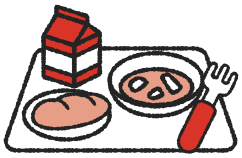

Extreme Lunch Makeover

The race to remove ultra-processed foods from school meals

BY MATT ALDERTON

Sacramento City Unified School District serves more than 40,000 K-12 students across 83 public schools, all of whom are entitled to free breakfast and lunch under California's Universal Meals Program, a first-of-its-kind initiative that provides no-cost meals to all students regardless of family income.

What makes Sacramento remarkable, however, isn't just the cost of student meals. It's the content. There are staples like pizza and chicken nuggets, to be sure. But kids also have hearty breakfast choices like whole-grain blueberry pancakes, biscuits and sausage gravy, and egg bites, and sophisticated lunch options like honey chipotle chicken, yellow curry with baked tofu, and beef Bolognese pasta.

Many of those meals are made entirely from scratch at the district's Central Kitchen, a 50,000-square-foot, taxpayer-funded facility where professional chefs prepare fresh meals using seasonal ingredients sourced from nearby farms.

Established in 2022, Central Kitchen makes meals with a mission, says Director of Nutrition Services Kelsey Nederveld. "We in school nutrition have inherited some really bad problems, and one of those problems is ultra-processed foods," she says. "Just because we inherited something, however, doesn't mean we have to continue down the same path."

NEWMAN'S OWN FOUNDATION; KIRSTEN BOYER; GETTY IMAGES

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> *Ultra-processed foods are intentionally made to be very convenient and what scientists call 'hyper-palatable.'"*
>
> **MICHELE POLACSEK PROFESSOR OF PUBLIC HEALTH, UNIVERSITY OF NEW ENGLAND**

From sugary cereals and salty snacks to packaged meats and frozen treats, ultra-processed foods constitute 61.9% of all calories that youth ages 1 to 18 consume, according to the National Center for Health Statistics.

WHAT IS ULTRA-PROCESSED FOOD?

"Ultra-processed" means different things to different people — which is one reason removing these foods from school meals is so challenging, says Stacie Reiter, a registered dietitian and director of nutrition and wellness for Sodexo at School. "From my perspective, it's anything that can go from the freezer to the oven to a student's tray," Reiter says.

Michele Polacsek, professor of public health at the University of New England, describes ultra-processed foods as "formulations of food substances that result from a series of industrial processes." Basically, food that comes from factories.

In October 2025, Gov. Gavin Newsom signed a first-in-the-nation law banning ultra-processed foods from school meals in California by 2035. The law defines them as foods and beverages containing additives — for example, artificial colorings, emulsifiers and nonnutritive sweeteners — and high amounts of sodium, saturated fat or added sugar.

SICK KIDS BECOME SICK ADULTS

"Ultra-processed foods are intentionally made to be very convenient and what scientists call 'hyper-palatable,' which just means that they're very, very tasty," Polacsek says. "They're high in fat, sugar and salt, which we're programmed to love. So, people tend to overeat ultra-processed foods and gain weight."

The World Health Organization says being overweight or obese increases your risk of Type 2 diabetes, heart disease and cancer. Children are particularly vulnerable: being overweight makes kids more susceptible to disease not only when they're young but also in adulthood. Childhood obesity also carries adverse psychosocial consequences, including discrimination, bullying and lower school performance. >

Chef Nathan Bates of Newman's Own Foundation

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Sodexo's Future Chefs competition

SCHOOLS ON THE FRONT LINES

Schools collectively serve some 46 million meals every day — making them "the largest restaurant chain in America," says Christina Chauvenet, child nutrition officer at Newman's Own Foundation.

That's why schools are ideally positioned to influence kids' diets, says Mara Fleishman, CEO of the Chef Ann Foundation, which helps school districts build and sustain scratch-cooking programs. "School food programs are the most consistent, long-term health intervention opportunity in our country," Fleishman says.

But change isn't easy. "Big food companies have deliberately targeted busy families and schools running on razor-thin budgets, selling them ultra-processed foods as affordable and practical solutions," Fleishman says.

The primary source of funding for school meals is federal reimbursements from the USDA, which currently pays schools $4.60 and $2.46 per meal served for free lunch and free breakfast, respectively. After paying labor and overhead costs, Nederveld says she has only $1.25 of that to spend on food.

FEEDING CHANGE

The district's Central Kitchen makes scratch cooking more accessible by centralizing meal preparation, freeing individual schools from having to invest in labor and kitchen equipment. It also procures ingredients directly from manufacturers and farmers, cutting out middlemen to save money.

Kids must be willing partners, adds Reiter. "We can't just make meals and hope kids will eat them," she says. "We have to bring them along with us so they get excited about the food, become comfortable with it and can understand why it's important for them to eat it."

Although ultra-processed foods remain a fixture on most school menus for now, parents need not be concerned, Chauvenet says. "School food is healthier than it's been in a really long time."

"If you're going to eat a processed-food meal, eat it at school," Reiter says. "It's going to be more healthful than anything you buy at the grocery store." ■

61.9%

of all calories that youth ages 1 to 18 consume come from ultra-processed foods

SOURCE: National Center for Health Statistics

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