

The scale  
of the  
opportunity  
is huge.



Our public schools are

# America's largest restaurant chain.



**21,000  
districts**

serve school meals  
each year

**30 million  
students**

rely on school meals  
for nourishment

**5 billion  
meals**

served annually

## Yet our schools enjoy none of the efficiencies of a high-functioning franchise.

Each year, our country's school meal program costs

**\$18 billion**

The average federal reimbursement rate for a school lunch is

**\$3.46**

But the amount spent on food per lunch is only

**\$1.19**



### This is our current reality:



**1** in **5** children struggle with hunger



**1** in **3** are on track to develop diabetes in their lifetime



For children of color, it's **1** in **2**

# We need clear and actionable solutions around which all school food stakeholders can rally.

**reWorking Lunch convenes senior leaders and decision-makers across the food system to determine how we might:**



Leverage the scale of 21,000 school districts to provide healthier, affordable menu items



Fuel product innovation that brings better-for-you alternatives that kids like and that are not more expensive



Create demand for healthier menu items and position school food as a high-quality dining experience



Ensure that school meal supply-chain operations make it easier, not harder, for school districts to procure (and manufacturers to provide) the healthy food they want



Our goal is to identify **opportunity areas** across the school food system where our **collective action** can produce big, sustained change.

Through our Pre-Event Survey,  
we asked, you answered:

**We're building a future for  
school food that continues  
to shift from:**

**inequitable to balanced**

**misleading to transparent**

**disconnected to integrated**

**processed to nutritious**

**limiting to accessible**

**cost-driven to value-driven**

**undervalued to celebrated**

# How we'll get there:

## There is no single fix.

There are a number of barriers in the way of the system we want to see, and therefore we need a suite of complementary solutions. To change a system, multiple interventions are necessary. We know more funds in the school food system would be nice—but what about kids' ability to scarf down a salad during a short lunch break? Updated kitchens would help—but not if districts struggle to recruit staff with the skills to use them.

## We must tackle root causes.

When we feel like our efforts to change things aren't working, it's often because there are deep-seated structures holding the old system in place—whether values and beliefs or entrenched policies and practices. We'll aim to look beyond incremental innovation, balancing quick wins with supporting deeper shifts in the system.

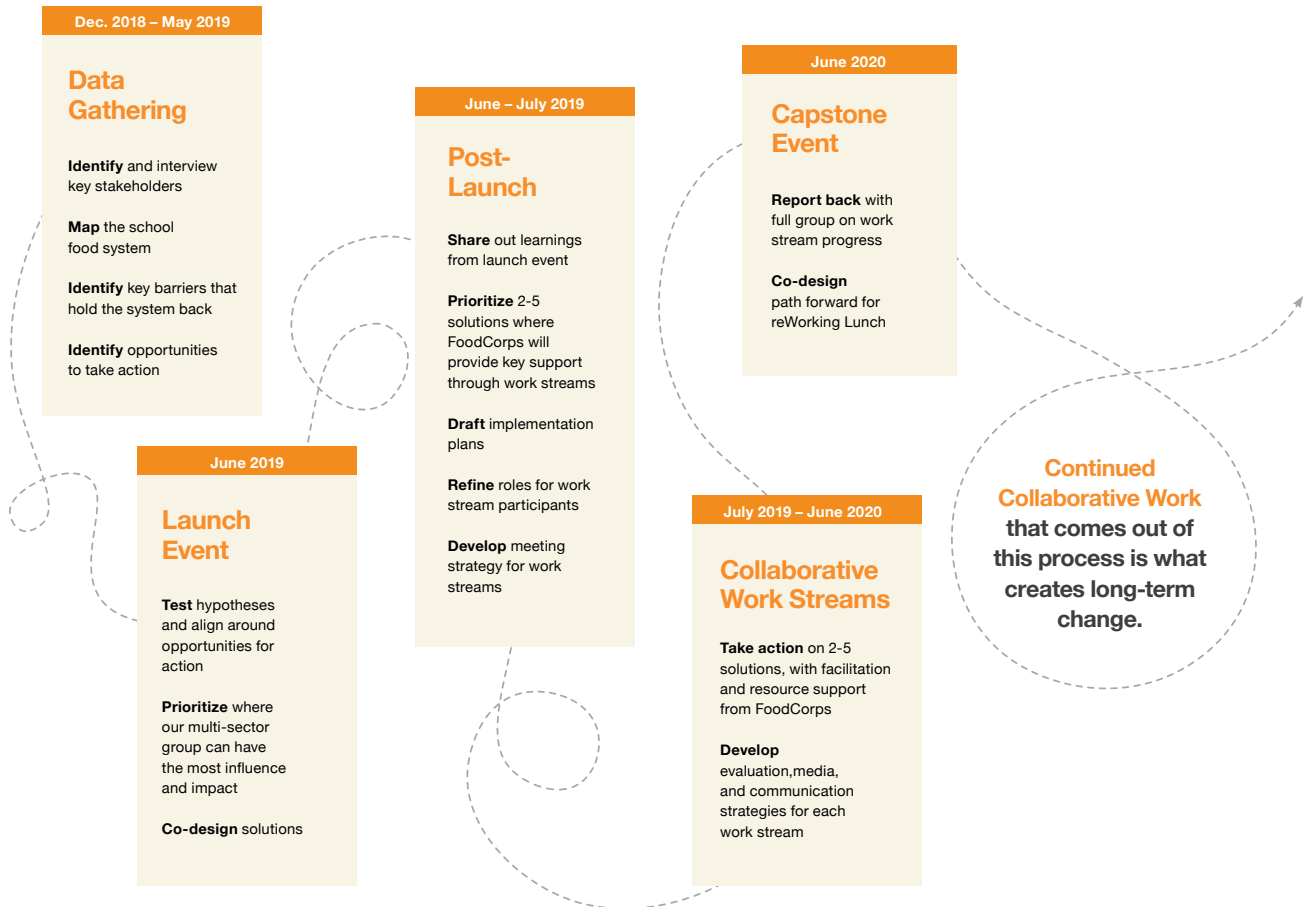
## Everything is connected.

A system is simply a collection of elements (whether people, objects, structures, or processes) that are interrelated. As we figure out how to collaborate in this initiative, we'll increase our potential for success by being aware of how our work influences—and is influenced by—other things happening around it.

## We need diverse perspectives.

We need a full picture of a system to really understand how best to change it. And we can't have that picture without the perspectives of everyone who's part of it or being more open to understand and help each other.

## This means our process for change is not a straight path.



**Changing a system requires a variety of solutions and depends on people across the system playing a variety of roles, to catalyze, support, and sustain these new ways of doing things.**

reWorking Lunch brings together leaders from the fields of school nutrition, the food industry, philanthropy, government, and the nonprofit sector. As we move forward together, your role in this effort may include any one (or more) of the following—depending on your skills, capabilities, interest and where you currently sit within the system.

#### **Anchor Partner**

You provide wisdom, expertise, and thought partnership to help drive the reWorking Lunch initiative forward.

#### **Work Stream Lead**

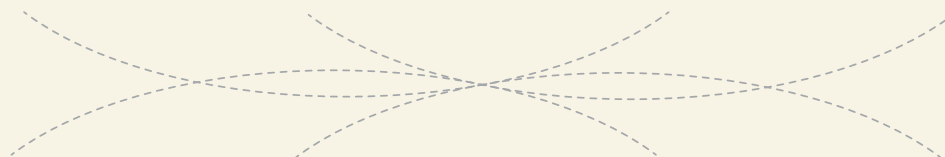
You have the time and energy to take on and lead something new, whether as part of your current work or something entirely new you're up for committing to.

#### **Work Stream Contributor**

You'd like to get involved in a new (or already existing, but new-to-you) project—whether you have particular expertise to share, or are in a role where you are up for experimenting with new ways of doing things.

#### **Funding Partner**

You help provide the financial support—a foundational ingredient in changing a system, and necessary for unlocking access to the know-how, time, energy, and passion that we also need to drive change.



#### **Connector**

You help forge new partnerships, bring new voices to the table, or new information flows within (and outside of) the school food system.

#### **Issue Expert**

There are a lot of complexities in the school food system. Collaborative efforts may require people to engage with areas of the system that are new to them, and to get up to speed quickly. You help provide the deep expertise needed to unlock change in a particular opportunity area.

#### **Assimilator**

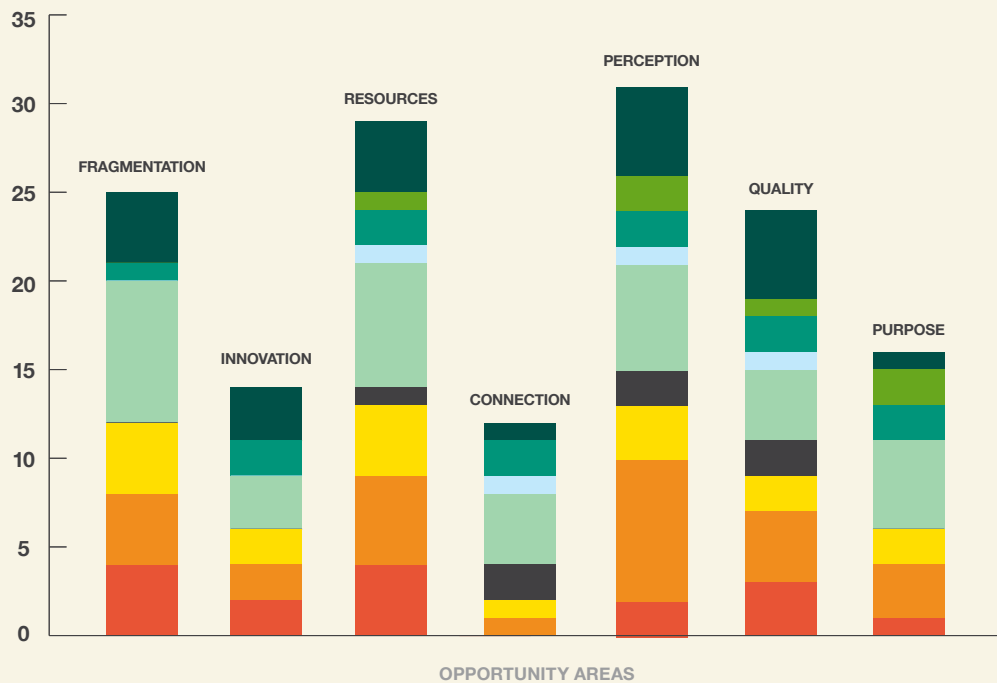
We'll need innovation and experimentation, but we'll also need to spot where things are working already, codify great practices, and spread them across the system (whether formally through policy, or informally through information sharing).

#### **Amplifier**

Some people are not in a role to try something new or make a change themselves—but have a platform to communicate and spread the word about efforts taking place across the system. You help to amplify our discoveries, changes, and calls to action.



# Stakeholders are currently seeing different challenges and opportunities for change.



## STAKEHOLDERS

- Trade Association
- Parent
- FSD
- Thought Leader
- NGO
- Food Manufacturer
- Philanthropy
- Government
- Distributor

Lasting solutions will only be realized through the collaboration of a multi-sector group of stakeholders who, together, leverage their specific skills and assets towards healthier and higher-quality school meals.

# Understanding the school food system, key barriers, and opportunity areas

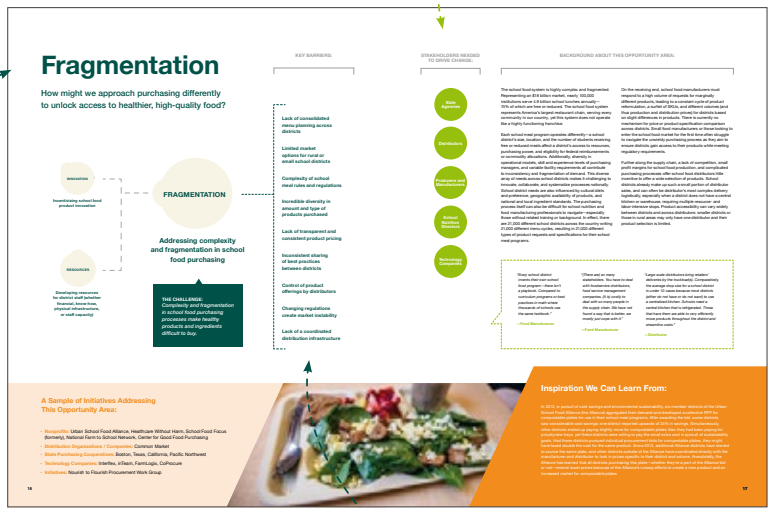
We've created visual maps of opportunity areas in the school food system, based on conversations with you and others—those who work in this world every day, and know it best.

These maps will provide us with a common starting point, and help us see the system as a whole—rather than from our own silos—as we explore shared challenges and opportunities to collaborate.

**It's a natural tendency to view the system from one's own vantage point:** superintendents won't necessarily be familiar with the challenges of putting together weekly menus, while policy-makers may not have an understanding of what kids like to eat for lunch, and manufacturers may not know about the many hats a School Nutrition Director wears.

**Stakeholders & Quotes from the Field**

Over the past few months, we've spoken with stakeholders from across the school food system—over 45 of them—around the country, representing many perspectives and roles.



**Opportunity Areas**

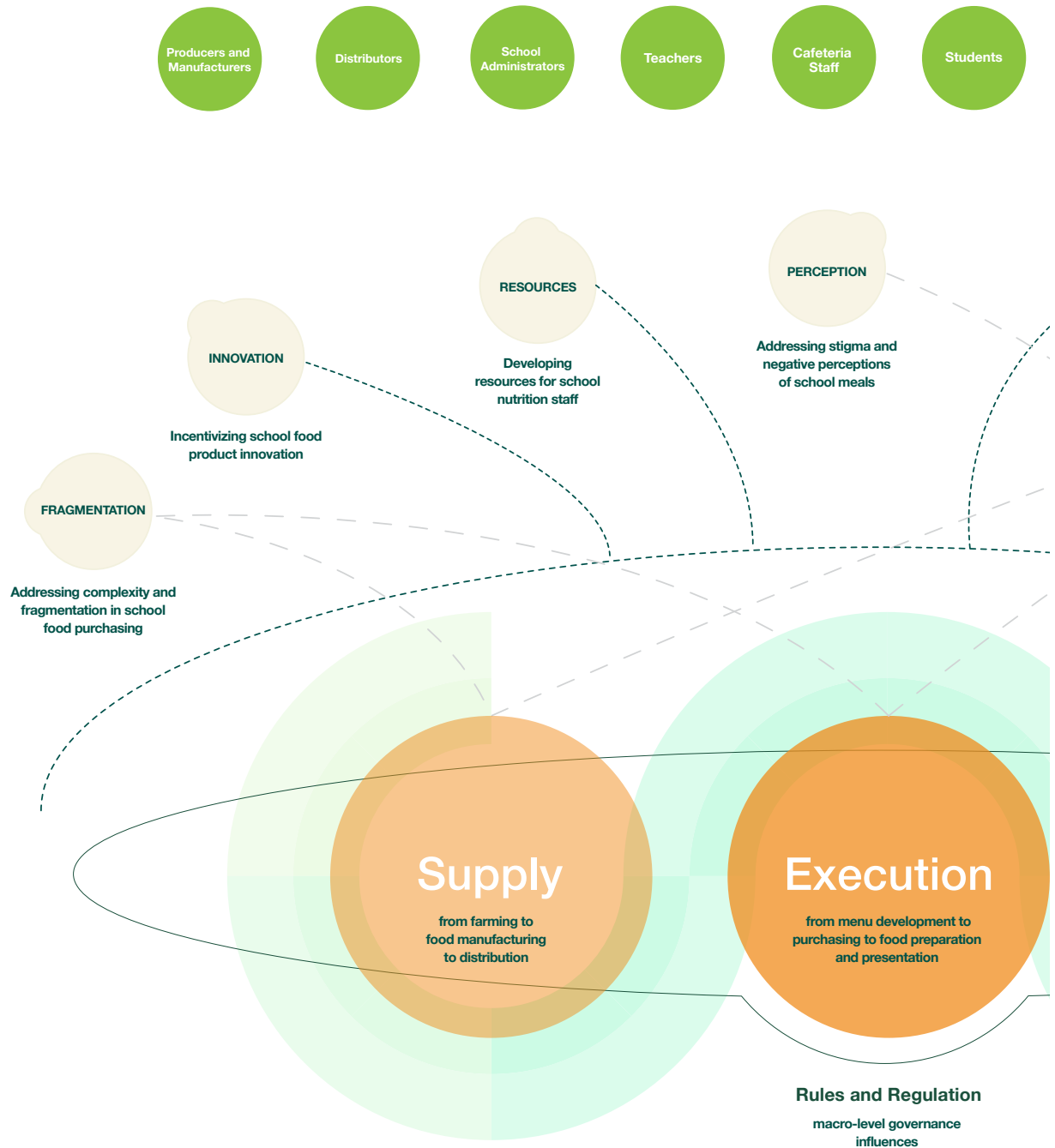
We've mapped these along the school food supply chain to give you a sense of where these opportunity areas are, in relation to school food's path from its origin all the way to the child.

**Key Barriers**

We asked what's working for stakeholders; what's not, and why; where they think change—particularly multi-stakeholder, collaborative change—is needed; and where the system is either stuck or ripe with opportunity.

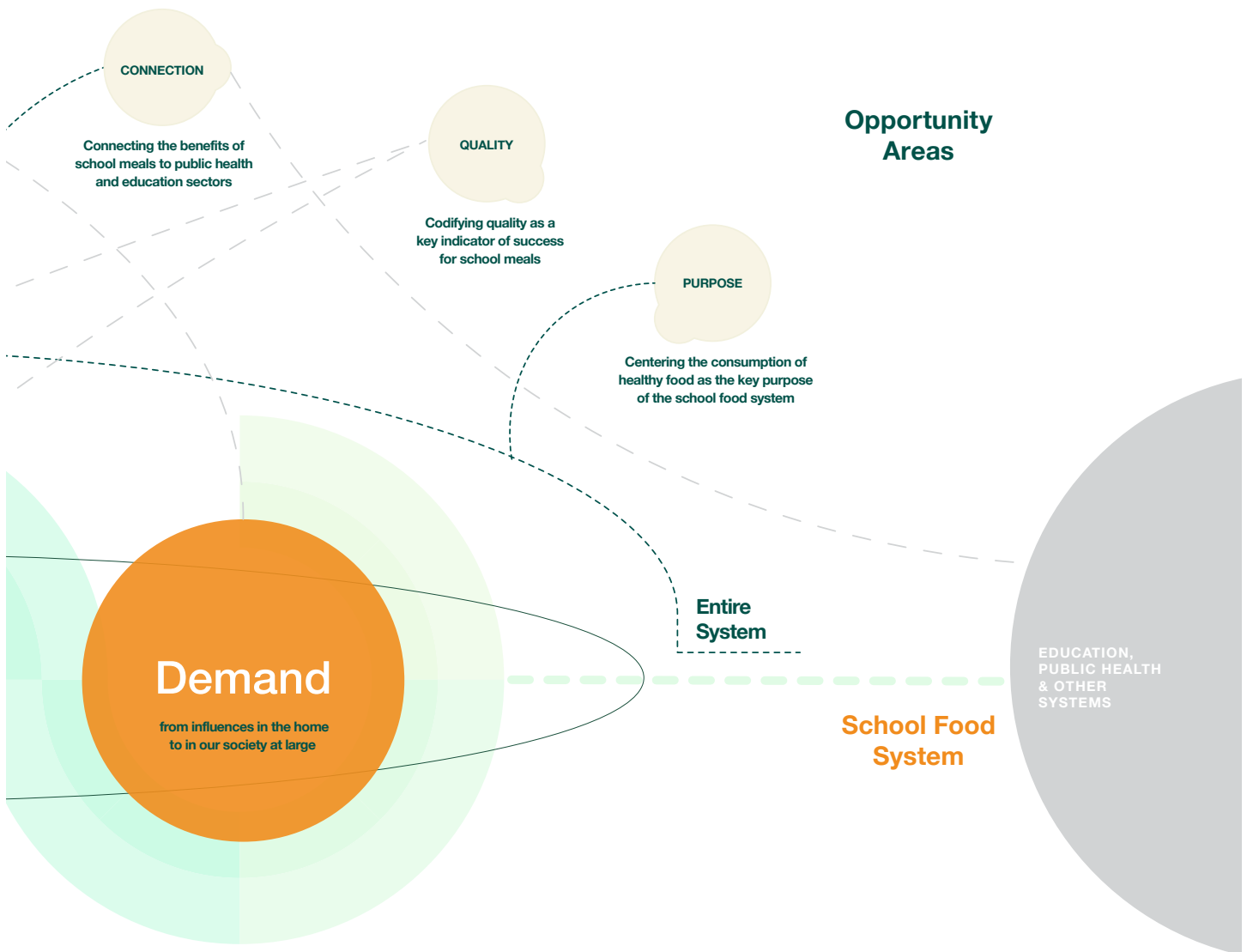
**We've compiled your thoughtful responses and insights, looked out for common themes across them, and boiled them down into seven opportunity areas, shown on the pages that follow.**

# Opportunity Areas





**Stakeholders**



**Opportunity Areas**

# Challenges in the

## Key Barriers

- Lack of consolidated menu planning across districts
- Limited market options for rural or small school districts
- Complexity of school meal rules and regulations
- Incredible diversity in amount and type of products purchased
- Lack of transparent and consistent product pricing
- Inconsistent sharing of best practices between districts
- Control of product offerings by distributors
- Changing regulations creates market instability
- Lack of a coordinated distribution infrastructure

- Lack of communication between buyers and manufacturers
- Menus driven by K-12 marketplace availability
- Low tolerance for risk amongst School Nutrition Directors
- Strict RFP processes
- Challenges in securing distribution for new products or manufacturers
- Lack of demand for healthier products from students and parents
- Lack of collaboration to develop new products between buyers and manufacturers
- Control of product offering by distributors
- Lack of investment in innovation from K-12 food manufacturers

- Lack of administrative/business knowledge amongst School Nutrition Directors
- Lack of staff or poor utilization of staff
- Lack of culinary knowledge amongst school nutrition staff and leadership
- Low margins on school food
- Lack of support for school nutrition departments from community
- Lack of support for School Nutrition Directors (financial policy, infrastructure) from the district

## Opportunity Areas

Addressing complexity and fragmentation in school food purchasing

FRAGMENTATION

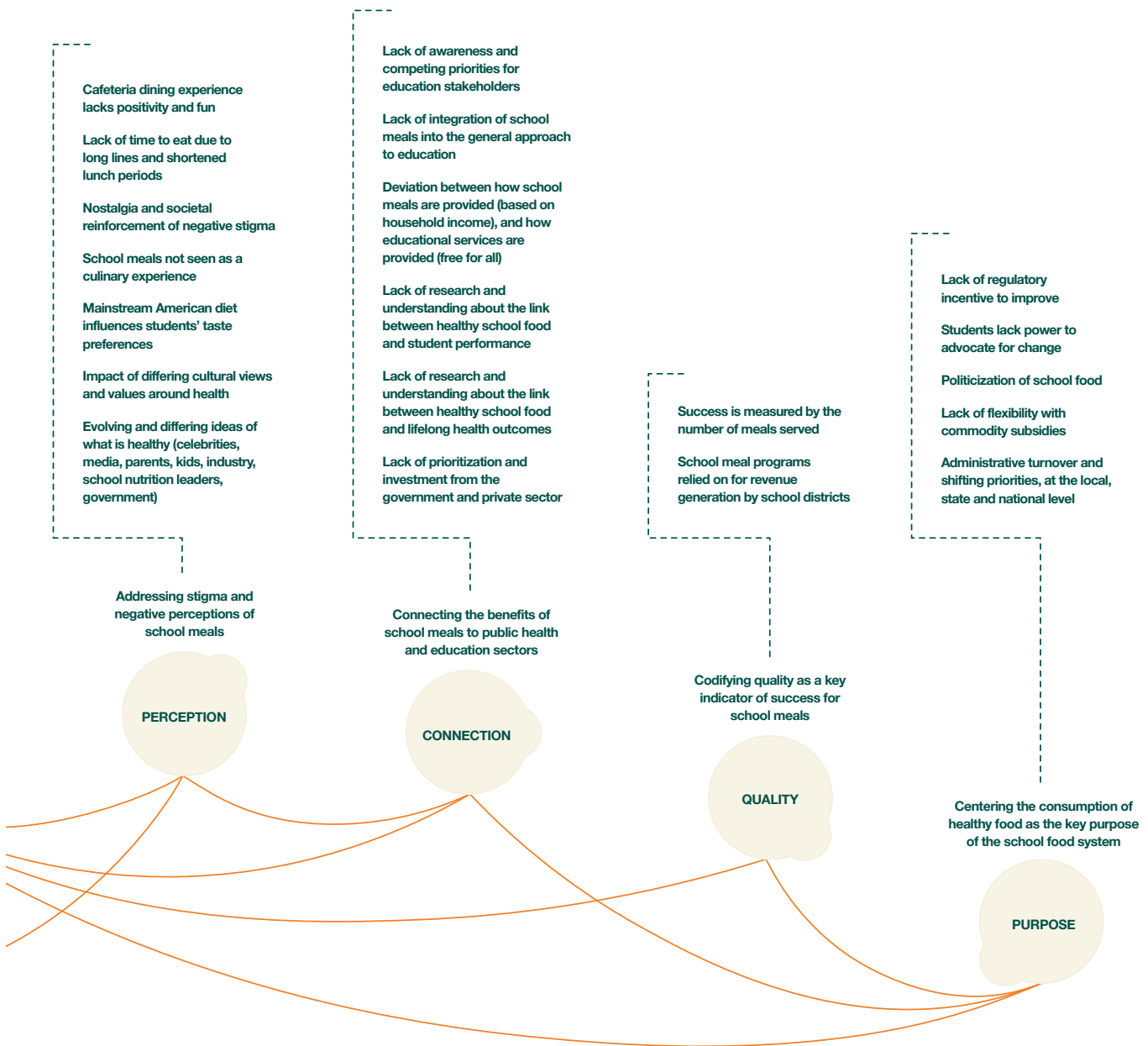
Incentivizing school food product innovation

INNOVATION

Developing resources for school nutrition staff

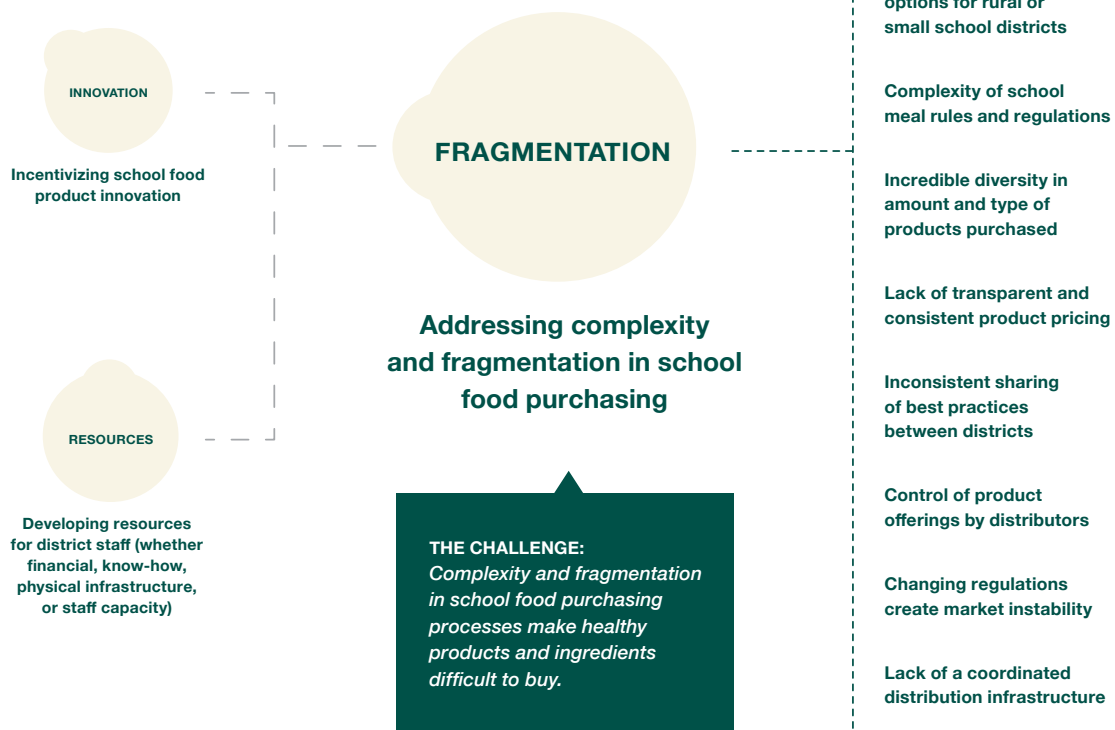
RESOURCES

# System



# Fragmentation

How might we approach purchasing differently to unlock access to healthier, high-quality food?



## A Sample of Initiatives Addressing This Opportunity Area:

- **Nonprofits:** Urban School Food Alliance, Healthcare Without Harm, School Food Focus (formerly), National Farm to School Network, Center for Good Food Purchasing
- **Distribution Organizations / Companies:** Common Market
- **State Purchasing Cooperatives:** Boston, Texas, California, Pacific Northwest
- **Technology Companies:** Interflex, inTeam, FarmLogix, CoProcure
- **Initiatives:** Nourish to Flourish Procurement Work Group





**STAKEHOLDERS NEEDED TO DRIVE CHANGE:**

State Agencies

Distributors

Producers and Manufacturers

School Nutrition Directors

Technology Companies

**BACKGROUND ABOUT THIS OPPORTUNITY AREA:**

The school food system is highly complex and fragmented. Representing an \$18 billion market, nearly 100,000 institutions serve 4.9 billion school lunches annually—74% of which are free or reduced. The school food system represents America’s largest restaurant chain, serving every community in our country, yet this system does not operate like a highly functioning franchise.

Each school meal program operates differently—a school district’s size, location, and the number of students receiving free or reduced meals affect a district’s access to resources, purchasing power, and eligibility for federal reimbursements or commodity allocations. Additionally, diversity in operational models, skill and experience levels of purchasing managers, and variable facility requirements all contribute to inconsistency and fragmentation of demand. This diverse array of needs across school districts makes it challenging to innovate, collaborate, and systematize processes nationally. School district needs are also influenced by cultural diets and preference, geographic availability of products, and national and local ingredient standards. The purchasing process itself can also be difficult for school nutrition and food manufacturing professionals to navigate—especially those without related training or background. In effect, there are 21,000 different school districts across the country writing 21,000 different menu cycles, resulting in 21,000 different types of product requests and specifications for their school meal programs.

On the receiving end, school food manufacturers must respond to a high volume of requests for marginally different products, leading to a constant cycle of product reformulation, a surfeit of SKUs, and different volumes (and thus production and distribution prices) for districts based on slight differences in products. There is currently no mechanism for price or product specification comparison across districts. Small food manufacturers or those looking to enter the school food market for the first time often struggle to navigate the unwieldy purchasing process as they aim to ensure districts gain access to their products while meeting regulatory requirements.

Further along the supply chain, a lack of competition, small profit margins for school food production, and complicated purchasing processes offer school food distributors little incentive to offer a wide selection of products. School districts already make up such a small portion of distributor sales, and can often be distributor’s most complex delivery logistically, especially when a district does not have a central kitchen or warehouse, requiring multiple resource- and labor-intensive stops. Product accessibility can vary widely between districts and across distributors: smaller districts or those in rural areas may only have one distributor and their product selection is limited.

*“Every school district invents their own school food program—there isn’t a playbook. Compared to curriculum programs or best practices in math where thousands of schools use the same textbook.”*

—Food Manufacturer

*“(There are) so many stakeholders. You have to deal with food service distributors, food service management companies. (It is) costly to deal with so many people in the supply chain. We have not found a way that is better, we mostly just cope with it.”*

—Food Manufacturer

*“Large scale distributors bring retailers’ deliveries by the truckload(s). Comparatively, the average drop size for a school district is under 10 cases because most districts (either do not have or do not want) to use a centralized kitchen. Schools need a central kitchen that is refrigerated. Those that have them are able to very efficiently move products throughout the district and streamline costs.”*

—Distributor

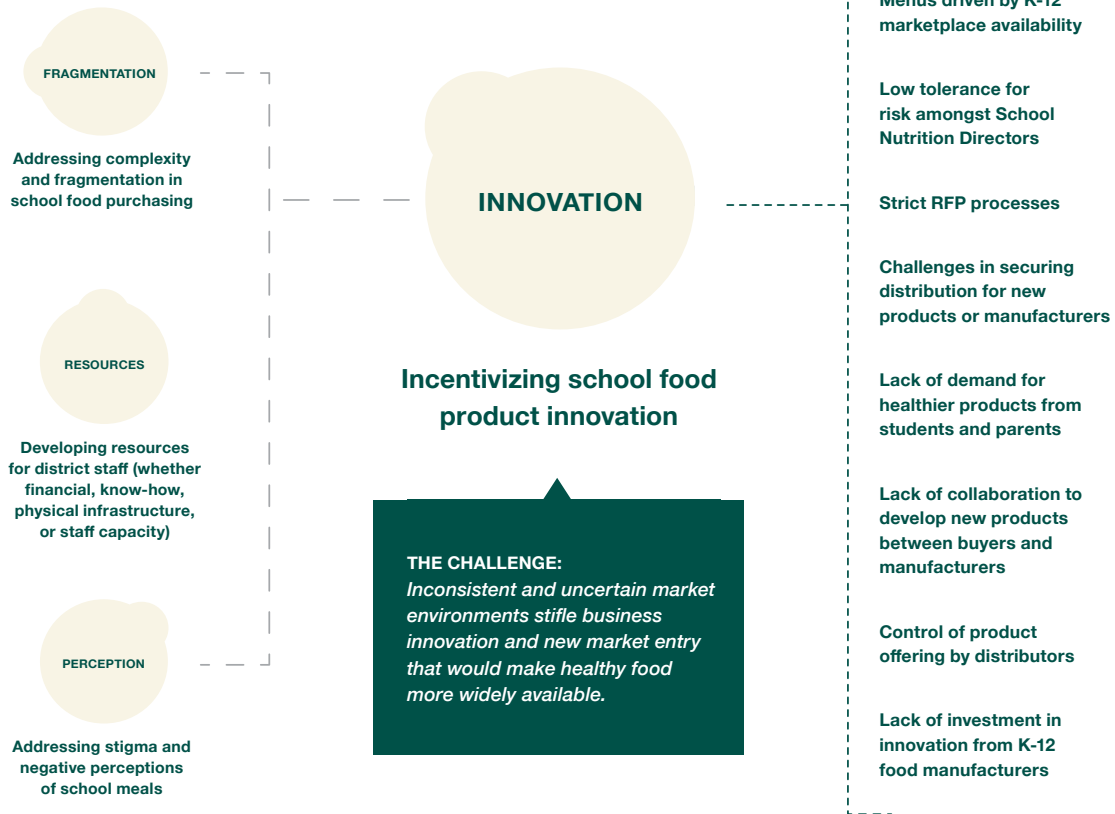


**Inspiration We Can Learn From:**

In 2013, in pursuit of cost savings and environmental sustainability, six member districts of the Urban School Food Alliance (the Alliance) aggregated their demand and developed a collective RFB for compostable plates for use in their school meal programs. After awarding the bid, some districts saw considerable cost savings: one district reported upwards of 24% in savings. Simultaneously, other districts ended up paying slightly more for compostable plates than they had been paying for polystyrene trays, yet these districts were willing to pay the small extra cost in pursuit of sustainability goals. Had these districts pursued individual procurement bids for compostable plates, they might have faced double the cost for the same product. Since 2013, additional Alliance districts have started to source the same plate, and other districts outside of the Alliance have coordinated directly with the manufacturer and distributor to lock in prices specific to their district and volume. Anecdotally, the Alliance has learned that all districts purchasing this plate—whether they’re a part of the Alliance bid or not—receive lower prices because of the Alliance’s runway efforts to create a new product and an increased market for compostable plates.

# Innovation

How might we position school meals as a catalyst for healthier product innovation?



## A Sample of Initiatives Addressing This Opportunity Area:

- **Nonprofits:** Urban School Food Alliance, School Food Focus (formerly) / FoodCorps, Alliance for a Healthier Generation
- **Institutions:** Oregon Department of Agriculture School Food Innovation Lab
- **Initiatives:** Forum for the Future's Plant Based Protein Initiative



**STAKEHOLDERS NEEDED TO DRIVE CHANGE:**



**BACKGROUND ABOUT THIS OPPORTUNITY AREA:**

The school food marketplace is defined by high barriers to entry, low profit margins, and a complex set of requirements for stakeholders to navigate and satisfy. With a stagnant and narrow federal reimbursement rate for school meals, it is difficult for manufacturers to innovate within slim price points while aiming to meet demand from school nutrition professionals for high-quality products. This complicated, highly regulated environment creates significant barriers to entry for smaller producers and manufacturers, and for those who already provide innovative healthy products to secure significant and profitable market share. Further, it is difficult for manufacturers to have new products picked up by distributors without significant high-volume demand for those products from school districts.

Further compounding the intricacies and pain points for manufacturers in thinking outside the school-nutrition-regulatory box, School Nutrition Directors, parents, students, and consumers at-large have different opinions about what constitutes a healthy, desirable meal for students. Manufacturers receive mixed messages about what to prioritize when creating new products, and may feel a disconnect between demand from their customers (districts) and consumers (children). School Nutrition Directors are under a great deal of scrutiny for their use of government dollars and may be concerned about the perceived risks of communicating with manufacturers about new or innovative product or procurement solutions, limiting their ability to collaborate and co-create meals or new product offerings.

Together, these factors disincentivize investment in innovation and the entrance of new market players, reinforcing “traditional” school food products and limiting the potential for change in a district’s supplier base or what they offer.

*“Supplying to school districts is complex, particularly for new companies and small producers—there are barriers for farmers and new suppliers to getting into school food... It is enough paperwork to choke a mule...”*

— School Nutrition Director

*“In some cases school districts receive funding from the state if they served local food. But some school districts are struggling to be able to take advantage of the additional funding because they can’t get access to enough volume of local food to meet demand.”*

— Trade Association

**Inspiration We Can Learn From:**

Chicken is the #1 most-served protein in school meals, and school districts spend \$1 billion annually to serve it in the cafeteria. Recognizing the potential for improvement in this massive portion of the school food marketplace, the former nonprofit School Food Focus led a multi-year collaborative effort with school districts, food producers, and government stakeholders to improve the standard of U.S. poultry production and leverage the collective purchasing power of districts across the country to create a higher-quality, environmentally sustainable product. School Food Focus worked directly with school districts to change the chicken that shows up on the lunchline—from exploring improvements to existing products or the potential pathways to procure different chicken products for the first time, to developing specifications, guidelines, and processes to introduce new products to the marketplace.

Through national and regional networks, School Food Focus leveraged combined, multi-district procurement strategies to significantly shift regional, national, commercial, and commodity supply chains to increase the availability of healthier, regional, and sustainably produced chicken. These efforts resulted in three major outcomes in the supply chain:

- 1. Improved health:** The National List of USDA Foods now includes a clean-label chicken strip, available to all school districts nationally.
- 2. Increased regional supply:** Regional producers significantly increased their supply of whole-muscle, clean-label chicken for schools, in western and mid-western regions. Three companies supply the lion’s share of the product: Mary’s Chicken (California), Miller Poultry (Indiana), and Smart Chicken (Nebraska).
- 3. Increased Sustainability:** School Food Focus and participating districts developed the new Certified Responsible Antibiotic Use (CRAU) standard, which offers an option for producers at all scales to limit antibiotic use and raises the bar for the poultry industry at-large. By June 2015, two of the top four poultry integrators in the country, Tyson and Perdue, underwent USDA-CRAU audits at their school-based processing plants. By 2019, the USDA had approved eight additional poultry companies.

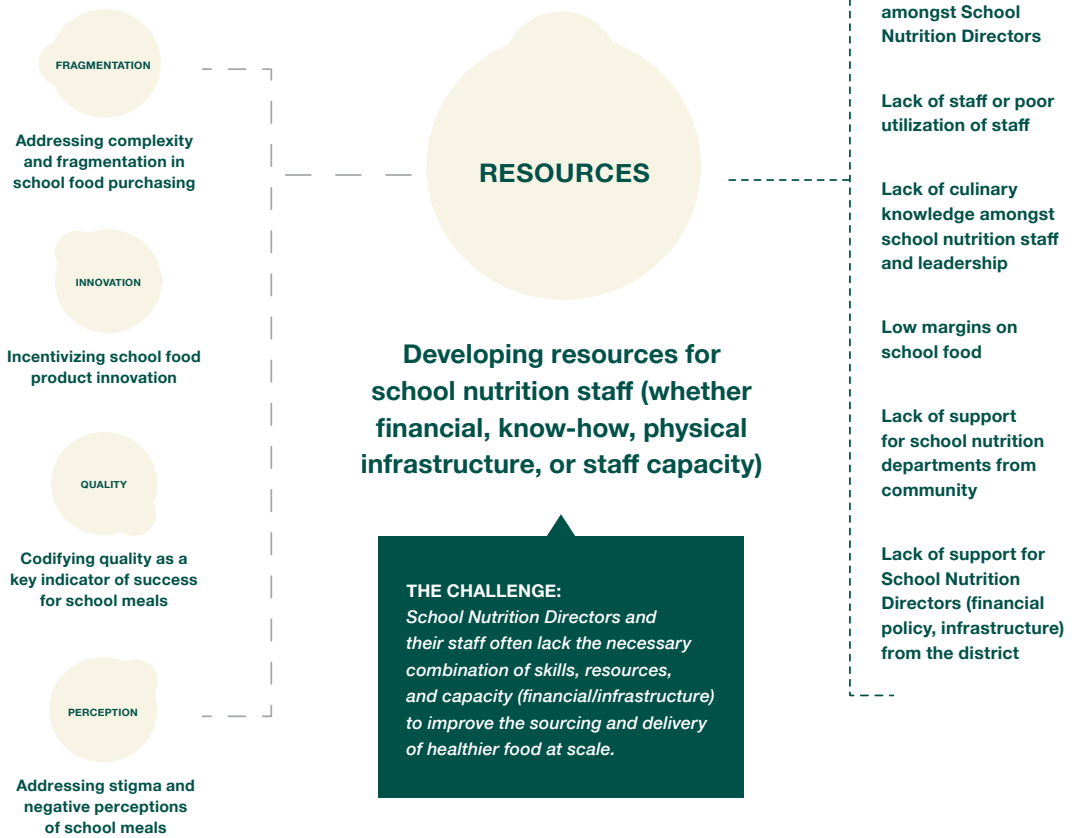
Spending by School Food Focus districts on chicken raised with responsible use of antibiotics increased almost 57-fold between the 2011-2012 and 2015-2016 school years.



# Resources

How might we provide school nutrition staff with the resources, funding, training, and time that they need to source and serve healthy, high-quality meals?

KEY BARRIERS:



## A Sample of Initiatives Addressing This Opportunity Area:

- **Nonprofits:** Chef Ann Foundation, Institute of Child Nutrition, School Nutrition Association, Alliance for a Healthier Generation, FoodCorps
- **Initiatives:** Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, School Nutrition Services Dietary Practice Group, School Food Support Initiatives (Lifetime Foundation, Whole Kids Foundation, The Gateway Fund, Chef Ann Foundation), Culinary Institute of America's Healthy Kids Collaborative



**STAKEHOLDERS NEEDED TO DRIVE CHANGE:**



**BACKGROUND ABOUT THIS OPPORTUNITY AREA:**

School Nutrition Directors are the linchpin of sourcing and serving high-quality, sustainable foods to students each and every day. Before school lunch even gets to the child's plate, these leaders must manage complex, bureaucratic, and unstandardized procurement processes; menu planning; distribution contracts; labor; operations; food preparation; and janitorial and other school building requirements.

No matter how innovative their vision for the district's approach to school food, School Nutrition Directors are stretched thin, spending significant energy completing just the basic tasks and requirements of their jobs. Introducing new, innovative products, systems, or operations can feel like a burdensome task. For example, School Nutrition Directors may lack the capacity to single-handedly walk a manufacturer through the highly regulated procurement process required to meet federal procurement guidelines.

Many districts are facing staff shortages and/or staff cuts, further exacerbating the need to juggle multiple roles to operate a successful program. And while the breadth of a School Nutrition Director's remit is wide, formal training for the role often focuses on singular skill set—such as dietetics, culinary, hospitality, or food service operations. School Nutrition Directors may, therefore, lack the necessary diversity of skills (administrative, culinary, collaboration, business) that would fuel a more effective, healthier school food program.

Beyond the School Nutrition Director, school meal programs are often siloed and isolated within broader school district operations. They are most often housed with support services like janitorial, busing, and athletics, and are not incorporated into larger district decision-making and strategies geared towards student success. Often the only time a school meal program is brought to the attention of a superintendent or school board is if it is failing financially.

*"School Nutrition Directors need a lot of support. There is so much on their plate. Their main priority is to feed the kids and there are so many distractions.... They are distracted by Buy American, regulations, state audits, different audits (procurement and admin reviews), use of commodities.*

— School Nutrition Director

*"Limitations within cafeterias vary so much from school to school. There is no one solution anytime you have such a huge degree of variability."*

—Food Manufacturer

*"School Nutrition Directors feel isolated—siloed—not confident that they're able to make a change. Huge opportunity to train School Nutrition Directors to help them understand how to make some of these changes."*

—Food Manufacturer

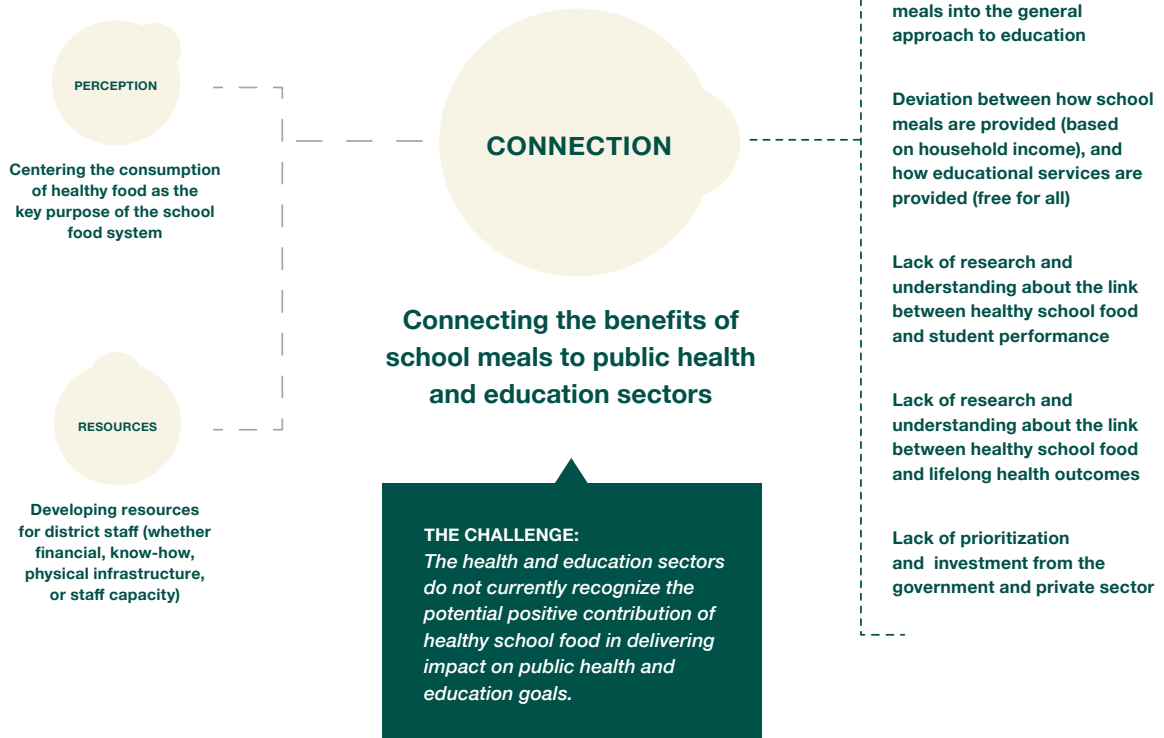


**Inspiration We Can Learn From:**

The Chef Ann Foundation (CAF) provides hands-on training, resources, and funding that increases healthy food in school meals and enables schools to cook meals from scratch using fresh, wholesome ingredients. CAF's program, The Lunch Box, offers school districts technical support, including access to scalable recipes, USDA compliant menu cycles, procurement tools, financial calculators, and marketing materials at no cost. CAF's School Food Institute offers video-based online courses that leverage Chef Ann Cooper's extensive expertise in leading school food programs through a transition to serving whole, fresh, healthy foods. The Institute offers eight courses which cover key operational components to make sustainable change to school food operations. CAF filled 866 course seats over the past ten years. More than 77% of students who participated in the School Food Institute said they will make a change in their district because of the courses. CAF's Get Schools Cooking program offers an intensive three-year program to transition school districts from a heat-and-serve model to one that is rooted in scratch cooking. The program offers on-site assessments, strategic planning, and action plans. To date, CAF has assisted 182 schools to move their operations to scratch-based cooking, positively impacting 55,393 students who now have access to healthier food in school.

# Connection

How might we build awareness in the public health and education sectors about the impact healthy, high-quality meals have on a child's education and long-term health?



## A Sample of Initiatives Addressing This Opportunity Area:

- **Nonprofits:** Council of Great City Schools, National Dairy Council, Share Our Strength's No Kid Hungry campaign, Tisch Food Center: Teachers College Columbia University, Berkeley Center for Weight and Health, FoodCorps
- **Initiatives:** Action for Healthy Kids' Every Kid Healthy Campaign, Partners for Breakfast in the Classroom, No Kid Hungry & NEA Foundation's Fellowship Program



**STAKEHOLDERS NEEDED TO DRIVE CHANGE:**



**BACKGROUND ABOUT THIS OPPORTUNITY AREA:**

School meal programs are often siloed from the education system, which generally leads to a lack of understanding of the school nutrition program among educators and school administrators. At the federal level, this silo is demonstrated with the U.S. Department of Agriculture regulating school nutrition programs while academic programs fall under the purview of the U.S. Department of Education. At the state and district level, lack of prioritization of school meals by key decision makers impairs the process for school food programs to receive funding, capital improvements, and broader support for change. At the school level, this silo limits the awareness and understanding principals and teachers need to make critical decisions—such as the length of a lunch period—when creating the master schedule. At the same time, when teachers and principals do prioritize healthy food, they serve as powerful and effective advocates for change.

Among public health and health care stakeholders there is increasing recognition of the importance of social determinants of health, but they don't always have school food on their radar as a system that can contribute towards long-term positive health outcomes. This means that many potentially influential stakeholders outside of the school food system do not currently invest in, or advocate for solutions for healthier school meals.

*"The education system is not designed to work with the school food system.... Teachers don't always think food is important to education. They see school food as an afterthought. They think parents should be feeding their kids at school. Educators that understand that nutrition and the environment are our responsibility—those that understand the link are doing a better job."*

—Government

*"To the extent that schools have unfunded mandates around health from either the state or local government (e.g. check the box on wellness plan or health advisory council), can we help them meet those mandates in a more meaningful way? We could provide resources that don't require a lot of the districts and help them meet existing requirements."*

—Foundation

*"In many school districts, school meals aren't their first priority—they are dealing with teacher strikes or other budget issues."*

—Food Manufacturer

**Inspiration We Can Learn From:**

Research has shown that school breakfast plays a significant role in a child's ability to concentrate and learn, while children experiencing food insecurity are vulnerable to poor health, stunted development, and higher risk for behavioral issues or social difficulties. Yet, less than half of all children who qualify for a free or reduced breakfast receive it due to barriers such as stigma, and bus/carpool schedules not lining up with early morning breakfast times. Working with educators—teachers, principals, and education support professionals—is essential to achieving a successful school breakfast program, particularly when making breakfast a part of the school day and serving the morning meal in the classroom.

In school year 2018-2019, **Share Our Strength's No Kid Hungry** campaign partnered with the **NEA Foundation** to launch a Fellowship program to build educators' leadership capacity for breakfast after the bell. The Fellowship was made available to all NEA members, including teachers and education support professionals. Selected Fellows received a stipend for participating and an opportunity to apply for a grant for breakfast after the bell start-up costs, such as

coolers and/or hotboxes, grab n' go kiosks, trash cans, recycling bins, and cleaning supplies. Fellows met regularly with leaders from the NEA Foundation and No Kid Hungry to learn more about the school breakfast program, barriers to accessing the program, and how to lead efforts to create change in their schools and districts by making breakfast part of the school day. This program builds on past work by No Kid Hungry to develop educators as champions for breakfast and has resulted in school-wide implementation of breakfast after the bell programs across the nation, including districts in Pennsylvania, Delaware, Tennessee, and New Jersey.

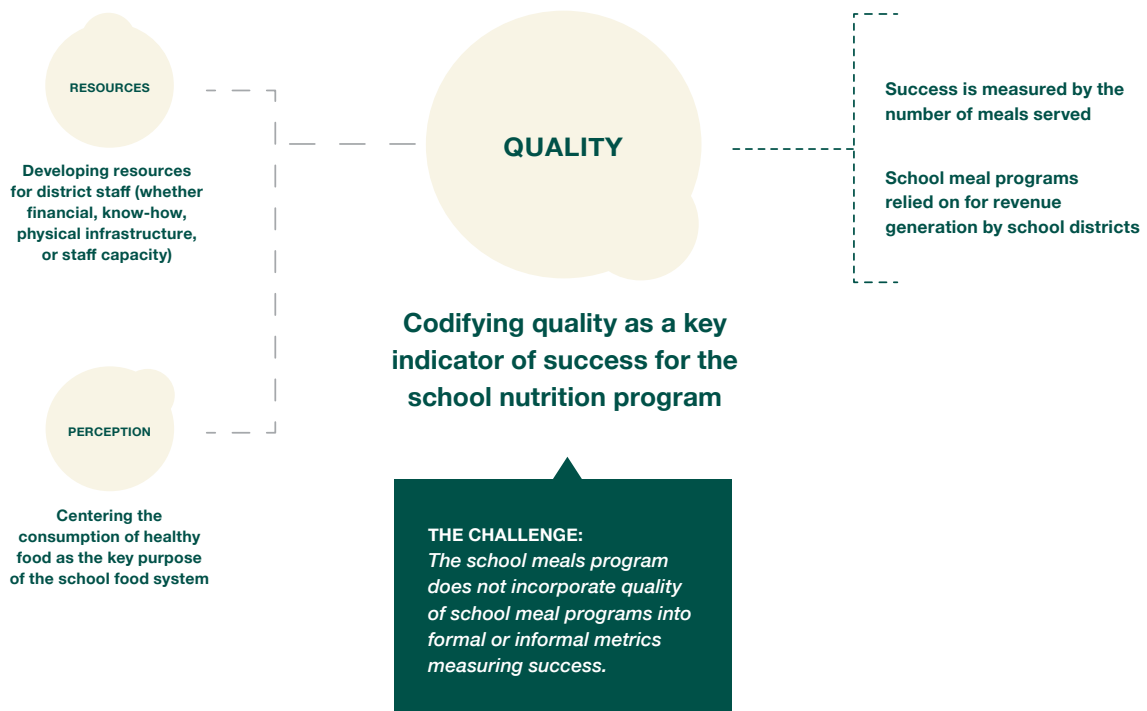
Results from the Fellowship and other school breakfast pilots indicate an increase in student participation in school breakfast through breakfast after the bell programs, a relationship between breakfast and increased attendance, and decreases in behavioral referrals and school nurse visits. Most importantly, educators shared that breakfast changes the climate of the classrooms: students start their day in a calmer manner and better student-to-student and student-to-teacher relationships emerge.



# Quality

How might we measure the success of the school meals program on food health and quality, in addition to student participation?

KEY BARRIERS:



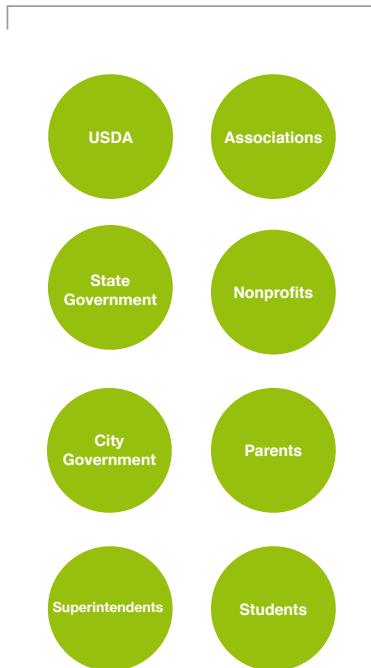
## A Sample of Initiatives Addressing This Opportunity Area:

- **Nonprofits:** Brigaid, Wellness in the Schools, School Food Focus (formerly), National Farm to School Network, Center for Good Food Purchasing
- **School Districts:** Lists of prohibited ingredients (ex: NYC)
- **State Government:** Michigan, New York, D.C., Oregon, Alaska
- **Initiatives:** School Food Focus' Ingredient Guide, Center for Good Food Purchasing: Good Food Purchasing Program





STAKEHOLDERS NEEDED TO DRIVE CHANGE:



BACKGROUND ABOUT THIS OPPORTUNITY AREA:

Governed by federal, state, and sometimes city regulations, school meals must meet a prescribed set of nutrition standards, while keeping costs within a set reimbursement rate. In addition to food, these funds must also cover labor, equipment, utilities, and various other costs, often leaving about \$1 per meal to spend on food. Many school districts view the nutrition standards as the bar they must meet, yet the USDA often communicates that the nutrition standards are a floor, not a ceiling, stating that school districts are free to serve meals that go above and beyond the nutrition standards in terms of health and quality.

While this may be true, there is currently limited incentive for school districts to improve: their programs are measured based on meeting the baseline nutrition guidelines, containing costs, and adhering to strict bureaucratic processes. And with limited funding, it can be hard for school nutrition professionals to imagine how to stretch that \$1 even further. Some municipalities have instituted higher standards for school food sourcing, either by participating in programs like the Good Food Purchasing Program or by creating their own lists of prohibited or preferred ingredients or food characteristics, but usually these additional mandates are unfunded.

School nutrition programs are commonly viewed as revenue generators for districts. As a result, school nutrition professionals are incentivized to increase the number of meals served and maximize efficiency. This approach orients planning and decision-making around increasing a district's income, rather than on students' positive health outcomes.

*"We make our children a revenue stream and we don't prioritize the health and wellness of our child. We bus our children to school for free but we don't feed them food that is conducive to learning or health."*

—Foundation

*"The current system is about meeting minimum standards, meeting guidelines and working within budget constraints."*

—Food Manufacturer

*"My superintendent is not at a place to understand that a hungry kids aren't able to get the best education experience. He is open-minded but doesn't understand how the perception of school food is shifting as the broader cultural school institution changes. It is my job to make the connection to long-term health to them."*

—Food Service Director

Inspiration We Can Learn From:

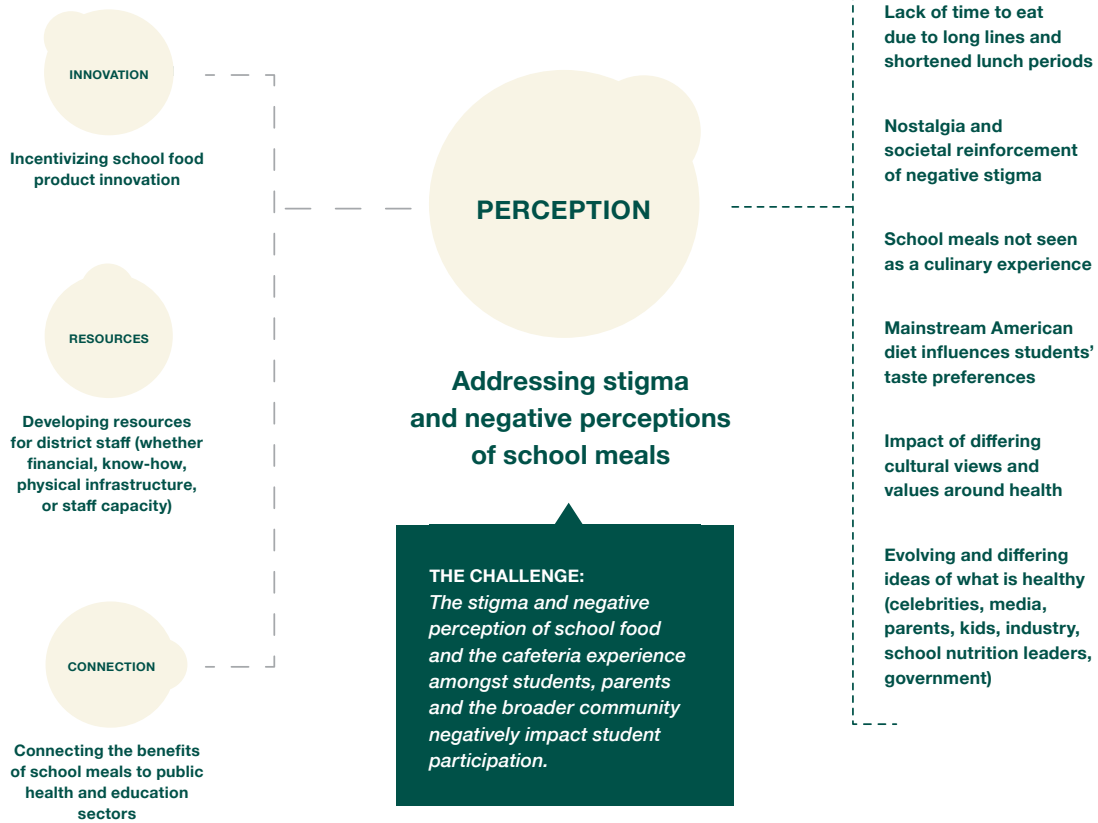
In 2016 Michigan implemented a state-funded pilot program, **10 Cents a Meal for School Kids & Farms**, providing up to \$.10 per meal in match incentives for school meals that include a Michigan-grown fruit, vegetable, or legume. The additional funding helped school nutrition professionals prioritize and plan for local sourcing, increased the variety of healthy items available to students, and boosted local farm economies. Encouraged through taste testing and other nutrition education activities, students are consuming and enjoying the new foods.

"I describe it as a win, win, win situation," reports one School Nutrition Director, "the farmers are happy, my food service budget is happy, and the students are happy." One high school has seen their school lunch participation rates increase by 60% over the previous year. The program is even improving food service staff morale and pride, as a school nutrition respondent reflected in a recent evaluation survey, "any nervousness that [staff] have had in the past in working with unfamiliar items has been replaced with confidence and pride that we are serving something special."



# Perception

How might we flip the script from tired stereotypes and celebrate the experience and importance of school meals?



## A Sample of Initiatives Addressing This Opportunity Area:

- **Initiative:** Rachael Ray Foundation, School Meals That Rock (social media)



**STAKEHOLDERS NEEDED TO DRIVE CHANGE:**



**BACKGROUND ABOUT THIS OPPORTUNITY AREA:**

We all know the stereotype: lunch ladies in hairnets scooping and serving “mystery meat” and unidentifiable goop to an endless line of hungry students. The negative and enduring perception surrounding school meals has been fueled by pop culture and reinforced by social stigmas about what school meals are and who eats them. Negative representations of school food and food service staff have built up over time and now shape the experience of school food for students. Recent studies conducted by School Food Focus and FoodCorps found that students exhibit contradictory behavior when it comes to school lunch: they’re enthusiastic about their favorite lunchline foods and cafeteria staff members, while retaining skepticism about the overall program.

The setting and timing for the lunch period are crucial to understanding students’ lived and felt experiences of the school meal program, and thus their disposition toward eating at school at all—let alone eating the healthy foods offered. Lunch periods are often short, loud, and if the lunch line is long, students are left with little time to eat. This stigma affects the participation of students at all income levels, and wealthier students in particular may be more likely to bring

lunch or purchase à la carte options, reinforcing the perception that school lunch is for students from low-income households.

Students, in general, are not against eating healthy foods; rather they are more concerned with the taste of the food, and emphasize qualities of “freshness” and “realness,” with “freshness” often alluding to meals prepared in front of them à la fast casual dining experiences outside of school.

These experiences that students have with food outside the cafeteria system—at home, in restaurants, or via the media—influence their taste and food preferences. In order to boost or maintain participation rates, school lunch programs often try to reflect mainstream preferences, and may struggle to align influences of US diet and mainstream culture with required nutrition standards.

Addressing the enduring stigma of school food and creating a welcoming cafeteria environment are crucial to bolstering meal program participation and promoting worthwhile program improvements that create a more nourishing, positive experience around school food for students.

<p><i>“There are very strong leaders that operate under the stigma of what school food used to be.”</i></p> <p>—School Nutrition Director</p>	<p><i>“It is hard to generalize healthy diets for an entire population. The guidelines can be idealistic guidance for best practice—you can live a healthy life without adhering to those guidelines.”</i></p> <p>—Nonprofit</p>	<p><i>“Students don’t have time to eat so they grab what they can finish in that time, rather than what they might want or what is healthy.”</i></p> <p>—Distributor</p>	<p><i>“School Nutrition Directors aren’t asking for these (healthier) products, and they aren’t asking, because parents aren’t asking.”</i></p> <p>—Food Manufacturer</p>
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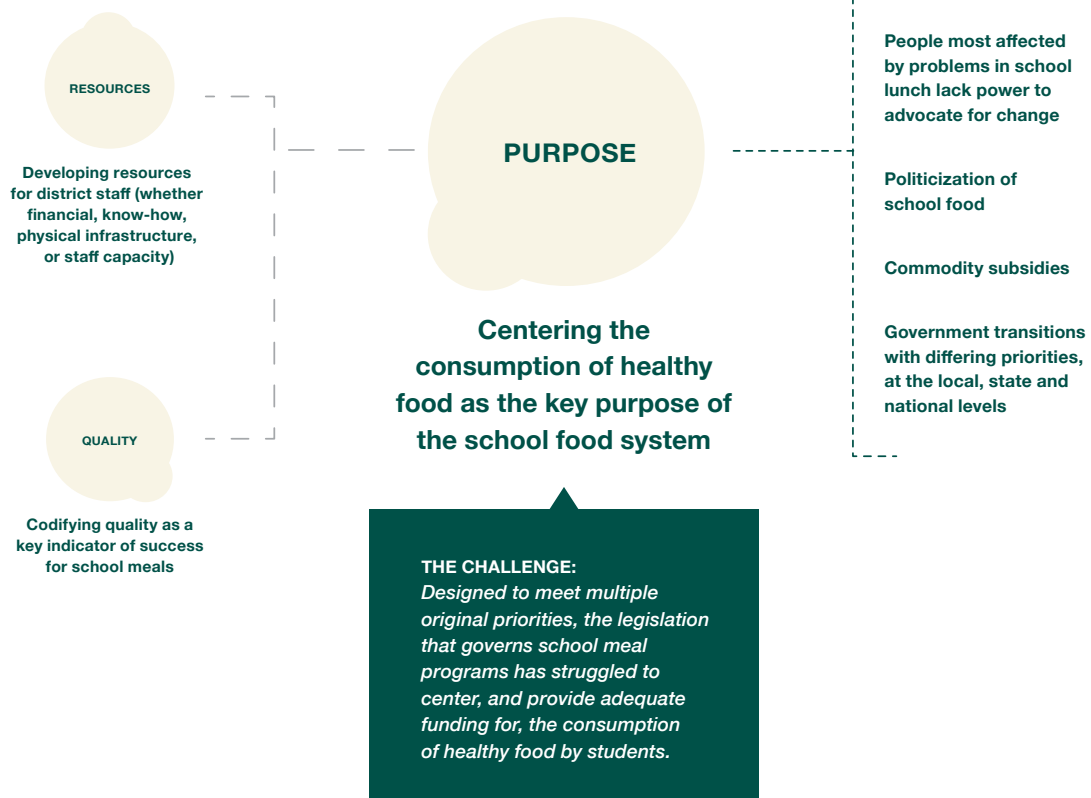
**Inspiration We Can Learn From:**

In 2013, San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) set out to comprehensively redesign the school food experience for students through the creation of dining areas that are full of options, creative, and student-centered. The **SFUSD Future Dining Experience** is focused on developing a financially stable food system that provides fresh, healthy meals to students as they grow. Encompassing the physical space, technology, operations, community engagement, and overall dining experience, the Future Dining Experience has identified ten design recommendations—such as central food preparation, grab and go carts, smart meal technology, and communal eating—and launched the School Food Advisory, a group of 32 high school students tasked with representing student voice in SFUSD’s Student Nutrition Services decision-making process.

# Purpose

How might we align around providing healthy food for all as the sole purpose of our school meals programs?

KEY BARRIERS:



## A Sample of Initiatives Addressing This Opportunity Area:

- **Nonprofits:** American Heart Association, Center for Science in the Public Interest, National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition, National Resources Defense Council
- **Associations:** American Commodities Distribution Association
- **Initiatives:** Let's Move!



**STAKEHOLDERS NEEDED TO DRIVE CHANGE:**



**BACKGROUND ABOUT THIS OPPORTUNITY AREA:**

*"It is hereby declared to be the policy of Congress, as a measure of national security, to safeguard the health and well-being of the Nation's children and to encourage the domestic consumption of nutritious agricultural commodities and other food, by assisting the States, through grants-in-aid and other means, in providing an adequate supply of foods and other facilities for the establishment, maintenance, operation, and expansion of nonprofit school lunch programs."*

**—NATIONAL SCHOOL LUNCH ACT, 1946**

The **National School Lunch Program** was created to address two primary concerns: 1) malnourishment (specifically undernourishment) of our nation's youth as our country looked to build a strong military in the face of a second World War, and 2) stable markets for domestic agricultural products, specifically commodities like wheat and corn. Since then, these two priorities have come into tension as school meals (including school breakfast and other institutional food programs in prisons and on Native American reservations) became an entry point for highly processed commodity products like refined grains and sugars. As our agricultural

commodities lost more and more nutritional value, so did our school meals. Meanwhile, reimbursement rates for school meals struggle to keep up with rising labor and food costs, which leaves schools little choice but to purchase more of the subsidized, processed commodity products.

Despite the original mandate from Congress to "safeguard the health and well-being" of students, school meal programs today are not held to this metric. Instead, most state and federal governments measure the program based on meeting minimum nutrition standards and passing an operational audit, while the school districts base their measurement on profitability.

We have seen a steady effort since the 1990s—when candy, sugary juice, and items high in sodium and saturated fat influenced the school meal landscape—to improve school meal programs and bring them back in line with their original intention. The reauthorization of the Child Nutrition Act in 2004 and 2010 proved critical in improving nutrition standards and access to school meals and developing accountability for health and wellness at the school district level through the establishment of Wellness Policies.

*"Both education budgets and federal policy related to the Farm Bill and commodities—things trickle down and impact what schools feel they can do with the resources they have. Lack of funds to sustain a system, provide high-quality foods."*

**—Trade Association**

*"Nutrition work on a national level is incredibly difficult. We are more multicultural than ever before. The latest version of dietary guidelines were remarkable—this was the first version that ever said, 'there are many diets and food plans that you can use to achieve a healthy diet.' Then look at school nutrition guidelines—it is the most prescriptive approach possible."*

**—School Nutrition Director**

*"Students don't have time to eat so they grab what they can finish in that time, rather than what they might want or what is healthy."*

**—Distributor**

*"Who is voting to say I want to put millions of dollars towards school food? Why do we have so little funds in civic work? It is difficult to make a school feeding system when you are weighing it against all of the urgent needs of society."*

**—Food Manufacturer**



**Inspiration We Can Learn From:**

The **Healthy Hunger Free Kids Act (HHFKA)** of 2010, a reauthorization of the Child Nutrition Act, marked the first time in decades that our nation acted on the opportunity for school meals to improve the health of tens of millions of children. Publicly championed by Michelle Obama and Let's Move!, the legislation was methodically brought to fruition by a broad coalition of health, hunger, education, and agriculture advocates. The legislation included a rework of the nutritional guidelines, mandating more whole grains, less sugar and sodium, and more (and more variety of) fruits and vegetables. Additionally, the law increased access to school meals for low-income children and helped make the health and availability of school meals more equitable overall. While some districts struggled to implement the sweeping changes early on, as of September 2016, USDA reported that more than 99% of all districts were meeting the requirement successfully. A recent study by USDA showed that the nutritional quality of school meals increased by 41% between 2010 and 2015. Currently, Congress is just beginning the next Child Nutrition Reauthorization process, signaling another opportunity to continue to improve these critical programs.

## REWORKING LUNCH ONGOING MANAGEMENT



### CONVENING PARTNERS



Act as backbone organization, providing staff management for workstreams and strategic direction of overall RWL initiative

Determine final workstreams post-Summit

Fundraise for reWorking Lunch Money Fund to support workstreams and overall costs

Act as fiscal agent for reWorking Lunch

Coordinate Anchor Partner group

Provide marketing and communications support for overall initiative

Co-convene participants for Capstone Event in 2020



Provide staff support focused on strategic advisement and network expansion

Support initiative with a financial contribution

Co-convene participants for Capstone Event in 2020

### FACILITATING PARTNER



Provide facilitation and systems change strategy coaching to workstreams and overall initiative

Facilitate workstream convenings as needed

Facilitate Capstone Event in 2020

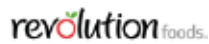
### ANCHOR PARTNERS

Provide advisement to strategic direction of workstreams and overall initiative

Corporate and philanthropic members support initiative with a financial contribution

Dedicate staff time to ongoing participation through capstone event

WANT TO LEARN MORE? VISIT [WWW.REWORKINGLUNCH.ORG](http://WWW.REWORKINGLUNCH.ORG)



DESIGN BY STUDIO RAINWATER


# reWorking Lunch Fund

**We're raising funds to transform big ideas into collective action.**

FoodCorps launched the reWorking Lunch Fund to raise the capital needed to invest in the bold ideas and innovative solutions that come from reWorking Lunch's cross-sector collaborative work streams through 2020. FoodCorps will act as fiscal sponsor and manager of the Fund, with guidance from our Anchor Partners and other key stakeholders.

To learn more and join in our efforts to change how we nourish and feed our nation's kids, contact Michele Matyasovsky at [michele.matyasovsky@foodcorps.org](mailto:michele.matyasovsky@foodcorps.org).



An overhead photograph of four children sitting around a light-colored wooden table, eating a meal. Each child has a white, compartmentalized tray in front of them. The trays contain various foods including diced cucumbers, diced tomatoes, a small carton of milk, and a small portion of brown rice or quinoa. The children are wearing casual clothing; one is in a blue long-sleeved shirt, another in a yellow t-shirt, and a third in a green t-shirt. The floor is made of light-colored wood. The text "Together, how might we build a bright, just, and healthy future for our nation's kids?" is overlaid in white on a green background across the center of the image.

**Together, how  
might we build  
a bright, just, and  
healthy future for  
our nation's kids?**