

## Starting From Scratch

If you've ever had to feed a crowd a healthy, delicious meal on a super-tight budget, then you have an inkling of what Diana Flores accomplishes on a daily basis. As director of nutrition services for Sacramento City Unified School District, Flores is responsible for providing meals to more than 40,000 students on a typical school day. It's a job that requires equal parts ingenuity and organization—and no small amount of moxie.

"We literally touch almost every student in the district with just this one program," explains Flores. "It's not as easy as just cooking food. It's having to meet the meal requirements—ensuring there's enough protein, enough whole grains, making meals that are lower in sodium, lower in fat."

Two generations ago, cafeteria meals in public schools were largely made from scratch. "Basically, if they found a recipe they liked, they could make it," she says. But when federal policies and funding mechanisms for school nutrition programs changed in the 1980s, scratch cooking fell by the wayside. In its place came prepackaged and processed meals.

Flores has been on a years-long quest

to change that. Her goal is to serve hot, homestyle meals that appeal to kids' taste buds while also fulfilling their nutritional needs. That's the impetus behind the district's 50,000-square-foot Central Kitchen, which is expected to be in full swing this fall. "The Central Kitchen allows us to operationalize scratch cooking," explains Flores. "At some of our school sites, the kitchens are too small to even have a sink for washing produce."

The spacious new facility will also allow Flores and her team

to procure and prepare more local produce

"so everything is fresher and tastes better." As she puts it, "When you get a mandarin from Penryn in season, it is the most fabulous tasting mandarin.

If you want students to eat produce, it needs to taste its best."

But buying local is about more than flavor. It's also about saving money, in many cases. "My farm-to-school program started because I could get nicer produce

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from local sources [versus the federal commodities program], says Flores. "We couldn't afford mandarins before, but when I bought them from the grower direct, it was a cost savings and it was a better product."

Due to various constraints, it may take several years before the district can operate a fully scratch kitchen. But launching the Central Kitchen represents an important first step toward that goal.—*Catherine Warmerdam* **IS**