processed foods on school menus, almost 100% of programs reported needing more equipment, infrastructure, and funding.[11]

The Current Landscape: Equipment & Infrastructure Gaps

OPERATIONAL CHALLENGES

The American Society of Civil Engineers' 2025 Report Card for America's Infrastructure found U.S. public school buildings are, on average, 50 years old, and fewer than half of these buildings have undergone major renovations.[12] Thus, it can be inferred that over half of school kitchens have not had significant updates since construction and therefore do not have the wiring, plumbing, space, etc. needed to support new kitchen equipment.

In a 2023 national survey of school nutrition directors, half of respondents reported that increasing scratch preparation of meals was a top menu priority for the 2023-24 school year, but 72% of respondents stated shortages of new equipment and/or parts were a moderate-to-significant challenge for programs.[13] Beyond these data, more research is needed to fully estimate nationwide kitchen equipment needs.

Although state investments in kitchen equipment vary greatly, more data reflecting the status of school kitchen infrastructure is available at the state level vs. nationally. In 2020 it was estimated that the cost to update all public-school kitchen facilities in California alone would require almost $6 billion in renovations to ready them for scratch cooking.[14] Comparatively, the cost to transition all US schools to scratch cooking is unknown.

FUNDING HISTORY

Congress has not provided consistent nor adequate funding for school food service operations for decades. In 2009, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act provided a one-time $100 million investment, the first in decades since the inception of the NSLP.[15] Annual appropriations for kitchen equipment grants began in 2010 but have not met the need of school food service operators amid increased regulations, food costs, and efforts to increase scratch cooking.[16]

In 2023, the USDA launched the $100 million Healthy Meals Incentives (HMI) initiative to improve the nutritional quality of school meals.[17] For two years, until the conclusion of the program, grants were provided to school nutrition departments for projects ranging from food service supplies and staffing to student engagement initiatives. Kitchen equipment was a popular use of funding- 90% of awardees upgraded kitchen equipment with HMI funds.[18] To continue this momentum, investments need to be increased and sustained to reach all school food programs nationwide.

Policy Recommendations

CONGRESS

- Pass the *School Food Modernization Act of 2025* (H.R. 5731), which provides funding for school infrastructure updates, training, and technical assistance to school food service personnel.[19]
- Pass the *Improving Training for School Food Workers Act* of 2025 (S. 1736/H.R. 3367), which requires school food personnel training to be provided during regular working hours as often as possible and promotes in-person and hands-on opportunities.[20,21]
- Reintroduce and pass *the Scratch Cooked Meals for Students Act* of 2024 (H.R. 7748), which establishes a pilot grant program for school food departments to promote scratch cooking, which may include purchasing equipment, improving infrastructure, training, and technical assistance.[22]

CONGRESS & U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

- Increase annual appropriations for USDA kitchen equipment grants to remain in step with inflation and rising costs.
- Reincorporate successful components of USDA's Healthy Meals Incentives (HMI) program– investments paired with skill training, action planning, and program and menu development – into other school nutrition technical assistance strategies, such as Team Nutrition and Institute for Child Nutrition.

STATE & LOCAL GOVERNMENT

- Increase state and local investments that help close the gaps in kitchen equipment and infrastructure funding. Encourage state-level tracking of school kitchen conditions.
- Provide flexibility for funding that allows school administrators to construct, remodel, or expand kitchens and dining facilities, and purchase durable kitchen equipment.
- Ensure kitchen equipment grants support complementary training for school food service personnel, technical assistance, and strategic planning for maximum application and skill development.

State Funding Examples

- Arkansas: The Arkansas Farm to School Kitchen Equipment Grant (2024) awarded funds to 11 educational settings to support districts in preparing and serving more specialty and local crops within school meals.[23]
- New Mexico: New Mexico's School Kitchen Infrastructure Improvements Grants (2024-2026) provide funding for kitchen equipment and infrastructure upgrades, and renovations to encourage scratch cooking in school kitchens.[24]
- Washington: Between 2023-2025, Washington State provided $10 million to the Superintendent of Public Instruction to administer the Healthy Kids-Healthy Schools grant program. These grants funded renovations and improvements to kitchen equipment as well as infrastructure for school gardens and greenhouses.[25]
- California: Since 2021, California's Kitchen Infrastructure and Training (KIT) program has provided schools with $750 million to fund kitchen infrastructure upgrades and food service staff training.[26] Over 80% of districts reported that after the kitchen upgrades facilitated by KIT, they planned to prepare more foods from scratch.[27] However, based on a 2023 survey of all California school food districts, even after two rounds of KIT funding, 50% of respondents reported inadequate kitchen equipment and facilities challenged efforts to incorporate freshly prepared menu items.[28] Thus, investments in all states must continue to catch up after years of underfunding.

Call to Action

INVESTING IN SCHOOL KITCHENS IS INVESTING IN SCHOOL NUTRITION

- Greater investment in school kitchen equipment and infrastructure is critical to incorporate more fresh food into school meals. Fewer than half of public schools have undergone renovations in fifty years.
- Up-to-date kitchens support all child nutrition programs, as all rely on school kitchens to feed children, even beyond the school day.
- Support complimentary culinary training and technical assistance. Scratch cooking requires skill development, menu updates, and appropriate equipment and procedures.

Endnotes

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