



The Power of Student Voice & Choice: Integrating Whole Child Into Food Education

Developed with support from [sweetgreen](#)[®]

FoodCorps Overview

Together with communities, FoodCorps connects kids to healthy food in schools. We're a national nonprofit that envisions a future in which all kids—regardless of race, place, or class— know what healthy food is, care where it comes from, and eat it every day. We partner with AmeriCorps and school communities to place FoodCorps service members in public schools to integrate our evidence-based approach to hands-on food education in support of schools' efforts to ensure kids receive the nourishment they need to thrive.



Prioritizing Equity

COVID-19 has disproportionately affected communities of color, highlighting and exacerbating existing inequities in education, healthcare, justice, and economic opportunity. FoodCorps continues to partner with schools where at least 50% of the student population is eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, an indicator of a community that has experienced deep inequity. FoodCorps works to recruit service members who are from or have a connection to the communities they serve. Our program is designed to be adaptive and culturally responsive to the local contexts and cultures of the communities we serve.



Introduction

Schools across the country have been challenged this year as communities continue to grapple with COVID-19 and its effects on families, our public institutions, and the ways we interact and engage with one another. Communities of color and families living in poverty have been disproportionately affected by COVID-19 and all students have faced trauma by disruptions to their daily lives. Regardless of when schools return to regular, in-person instruction, students will be feeling the effects of this pandemic for a long time. No matter what the stage of re-opening is in your community, this is a crucial time to explore how to effectively provide the support students need from the adults in their lives.

FoodCorps believes that this is a key moment to ground education in human development by taking a whole child approach to learning that accounts for the many different ways in which young people grow and thrive. We invite you to explore the work we've done to focus on the needs of the whole child and strengthen the role of healthy food in our education system through food education. This brief is primarily intended for anyone working with students in a school environment—particularly in the classroom, garden, and cafeteria. However, many of these topics can also be adapted to home learning environments and used to inform school reopening plans. Our hope is that by implementing the practices below, together, we can advance student health and well-being, honor student voices and community identities, and ultimately ensure that all kids are given the chance to thrive.

Finally, the [CDC School Nutrition Policies and Practices Can Support the Social and Emotional Climate and Learning](#) brief also reinforces the idea that addressing the social and emotional climate is an important part of creating healthy schools that support student health and academic performance (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021). Many of the themes touched on in the CDC report also are reflected in the following FoodCorps recommendations below.



A Commitment to Whole Child Education



For students to thrive in today's world, they need an educational experience that recognizes their unique identities and addresses their comprehensive needs. Academic development is critical, but it's only one part of the equation. For students to show up for class ready to learn, they must be supported and nourished physically, socially, emotionally, and cognitively. That's why FoodCorps is committed to a whole child approach to education.

A whole child education ensures that every student is healthy, able to learn in a physically and emotionally safe environment, engaged in their own learning and with their broader community, supported by caring adults, and academically challenged (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014). This holistic approach is needed as millions of students around the country continue to experience personal and community trauma—including social isolation, economic hardship, and health crises—as the result of an ongoing pandemic that is exacerbating long-standing inequities. Supporting students today and setting them up to succeed in the long term means helping students grow as their full selves.

Healthy food plays an integral role in serving the whole child. It:

- Nourishes students physically and emotionally.
- Can be used to create hands-on opportunities for social, emotional, and academic development.
- Connects kids to their communities, culture, and history

Incorporating Student Voice & Choice into Food Education in Schools

FoodCorps promotes student voice and choice through food education that happens in the classroom, cafeteria, and garden. Our approach to working with students integrates Culturally Responsive Teaching and Social and Emotional Learning practices into food education lessons and instruction.



Social and Emotional Learning and the Case for Student Voice & Choice

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is a key component to supporting the whole child. **One powerful way educators and school staff can support social and emotional learning is by offering authentic opportunities for all students to express their voices and make choices that directly impact their experience in the classroom, cafeteria, and garden.** Giving children choices is proven to increase intrinsic motivation, effort, task performance, and perceived competence (Patall et al., 2008). And research shows that this active engagement and sense of agency can lead to improved academic performance (Patall et al., 2010). The evidence is clear that by creating opportunities for student voice and choice, we communicate to students that their voices and perspective matter, and set them up on a path to success.

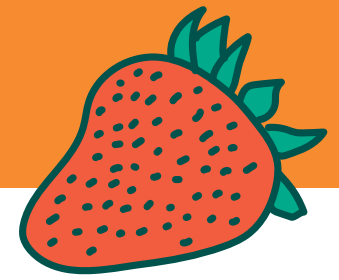
Promoting Student Voice and Choice with Culturally Responsive Food Education

FoodCorps' hands-on food education lessons center students and use Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) practices, an approach that responds to students' different cultural experiences and lifts up their unique voices and perspectives. Culturally responsive educators must commit to building and sustaining authentic relationships with students and families throughout the school year. These relationships provide students with the level of trust needed as they expand their knowledge, skills, and mindsets and begin examining and critiquing the status quo of their community, nation, and world.

The following strategies provide an overview of our approach and tips for how you can integrate CRT and SEL practices as a means of raising student voice and choice into your work.



In Every School Environment



Validate And Affirm the Identity of Students

This occurs through the implicit and explicit messages students receive daily. In practice it looks like building in opportunities for students to share stories of their lived experiences or cultural background. It also includes learning about people who share their social identity markers (ability, age, ethnicity, gender, nationality, race, religion, and/or sexuality). Culturally responsive educators do not pit academic success and cultural affiliation against each other. Rather, academic success and cultural consciousness are developed simultaneously. Culturally responsive educators encourage students to be proud of their ethnic identities and cultural backgrounds instead of being apologetic or ashamed of them (Holliday 1985). This looks like ensuring students' cultures and traditions are incorporated into the classroom.



See the following FoodCorps lessons from the “Connecting to Food, Culture and Community” and “Making Healthy Choices” themes as examples:

- [Our Food Traditions](#)
- [Food Story Swap](#)
- [Learning From Our Elders](#)
- [What The World Eats](#)



In Every School Environment

Model and Coach Students to Recognize How They Feel, or How Someone Else Might Be Feeling, During Instructional Time

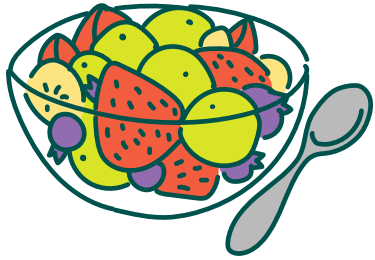
Every FoodCorps Lesson builds in time for reflection. Reflection sessions can take many forms. You might prompt a question to discuss as a whole class, have students write responses individually, or have students quietly think about answers. FoodCorps Lessons include process-oriented questions to let the learning sink in, such as: Did anyone else use a different strategy? What did you or other members of your team do that made it fun and productive to work together? What do you think you and your team can work on to work better together in the future?

See examples of offering students time for reflection in the following FoodCorps Lessons from the “Living Up To Our Own Potential,” “Growing and Accessing Healthy Foods,” and “Making Healthy Food Choices” themes:

- [Full Potential Manifesto](#)
- [Mindful Tasting](#)
- [Agents of Change](#)



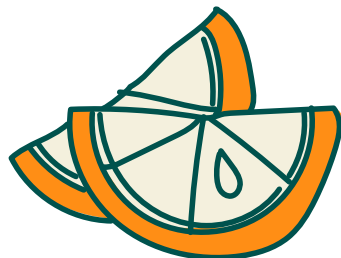
In the Classroom and School Garden



FoodCorps Lessons also include an array of individual and group reflections, opportunities for group decision-making involving all students, and for students to share their personal perspectives and take action to make change. You can find FoodCorps Lessons to use in the garden and classroom [here](#). Strategies for elevating student voice and choice through hands-on food education include:

Plan Student-Centered Instruction

- Engage students by having them generate topics they wish to study during a lesson.
- Promote collaborative conversation during lessons.
- Focus projects and lessons on topics that relate to the community.



In the Classroom and School Garden

Facilitate Student-Centered and Group Decision Making

One way to do this is by collectively developing group agreements that outline expectations for how the group can stay safe and happy. You can start with, for example, “Let’s talk about how we’ll work together. How can we be safe, happy, relaxed, proud?” Students can volunteer ideas like, “Help others, use kind words” etc. The group then brainstorms together, with the facilitator documenting and posting agreements where all students can see for future reference. You can further explore students’ personal viewpoints by asking students probing questions that honor their personal curiosity and connection to food. You can ask “What would you change if you were to do this activity on your own?” See examples of this in the [Garden Explorations](#) FoodCorps Lesson.

When Developing a Lesson, Consider Whether the Lesson

- Invites students to take action based on what they’ve learned when applicable?
- Connects to real-life situations your students have experienced?
- Allows students to make connections between the content they are learning and themselves, their families, their community, the country, or the world?
- Gives students the ability to learn about other people’s viewpoints, values, customs, or beliefs?
- Affirms identities of students, their families, and the community?
- Honors cross-cultural communication by incorporating opportunities for storytelling and sharing of oral traditions?

See Examples of This in the Following Foodcorps Lessons

- [Food Memory Tourists](#)
- [Changemakers](#)



In the Classroom and School Garden



When Cooking with Students, Consider

- How can students provide input on the recipe that is being prepared?
- How can students work collaboratively while cooking this recipe together?
- How can you provide an opportunity for students to reflect on their role during and after cooking? Can you ask open-ended questions to prompt reflection?
- Are there local food experts (chefs, elders, growers) with whom you can engage and collaborate in your recipe adaptations and cooking experiences?

See Examples of This in the Following Foodcorps Lessons

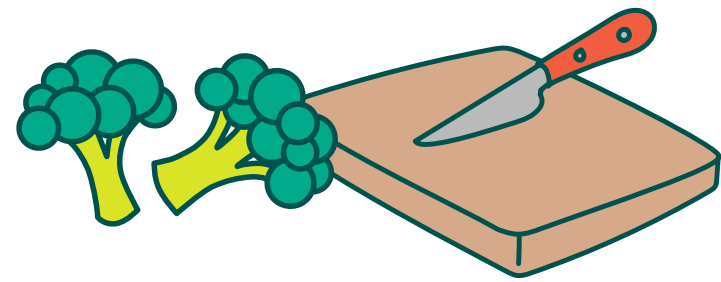
- [Stone Soup](#)
- [Green Sauces Around the World](#)
- [Gratitude Feast](#)

When Gardening Together, Consider

- How can students design a garden bed as a team?
- How can students share personal, community, or cultural knowledge about gardening?
- How can you get schoolwide input on what is grown in the garden?

See Examples of This in the Following Foodcorps Lessons

- [Plant a Salsa Bed!](#)
- [Garden Grids](#)
- [Seasonal Food Wheels](#)



In the School Cafeteria

We know that a student's cafeteria or mealtime experience can get them excited about trying new healthy foods and steer them toward the healthiest options. Through interviews with more than 400 elementary students across the country in our [Reimagining School Cafeterias design research](#), we learned that students greatly desire more agency and voice in the decisions that affect them in the cafeteria. Based on these findings, FoodCorps developed pilot programming incorporating many of the strategies below. From those pilots, we learned that students participating in these programs felt empowered to make decisions and teachers observed positive behavior changes, including improvement in student confidence and teamwork skills. Strategies to promote student voice and choice in the cafeteria include:

Offer Schoolwide Taste Tests

Taste tests are a great way to engage students to try new foods, give them real opportunities to share feedback and weigh in on the menu, and integrate new local foods into meals. And there is evidence that providing tastings of fruits and vegetables can increase preferences and consumption of healthy food (Baxter & Thompson 2002; Cullen et al., 2003; Brug et al., 2008; Di Noia & Byrd-Bredbenner, 2014; Wong et al., 2012; Chu et al., 2013).



In the School Cafeteria



Tips For Leading Taste Tests Include

- **Reach ALL students.** Keep accessibility in mind. Every student should have the opportunity to participate, so ensure an accessible setting, considering location and context.
- **Make voting key.** Having students vote signals to them that their opinion matters. This is also a way to learn their preferences and apply that knowledge to future tests and choices for menu items down the line.
- **Share voting results.** As important as having students cast a vote is broadcasting the results. Find ways to celebrate the event and its results with the whole school community.
- **Collaborate with Nutrition Services.** It's critical and valuable to involve the people on staff who feed students on a daily basis. Connect the taste test to the cafeteria menu, when possible. Ideally, the taste test features an item that is currently on or being vetted to be on students' plates during meal times.
- **Connect the taste test to classroom learning.** Consider leading lessons during instructional time that are complementary to the food that is featured in the taste test. This engages students so that they are more likely to try new foods.

Consider Conducting a “Tasty Challenge” Type of Taste Test

A Tasty Challenge involves preparing one food in two different ways for students to vote on their favorite preparation, with the winning selection being served on the lunch line in future weeks. Invite students to share what types of food preparations interest them. This is a great activity to partner with Nutrition Services to ensure preparation methods are possible in large quantities. Administering student surveys helps determine how to pinpoint the best recipes for the future and ensure that the recipe/food preparation is culturally appropriate.

For more information about taste tests see the [FoodCorps Taste Test Guidebook](#).

In the School Cafeteria

Incorporate Local Food Traditions and Culturally Appropriate Food into School Meals

- Provide opportunities for students to share their experiences in the classroom and cafeteria.
- Learn about various cultural groups that live in the community and are represented among your students by asking the following questions and sharing student feedback with Nutrition Services:
 - What are the staple foods of these cultures?
 - What types of foods are celebrated and are a source of pride?
 - What foods might be forbidden for cultural or religious reasons?
 - How do cultural beliefs or traditions about health and well-being show up in this community?
 - What can your students teach you about food? What new foods can you try?

Allow For Student Input On the Cafeteria Look and Feel

FoodCorps developed a program called Our Cafeteria Project, which seeks to empower students by elevating their voice and choice in the cafeteria. Using a project-based learning framework, Our Cafeteria Project provides students with an opportunity to lead conversations with other students and school staff about how to improve their cafeteria environment and shape their experience eating in the cafeteria. Through hands-on activities, students in the club gain leadership experience and feel empowered to ask for change in their school. This program outlines a process for a teacher or school staff to support students as they problem solve, develop a vision for change, and collaborate with school leaders and their peers on the process to enact the change they envision.



In the School Cafeteria

Key Components of the Our Cafeteria Project Include

- Allowing a small group of students to **meet regularly** throughout the project, with access to the cafeteria.
- Providing opportunities **for all students** in the school community to provide input on the project through a schoolwide vote.
- **Engaging with members of the school community**, including the principal, nutrition services staff and teachers to provide input on the project.
- Allowing for **authentic student leadership** while also providing guardrails to ensure students can succeed.

For more information on the Our Cafeteria Project program, see the [Guidebook here](#).

Join Us In Advocating For Student's Voice and Choice!

With all the challenges of this school year, this is a moment of opportunity to build toward a new future. Together, we can shape a future where access to healthy food and food education are a top priority for our education system, where student voices and community identities are honored and celebrated, and where all students are given an equitable chance to thrive.

FoodCorps will continue to bring our evidence-backed, community-centered programming to schools in partnership with communities around the country, and to advocate for policy priorities that advance our vision of healthy food access and education for all.

Learn more here: foodcorps.org/get-involved



Acknowledgments



We want to thank the many stakeholders and partners who have made FoodCorps' work of connecting kids to healthy food possible over the last 10 years. We also want to express gratitude to the many school nutrition service staff members and educators who played a part in our Reimagining School Cafeterias pilot program this past year, welcoming us into their communities and school kitchens so we could, together, test our belief that it's possible to lift up student voices in the classroom and cafeteria and that when we give students agency and human connection, they not only feel cared for, they thrive. We also want to give special thanks to sweetgreen for its partnership in the Reimagining School Cafeterias pilot program and in our hands-on healthy food education work around the country.



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Join us by supporting our work financially, utilizing our [healthy school food resources](#), and advocating for positive changes to the school food and education systems.

Visit [foodcorps.org/get-involved](https://www.foodcorps.org/get-involved) for more information about to get involved.