Ditching Disposables: Labor, Lunch and Reusables in K-12 Schools
Ditching Disposables: Labor, Lunch and Reusables in K-12 Schools

Sue Chiang (she/her): Director of the Food Program

September 1st, 2022
A non-profit organization dedicated to protecting public health from exposures to toxic chemicals.

We work with large purchasers to utilize their buying power to incentivize the production of environmentally preferable products

www.ceh.org/.org/foodware
Toxic chemicals in two commonly used single-use products

- Styrene
  - Cancer
  - Genetic Damage
  - Sperm Damage
  - Reduced Fertility
  - Birth Defects
  - Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
  - Delayed Puberty
  - Obesity
  - Testicular Cancer
  - Breast Cancer
  - Increased likelihood and severity of COVID

- PFAS
In 2021, the Center for Environmental Health (CEH) and our partner, Clean Production Action, developed a robust way for understanding the chemical makeup of disposable food service ware through GreenScreen Certified™ Standard for Food Service Ware. This groundbreaking certification sets a new safety standard for everyday items like disposable plates and bowls that do not contain toxic PFAS plus thousands of other chemicals of concern.

We want to make it easier for purchasers to identify single-use FSW products with safer chemistry. We have created a roadmap for and to recognize market leaders who want to avoid regrettable substitutions and move towards safer chemistry for people and the planet.

www.ceh.org/green-screen-certification
The Reusable Solution

Overall, reusables...

- are Covid-safe
- are available in inert materials
- can have a better life-cycle impact
- are more resilient to supply chain issues
- can save money
- teach good values

Image Credit: Boulder Valley School District School Food Project

https://www.ceh.org/k12toolkit
We pay schools to stop using petroleum-based plastic.

We do this by subsidizing the cost difference between the plastic you currently give to students and the reusable alternatives you agree to use moving forward. For reusable items that do not contain petroleum products (e.g., wood, glass, metal, bamboo), we pay 100% of the cost difference up to $5/item. For reusable plastic items, we pay 50% of the cost difference up to $1/item. We even offer two annual “restocking” subsidies of up to 30% of the initial outlay for reusable items. There are no forms to fill out or contracts to sign, and you retain 100% control of your suppliers, ordering, and inventory. We simply ask for your recent invoices for petroleum-based single-use plastic items and your invoices for their reusable replacements. Then we calculate the difference and send you money in the mail!

https://www.plasticfreerestaurants.org/
Dish Washing and Dish Machines in K-12 Schools

Webinar recording:
Contact

Sue Chiang (she/her): Director of the Food Program
Sue@ceh.org

Ben Schleifer (he, him): EDC Food Coordinator
ben@ceh.org

www.ceh.org/foodware
Presenters:

- Sally Spero,  
  Senior advisor of LunchAssist

- Angela Gomez,  
  School Lunch Coordinator of LunchAssist

- Irene Vargas,  
  Director of Nutrition Service, Distribution, and Purchasing for Alisal Union School District
Ditching Disposables: Labor, Lunch, and Reusables in K-12 Schools

Presented by: Sally Spero, SNS
September 1, 2022
About Me

- Over 35 years in School Nutrition
- Senior Advisor at LunchAssist
Way Back in 1946

- Lesson from World War II: Too many young men so poorly nourished as children they could not serve in the military
- Food production: Farmers were producing too much food, leading to price collapses
- Children + food + schools = National School Lunch Act
But Who Would Fix the Meals?

- Women workers in 1946
  - Only 26% of white women and 8% of women of color had a high school education
  - Married young and had children
  - Were expected to focus on their families first
But Who Would Fix the Meals?

- And...
  - Fired from jobs they held during WWII
  - Legal to pay women less than men
  - Many occupations closed to women
  - Husband should earn the main income
Labor and Meal Reimbursements

- Assumes there will be a large pool of low-wage workers available
- Assumes no benefits will be needed
- Reimbursement payments have this structural bias
Keep Programs Going

• A la carte sales
• Use of convenience foods
• Use of disposables
• BUT CAN OUR FUTURE BE DIFFERENT FROM OUR PAST?
Thank you!
DITCHING DISPOSABLES:
The Sustainability of the Cafeteria Worker

Presented by: Angela Gomez, RDN, SNS
School Nutrition Coordinator with LunchAssist
November 2017
HS Food & Nutrition Coordinator
39 schools

February 2020
Nutritionist
9 schools

March 2022
School Nutrition Coordinator with LunchAssist

Top 5 largest school districts in AZ
K-12
K-8

Me
LunchAssist
What is the nation's **second-largest** food and nutrition assistance program?

a) Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) *formerly known as "Food Stamps"
b) Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)
c) Seniors Farmers' Market Nutrition Program
d) National School Lunch Program (NSLP)
e) a and d

Source: Food Research & Action Center (FRAC)
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d) National School Lunch Program (NSLP)

e) a and d

95% of schools participate in NSLP

Source: Food Research & Action Center (FRAC)
This is a BIG complex topic...
The Sustainability Conversation
WE ARE NOT HAVING.

School Nutrition Coordinator, LunchAssist
Angela Gomez, RDN, SNS

We all have that “one” friend that brings up the conversation you are not having, but should be having. Today, I am that friend. More and more, School Nutrition Professionals are starting to talk seriously about sustainability. However, there is one huge piece of sustainability that we are not talking about. That is the sustainability of the Cafeteria Worker. You know, our frontline workers, our School Lunch Heroes, our bread and butter.

The labor shortage being felt throughout the country should be School Nutrition’s warning sign. Cafeterias all across the U.S. have plenty of vacant positions with very few people, if any, signing up to fill those positions. Now if you are in the School Nutrition world, it is no secret that the job of a Cafeteria Worker is a skilled position that is physically demanding, fast-paced, and (as care-work carried out by mostly women) is generally under-appreciated. Many Cafeteria Workers don’t make a livable wage and don’t have full-time hours or the benefits that come with working full-time.

Cafeteria Workers throughout the country do the best they can with what they have. They are making it work while being underpaid, overworked, and burnt out from a worldwide pandemic as a frontline worker.

Making it work isn’t the same thing as thriving. Making it work isn’t sustainable. It’s just surviving. Cafeteria Workers deserve more, not because they are Cafeteria Workers but because they are human beings. Their role in School Nutrition and the labor they produce are integral to our industry; the communities they live in, and, most importantly, to the students they serve. But Cafeteria Workers are more than their labor and it is time that we take care of the people who care for our children. When we advocate for Cafeteria Workers, we are also advocating for the students they serve.

The truth is, we need Cafeteria Workers more than they need us. So, let’s make moves towards sustainability, but we can’t have true sustainability without equity. You can’t have equity without prioritizing the very humans who ensure our School Meal Programs exist.

As you gear up to celebrate School Lunch Hero Day on May 6th, I want to ask: How are we showing up for Cafeteria Workers? How are we positively impacting their daily lives? How are we using our power to leverage a better life for Cafeteria Workers? Because as it stands today, the role of the Cafeteria Worker is not sustainable. We can’t just want it to change, we need it to change. The sustainability of our programs, the wonderful humans who make our programs possible, and the students who rely on these meals depend on it.

Angela Gomez, RDN, SNS
LunchAssist, School Nutrition Coordinator
She started her career as a Cafeteria server 15 years ago, unscathed. Falling in love with School Nutrition, being in the field ignited Angela’s love for School Nutrition. In the ideal world, every child is an optimist. But for Angela, it is not about knowing facts, but the world of School Nutrition continues to be a gentle place in the heart of young optimists.
The Sustainability Conversation We Are Not Having
Common Sustainability Concerns

- Plastic utensils
- Plastic straws
- Styrofoam trays
- Water bottles
- Compostable trays
- Plastic trays
- Food waste
- Pre-packaged foods
3 Pillars of Sustainability

- Water quality
- Air quality
- Reduction of environmental stressors
3 Pillars of Sustainability

- Economic Sustainability
- Environmental Sustainability

job creation |
profitability |
3 Pillars of Sustainability

- Economic Sustainability
- Environmental Sustainability
- Social Sustainability
  - environmental justice
  - human health
  - resource security
  - education
3 Pillars of Sustainability

- Economic Sustainability
- Environmental Sustainability
- Social Sustainability
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  - human health
  - resource security
  - education

employee retention
Makeshift Solutions

- Disposables can save time, money, and labor
- Best option when kitchen equipment unavailable
- Best option when short staffed
- Best option when unable to provide additional training
Prioritize the Sustainability of the Cafeteria Worker

- Cafeteria Workers are human, skilled workers, and caretakers
- Typically women and often from other marginalized identities
- If we advocate for cafeteria workers, then we advocate for the students they serve
The Reality for Cafeteria Workers
## Staffing Challenges in 2020

### Exhibit 3.8: Staffing Challenges: Overview

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Significant Challenge</th>
<th>Somewhat of a Challenge</th>
<th>Little Challenge</th>
<th>Not a Challenge at All</th>
<th>Average Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Finding and hiring management level staff</td>
<td>11.5%</td>
<td>19.3%</td>
<td>23.3%</td>
<td>45.9%</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retaining management level staff</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
<td>27.3%</td>
<td>61.3%</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding and hiring non-management level staff</td>
<td>36.6%</td>
<td>32.6%</td>
<td>19.0%</td>
<td>11.8%</td>
<td>1.9</td>
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<tr>
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<td>23.4%</td>
<td>31.4%</td>
<td>27.1%</td>
<td>18.1%</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n=1,032.

Note: The “average score” is based on a 0-to-3 scale where 0 is “not a challenge at all” and 3 is “significant challenge.”

Source: SNA’s 2020 Compensation Report
## Staffing Challenges in 2020

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The shaded areas denote the most prevalent response for each issue.

Note: The “average score” is based on a 0-to-3 scale where 0 is “not a challenge at all” and 3 is “significant challenge.”

Source: SNA’s 2020 Compensation Report
Staffing Shortages in 2021

70.7% survey respondents listed staffing shortages as a significant challenge.

Source: SNA's 2021 Supply Chain Survey Report
SHARE IN THE CHATBOX

What are some ways you have been able to increase hours and wages for cafeteria staff?
Median Starting Wages

Full-time Dishwasher at $10.15/hour

Full-time Cashier at $10.70/hour

Source: SNA's 2020 Compensation Report
Median Starting Wages

Full-time Dishwasher at $10.15/hour
Full-time Cashier at $10.70/hour

~ $21,112 annually
For household of 2
Eligible to receive free meals

Source: SNA's 2020 Compensation Report
Median Starting Wages

Full-time Dishwasher at $10.15/hour
Full-time Cashier at $10.70/hour

Part-time Assistant Manager at $15.00/hour
Part-time Manager at $14.95/hour

Source: SNA's 2020 Compensation Report
Top 3 Barriers

1) Raises/bonuses not approved by district administration

2) Insufficient funds available to raise salaries/provide benefits

3) Salary raises contingent on union contract renegotiation

Figure 6. Why Has Your Program Not Raised Salaries And/Or Not Added Bonuses to Address Shortages?

Source: SNA's 2021 Supply Chain Survey Report
SHARE IN THE CHATBOX

What are some sustainability-focused strategies you would like to see at school(s) in your community?
How do I support School Nutrition Professionals and Sustainability?
Get involved!

- Local School Wellness Policy (LSWP)
  - District's efforts to establish a school environment that promotes students’:
    - Health
    - Well-being
    - Ability to learn
Get involved!

- Local School Wellness Policy (LSWP)
  - District’s efforts to establish a school environment that promotes students’:
    - Health
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    - Ability to learn

★★ Required for operating the School Breakfast Program (SBP) and/or the National School Lunch Program (NSLP)
But how do I get involved?

- Participation is open to the general public and the school community
- Head to the district's website
- Contact the Food Service Director
- Collaborate with Food Service department to implement the changes you want to see!
Support, Support, Support

• Support initiatives and take action on legislation that supports
  ◦ Livable wages
  ◦ Fair treatment
  ◦ Safe working conditions

• Become a School Nutrition Advocate
  ◦ Educate yourself
  ◦ Share with others
  ◦ Lend your expertise to schools
Key Take-Aways

You can’t have...
- in children and families relying on school meals
- expectations of scratch cooked meals
- expectations of serving organic produce
- expectations of using sustainable materials and practices
- nutritional standards
- food prices
- gas prices
- supply chain issues
- long-term impacts from the pandemic

With...
- wages for Cafeteria Workers
- labor force
- access to foods that meet USDA standards

Without...
- support from the community, schools, leaders, and politicians
- money and investment in Cafeteria Staff
- money and sustainable investment in School Meal Programs
- policy change
- etc.

"The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) is the second largest food and nutrition assistance program behind SNAP (formerly food stamps)." (FRAC) The time to invest in our nation’s School Meal Programs was yesterday.
Recommended Read

The Labor of Lunch: Why We Need Real Food and Real Jobs in American Public Schools

Written By: Jennifer E. Gaddis

http://www.jenniferelainegaddis.com
Friend, Follow, and Like Us!

@LunchAssist

@LunchAssist

angela@lunchassist.org

www.lunchassist.org
Thank You!
Ditching Disposables: Solutions & Successes at Alisal

Presented By: Irene Vargas
Director of Nutrition Services
Alisal Union School District in Salinas, CA
About Me

- Training Manager & Area Supervisor at McDonald's (20 years)
- Graduated from Hamburger University (1998)
- Permanent Central Kitchen Assistant Cook (2001)
- Started as a sub at Alisal Central Kitchen & other sites (1998)
- Director at Alisal (2006)
District Stats

12 schools
60 employees
7,800 students
20,381 meals served daily
School Waste Reduction Laws (CA)

- **AB 341** - Mandatory Commercial Recycling
- **AB 1826** - Mandatory Commercial Organics Recycling
- **AB 827** - Provide appropriate containers to capture and divert recycling and organic waste
- **SB 1383** - Organic Waste Methane Emissions Reduction
Sustainable Strategies
Sustainable Strategies at Alisal

- Traveling Apple Policy
- Sharing Rack
- Milk Waste Collection
- Food Waste Composting
- Mixed Recycling
- Resuable Trays + Utensils
Start simple!

- Traveling Apple Policy
- Sharing Rack
- Milk Waste Collection
- Food Waste Composting
- Mixed Recycling
- Resuable Trays + Utensils
This was the first type of Liquid Waste Container we used.
Liquid Waste Containers

- Partnered with **Salinas Valley Recycles**
  - Completed an on-site assessment
  - Trained Food Service Staff
  - Donated utensils
  - Designed liquid waste container: garbage can with a hose
Liquid Waste Containers

- Food Service Department purchased equipment
- Tutorial how-to videos with students: send to principal and principal send to teachers
- System that flows (preferably near the exit) but individualize to different sites
- Green Team of students trained (4th-6th graders?)
Reusable Trays & Utensils

- Removed disposable:
  - Spork packets
  - Straws
    - Available for students who need them
- Received a donation of 1,320 reusable utensils
- Purchased Dispensers:
  - Condiments
  - Napkins
Addressing Food Service Staff Concerns

- Staff unsure at first
  - Students not having straws
  - How going to wash all of those utensils
  - Lost utensils
  - Wear and tear on utensils

- Identified solutions
  - Bus box with soapy water at the beginning of the line
  - Holders
  - Increased staff hours
Most Frequently Asked Questions
How did you get buy in?

- Superintendent wanted to know about food waste in cafeterias
- Needed support from the top
- Educated Administrators
- Partnered with Salinas Valley Recycles
- Identified a pilot school
- Collaboration with ALMA to communicate to the community
Who is responsible for what?

- **Salinas Valley Recycles**
  - Provides signage
  - Waste removal

- **Green Team**
  - Ensure program is up & running daily

- **School Admin**
  - Share Rack

- **Food Service Staff**
  - Washing reusables
  - Purchase 1st round of equipment

- **School Meal Program**
  - Dispose of liquid & food waste
  - Students teach other students
How do you get the little ones to do it?

- Teacher Aids assist students
- Green Team assists at lunch + supper
- Organized table dismissal
- Time + repetition is key
- Students will learn how to do it!
Future Goals + Plans

- Recess before lunch at all sites
- Reusable sporks
- Reusable cups
- Milk carton recycling
- Bulk milk
  - Still have cartons for younger students
  - Still have lactose-free milk for Special Diets
Tips + Takeaways

- Work with school and administration
- Take baby steps
- Pick pilot 1-2 sites
- Get buy in and feedback from whole school community
- Create training videos with students
- Student teams set-up and trained before implementation
- Work with local recycling vendor
- Partner with experienced people and organizations
- Be flexible and ready for change!
Tips + Takeaways

- Work with school and administration
- Take baby steps
- Pick pilot 1-2 sites
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- **Create training videos with students:**
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  - Work with local recycling vendor
  - Partner with experienced people and organizations
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Stay in touch and come visit!

- Email: irene.vargas@alisal.org
- Facebook: @AlisalUnionSchoolDistrict
- Twitter: @AlisalUSD
Questions?

Thank you!