

School Food FOCUS Annual Meeting Summary
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The demand for better food in American schools is nothing new. School lunch advocates from every state, town and school district have worked for decades to shift the focus towards serving student meals that contain healthier ingredients, take into account foods grown and produced locally and appeal to a client base whose tastes and opinions on food change as often and dramatically as their minds and bodies do in the growth years between ages 5 and 18.

The quality of meals that kids eat in the lunchroom is now capturing America's attention as never before. First Lady Michelle Obama, visiting British chef Jamie Oliver, U.S. chef Ann Cooper and the increased tendency to think about our food choices as outlined in the best-selling books by journalist Michael Pollan and as seen in the growth of farmer's markets nationwide, has generated a much louder conversation about school food. And while school meal advocates are grateful for the increased attention to their cause, they know that the issues surrounding school food transformation are complicated and varied and will take more than mass-media attention to alter them.

At the recent School Food FOCUS(www.schoolfoodfocus.org) Annual Meeting in Chicago this spring, several of those complicated issues were directly addressed among some of the most influential and passionate change agents within the school food environment. The Annual Meeting for School Food FOCUS, a national initiative working to transform **Food Options for Children in Urban Schools**, gathers food service professionals, community organizations, government officials and vendors together to explore and dissect both the ideas and the barriers associated with school meal improvement. This year's Annual Meeting, occurring during the Congressional debate on the reauthorization of the Child Nutrition Act (which governs school meals in the US), brought people together to share knowledge, best practices and encourage change within the school food areas of policy, procurement and purchasing. Perhaps even more importantly, the Annual Meeting gave advocates and stakeholders hope that improved change was possible and was already happening in peer districts nationwide.

The meeting opened with a tour of host city Chicago's public school cafeterias. Chicago is the third of a group of selected school districts (St. Paul and Denver being the others) to participate in an innovative and progressive School Food FOCUS pilot program, called the Learning Lab, for far-reaching change. As part of its participation in the pilot, Chicago's food service management, staff and community partners will work closely with FOCUS staff to research and fully implement large improvements to their food system that will not only transform the types of food served to their students, but will also serve as a model for other FOCUS districts as they work towards their own food change goals.

Jan Poppendieck, author of the newly released book *Free for All: Fixing School Food in America* (www.ucpress.edu/books/pages/10315.php) gave the keynote speech on opening night. Poppendieck is a professor of sociology at Hunter College, City of NY, and in addition to publishing 2 other titles on food issues, also serves on the board of directors for Why Hunger and Community Food Advocates. Her new title provides a comprehensive historical, political and financial history of the National School Lunch Program and offers several suggestions for sweeping change, including a nationwide policy that serves fresh, healthy food to all American schoolchildren for free.

The second day of the meeting opened with a welcome address from Gail Christopher, Vice President for Programs at the W.K. Kellogg Foundation (www.wkkgf.org), a supporter of the School Food FOCUS project. Christopher is a nationally recognized leader in health policy and serves on the Kellogg Foundation executive team involved with food, health, well-being and racial equity programming.

A new addition to the FOCUS Annual Meeting followed Christopher's address - the FOCUS Real School Food Showcase. The Showcase was presented in collaboration with Kids First, a Rhode Island-based non-profit working to improve student health statewide and known for its pioneering Regional Healthy Foods Marketplaces (www.kidsfirstri.org). The FOCUS Showcase brought FOCUS participants (urban food service directors and their community and purchasing partners) together with vendors carefully selected for their poultry and bread products for an intimately-sized product tasting and conversation. All products showcased at the event adhere to FOCUS committee core ideals that emphasize sustainable, healthy and local criteria.

The Showcase also featured a School District presentation highlighting learnings from the field about the procurement changes seen in 4 FOCUS districts - St. Paul, Portland, OR, Denver and Chicago. These meetings discussed specific changes that took place within each of the 4 districts as they pushed for better food for students. Stakeholders from each of the featured school districts explained in detail what changes they wanted to make, how they worked with their community partners and FOCUS to implement those changes and what kinds of results were obtained from those changes, both from a financial and public relations perspective within their communities. St. Paul spoke about working to reduce the sugar to the Institute of Medicine's recommendation of 22 grams per serving in the milk they served to students. Denver spoke about their efforts to purchase more locally sourced products beyond produce - including beef, bison and poultry and how they dropped commodity cheese from their purchasing in order to work with a large producer that was headquartered nearby. Chicago spoke about their "frozen local program" where locally grown produce was purchased in season in bulk and frozen for future use throughout the school year.

As a first step towards catalyzing change in the beef procurement issues of school food, Beef Conversations were also a part of the Showcase. Food service professionals were able to meet with beef companies one at a time to start the process of making sustainable, healthy and more local change in products offered and purchased. Grass fed beef producers were invited to be a part of the discussion as well.

As a follow-up to the morning conversations, break out Roundtables were held all afternoon to follow-up in depth about issues raised during meetings with vendors or as a way to continue dialogue about ideas, challenges and successes. Roundtable topics included

“Whole Grain, Clean Label Breads” - Can schools get and afford breads made with a variety of locally and sustainably produced grains?

“Building a Better Chicken” - What can school food service, industry and government do to get “gold standard” poultry onto children’s plates?

“Schools and Their Partners: A Recipe for Success” - How local, regional, federal government agencies and non-profits can help schools procure and promote more healthful, locally sourced and sustainably produced school food

“Sustainable Regional Food Systems” - Policy and mechanisms for food supply chains in the public interest

“National Food and Nutrition Standards: Where Are We Going? How Do We Get There?” - Comparison of national criteria for school meals, including discussion on the similarities and concerns between the Dietary Guidelines, the Healthier U.S. Challenge and the Institute of medicine Building blocks for Healthy Children

The final day of the Annual Meeting opened with working group meetings for each of the three School Food FOCUS program teams - Policy, Knowledge and Communications and School Food Learning Lab. These highly participatory meetings were followed by a discussion with USDA representatives at the national level to determine next steps that could be taken to promote and aid improvement goals set and discussed at the Annual Meeting. The meeting ended with school food service professionals and their community partners meeting together to discuss specific change desired going forward in their respective districts and how models and products and ideas presented at the Annual Meeting could assist in making those changes.