RETHINKING SCHOOL LUNCH

SCHOOL–COMMUNITY KITCHENS

Resource Hubs Serving Students and Surrounding Communities

CENTER FOR ECOLITERACY

A Letter from the Center for Ecoliteracy

The Center for Ecoliteracy is pleased to offer this concept paper, which presents school-community kitchens, a partnership in which schools and their surrounding neighborhoods share resources to support the health of students and residents, improve academic achievement, enhance community vitality, and promote justice and equity.

In late 2011, the Center completed an extensive feasibility study for the Oakland Unified School District. Establishment of school-community kitchens throughout the district emerged as one of the most creative recommendations of that study.

This concept is consonant with some of the most basic tenets of the Center for Ecoliteracy. We strongly endorse Oakland Superintendent Tony Smith's insight that "School food reform is not separate from school reform. It's part of the basic work we have to do." Meanwhile, "Sustainability Is a Community Practice" is one of the guiding principles of Smart by Nature™, our framework for education for sustainable living. School-community kitchens, as described in this paper, represent an opportunity to act simultaneously on these affirmations, to make schools more vibrant presences in their communities, and to bring schools and community members together in mutual service.

The Center honors Superintendent Smith, Director of Nutrition Services Jennifer LeBarre, and the Oakland Unified School District for their leadership and commitment to creating conditions that allow children to grow and learn at high levels and that foster healthy, thriving communities.

This paper belongs to a suite of publications and projects created by the Center for Ecoliteracy under the title Rethinking School Lunch. These productions include ideas and strategies for improving school food, teaching nutrition, supporting sustainable food systems, and designing education programs focused on understanding the relationships between food, culture, health, and the environment.

The pioneering work of Steve and Michele Heller, Lopez Island Farm Education, and the Lopez Locavores' Evening Meals at School program has inspired and motivated us throughout this exploration.

We are deeply grateful to the Heller Family Foundation, the TomKat Charitable Trust, and the S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Family Foundation for their generous support of this project.

Sincerely,

Cofounder and Executive Director
Center for Ecoliteracy

School-Community Kitchens

Resource Hubs Serving Students and Surrounding Communities

School-community kitchens are a comprehensive strategy for addressing a complex of overlapping crises that confront young people and the communities in which they live. The crises are well documented. Among them: 50 million people in the United States—17 million of whom are children—are living in food insecure households.[1] Obesity and overweight remain at epidemic levels,[2] accounting for a growing percentage of U.S. medical spending.[3]

These and a myriad of other problems are disproportionately distributed through our communities; facing them is a matter of equity and justice as well as of health and economics. An African American resident in West Oakland, California, for example, is five times more likely to be hospitalized for diabetes than a white resident born in the more affluent Oakland hills. Life expectancies can differ by a decade-and-a-half or more between two adjacent ZIP Codes.[4] Yawning racial achievement gaps plague many of our school districts.[5]

These problems are not unrelated. A growing body of research connects better nutrition with higher achievement on standardized tests; increased cognitive function, attention, and memory; and an array of positive behavioral indicators, including better school attendance and cooperation.[6] The movement to improve school food is one crucial response, but the issues extend beyond the school lunchroom to encompass everything from families' knowledge about good nutrition and food preparation to access to healthy food in local communities.

As described below, school-community kitchens are rooted in three movements: (1) the growing effort to improve school food, (2) the creation of full service community schools, which attend to the health of the whole child within a family and community context, and (3) a national and international movement on behalf of community kitchens. They are an example of what author and farmer Wendell Berry calls a "solution which causes a ramifying series of solutions."[7]

School-Community Kitchens

A school-community kitchen presents a new kind of social contract: a public school kitchen, used by both the school and the community as a resource for educational, vocational, and production purposes. The kitchen optimizes a public space to support student health and improve academic achievement; promote justice and equity; and enhance food security, emergency preparedness, and the economic advancement and vitality of local communities.

Siting community kitchens within schools acknowledges that the preparation of nutritious and appealing food is a key intervention for the at-risk school-age population, as well as for their families and neighbors. The public health crisis will only be solved one meal at a time, but such radical simplicity has many ramifications: When children are nourished, they are able to learn. When communities are nourished, they are able to come together and move beyond cycles of poverty and hunger to paths of empowerment and promise. When all the members of a community are nourished, food justice is served.

An Emerging Model in Oakland, California

Creating school-community kitchens throughout the Oakland (California) Unified School District (OUSD) is a key recommendation to come out of a yearlong Rethinking School Lunch Oakland Feasibility Study conducted by the Center for Ecoliteracy. The study was carried out to support the district's desire to improve the quality of school meals, elevate the status of school meals, and solidify the meal program's role as a central component of students' academic experience. In the words of Oakland Superintendent Tony Smith, "We are committed to building a school district that provides quality education and equitable outcomes for all children, and to make this goal a reality, we have to create conditions that allow children to grow and learn at high levels. This starts with taking care of our students' most basic needs, such as nutrition, so they can develop and reach their full potential."

The Feasibility Study also provided an opportunity to take a broader view of the role Nutrition Services could play in fulfilling the objectives of OUSD's Five-Year Strategic Plan. That plan is, in a word, about equity. It is about addressing, ameliorating, and resolving persistent systemic inequalities both within schools and in the wider community.

At the heart of OUSD's Strategic Plan is the concept of full service community schools, through which OUSD seeks to (1) ensure a high-quality instructional core; (2) develop social, emotional, and physical health; and (3) create equitable opportunities for learning.[8] As the name implies, full service community schools will function as resource hubs that connect with local partners to help build seamless, "wraparound,"[9] service-oriented systems of academic, social, physical, and emotional support.

According to the Strategic Plan, "A Full Service Community School serves the whole child; it invites the community in and extends its boundaries into the community in order to accelerate academic achievement; it shares responsibility for student, family, and community success."[10] This is congruent with the approach of "complementary learning," as developed by the Harvard Family Research Project, which advances "the idea that a systemic approach—which intentionally integrates both school and non-school supports—can better ensure that all children have the skills they need to succeed in school and in life."[11]

After fulfilling their primary daily service of feeding schoolchildren, school-community kitchens as envisioned by OUSD will be available to the public every day, including evenings and weekends, year-round. OUSD Nutrition Services Director Jennifer LeBarre calls them "kitchens that moonlight."

Fully integrated and utilized school-community kitchens in Oakland will support:

- Culinary education for employees, students, staff, parents, and community;
- School gardens/district farm gardens;
- Community events and education;
- Food processing and preparation by community groups;
- Centers for emergency preparedness; and
- Joint-use of space by food-based enterprises.

The programmatic possibilities of school-community kitchens draw on best practices from diverse examples of community kitchens from across the U.S. and around the world. Community kitchens' services range from hunger alleviation to vocational training (e.g., DC Central Kitchen[12]), hospice support (e.g., Ceres Community Project[13]), cooking collectives and community food processing (e.g. Community Kitchens Northwest[14]), and rented "incubator space" for for-profit local enterprise.

The Rethinking School Lunch Oakland Feasibility Study recommends selecting one elementary and one secondary school site within each of Oakland's seven governing board members' districts, and identifies nine criteria for assessing individual schools' capacity and readiness to serve as school-community kitchen sites.[15] They will be located at OUSD schools with existing or planned school-based health centers, which are in turn mostly situated within areas of high food insecurity. Each school-community kitchen will reflect the unique character of its location, while together they will support equity and opportunity across the city.

Fully realizing this school and community asset in Oakland will require infrastructure improvements across the fourteen sites, starting with schools where cooking kitchens are already in place. The needs of each site vary, due to differences in existing equipment and architecture. Eventually, each site will need one six-burner range, convection ovens, food choppers, bulk cafeteria serving lines with hot food wells, cold pans, hydrating stations, and sneeze guards, as well as dishwashing equipment to process new compartmentalized trays and stainless steel flatware. Additionally, cafeteria upgrades will be necessary to improve the dining ambiance, a fundamental but often-neglected aspect in attracting users to the sites.

Centers of Community

Every community needs a place to be communal.

In times of crisis, for example, people want to come together. Whether for comfort, nourishment, knowledge, or resources, when the need is great, families, neighbors, and communities instinctively join to mutually address the challenges at hand. The reasons people come together may be convivial, civic, economic, or educational. Or perhaps communities are preparing for—or seeking relief from—a large-scale disaster.

As part of public life, public school campuses—familiar in every neighborhood—provide common space in response to diverse community needs. In particular, public school kitchens and dining facilities, while attending to the needs of students during the school day, can serve as useful neighborhood gathering places for people to collaborate in numerous creative ways.

At their best, kitchens evoke hospitality, nourishment, and conviviality. They are places where hungry people come together at common tables to share food and stories, building and strengthening the bonds of community; making and breaking bread with neighbors creates cohesiveness like few things can. Converting a school kitchen into a school-community kitchen declares that food is vitally important to a community on multiple levels, including physical, emotional, social, and ecological health.

School-community kitchens will fulfill the OUSD Strategic Plan's intention to "evolve the idea of school-community partnerships from simply after-school programming or space-sharing or visiting campuses into true and authentic collaborations" that serve and nourish thriving students and communities.[16] Full service community schools with integral school-community kitchens will equitably satisfy many kinds of hunger: for food, for connection, for education, for contribution. As a hearth is central to a home, school-community kitchens will provide common hearths for Oakland's diverse communities to gather around.

Prototypes of Community Kitchens: Examples from across the Country

The name "community kitchen" can refer to any of several forms of communal efforts (charitable, governmental, or for-profit) focused around food. Each of the examples below contains aspects that could be integrated into the emerging model of a school-community kitchen. In general, community kitchens tend to fall into several categories of purpose:

1. Hunger alleviation
   In the United States in particular, community kitchens often refer to projects of charitable organizations focused on providing meals to the needy. These programs are frequently run with a vocational training component or some other welfare-to-work program.

2. Communal meals preparation
   In Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, community kitchens are generally seen as group-driven, resource-sharing, cooperative efforts to affordably procure and process food for the group. The main goals appear to be social connectivity and frugality.

3. For-profit, community-scale food processing
   Serving emerging local and regional food systems, community-supported kitchens occupy the niche of community-scale food processors. Connecting an urban customer base directly with regional farmers and ranchers, they source, cook, and provide value-added prepared foods for sale.

4. Incubator kitchens
   These commercial kitchen spaces act as umbrellas for start-up food businesses, helping offset the generally high costs of commercial kitchen rentals or build-outs. They are usually available for shorter amounts of time or at unusual hours. As the name implies, these kitchens house fledgling businesses until they can support themselves.

Notable examples of community kitchens working on the hunger and vocational training fronts:

DC Central Kitchen
Washington, DC
http://www.dccentralkitchen.org

Through meal distribution, job training, and support of local food systems, DC Central Kitchen creates long-term solutions to the interconnected problems of poverty, hunger, and homelessness. The organization provides a continuum of services, starting with addressing hunger and continuing through vocational training and educational outreach. DC Central is a large food recycler, converting 3,000 pounds of surplus food per day into 4,500 meals for the needy. Since 2010, DC Central has provided cooked-from-scratch meals for seven DC Public Schools. It also runs model projects on college campuses in nineteen states across the U.S.

Community Kitchen of Monroe County
Bloomington, IN
http://www.monroecommunitykitchen.com

The mission of Community Kitchen is to work to eliminate hunger in Monroe County, Indiana and surrounding areas through direct service, education, and advocacy. Feeding strategies include sit-down meals at a central location, take-away meals, and weekend food backpacks for low-income children, all provided with no questions asked.

Saint Vincent de Paul of Alameda County Kitchen of Champions
Alameda County, CA
http://www.svdp-alameda.org/kitchenofchampions.php

The Saint Vincent de Paul (SVdP) Kitchen of Champions Culinary Program is a hands-on employment-training program. The program helps prepare people for fair-wage positions in the food and hospitality industry. The Kitchen of Champions program provides classroom and hands-on training, workforce readiness basics, case management, and job placement. Students in the training program get real-world practice, working under a master chef and helping prepare the meals served at the SVdP Free Dining Room at the Downtown-West Oakland border in Oakland, California.

A notable example of a community kitchen focused on hospice support and illness recovery:

Ceres Community Project
Sebastopol, CA
http://www.ceresproject.org

The Ceres Community Project works to restore locally grown, organic whole food to its place as the foundation of health for people, communities, and the planet. Its integrated approach brings teenage volunteers into the kitchen to learn about growing, preparing, and eating healthy foods through serving as the program's chefs. Each year, it prepares thousands of nutritious and organic meals for individuals and families facing cancer and other life-threatening illnesses. Those families receive vital nourishment along with the loving support of the community.

Notable examples of community kitchens based on communal meal preparation, thereby delivering community building and education along with food:

Community Kitchens Northwest
Seattle, WA
http://www.communitykitchensnw.org

A program of Seattle Tilth, Community Kitchens Northwest is a model of community building through food. This consortium of community kitchens creates opportunities for people to cook together in a common space in order to build community strength through food and to acquire lasting skills for self-empowerment. Each kitchen reflects the diversity of its community and chooses its own goals.

Fresh Choice Kitchens
Vancouver, BC
http://www.communitykitchens.ca/main/

Fresh Choice Kitchens (formerly the Vancouver Community Kitchen Project) works to create opportunities for people to cook together, thereby building community strength through food. As the community kitchen program of the Greater Vancouver Food Bank Society, Fresh Choice coordinates many types of kitchens across British Columbia, offering supporting services and resources, including a large database of established kitchens, tools designed for community kitchen use, food support strategies, canning and food preservation resources, and funding strategies.

Notable examples of for-profit, community-supported kitchens:

Three Stone Hearth
Berkeley, CA
http://www.threestonehearth.com

Three Stone Hearth has pioneered a mid-level, community scale of food processing, providing high-quality regional, sustainable, nutrient-dense prepared foods to hundreds of customers each week.

Salt, Fire, & Time
Portland, OR
http://saltfireandtime.com/

Salt, Fire, & Time works towards a sustainable local food economy by providing regional, seasonal organic cuisine that nourishes and supports healthy bodies and communities.

Notable examples of incubator kitchens:

La Cocina
San Francisco, CA
http://www.lacocinasf.org/

La Cocina supports low-income food entrepreneurs as they formalize and grow their businesses by providing affordable commercial kitchen space, industry-specific technical assistance and access to market opportunities. This nonprofit focuses primarily on women from communities of color and immigrant communities.

Alameda Point Collaborative
Alameda, CA
http://www.apcollaborative.org/

This established nonprofit recently added a community kitchen to its list of services. Along with supporting the APC's work, the fully equipped certified commercial kitchen is available for monthly or daily rental by Bay Area food entrepreneurs such as caterers, bakers, and farmers' market vendors. Renters are provided 24/7 access.

Culinary Incubator
http://www.culinaryincubator.com/maps.php

This website lists incubator kitchens across the nation.

Examples of public school use agreements for "kitchens that moonlight":

Web-based research will surface numerous examples of use agreements from public school districts nationwide detailing the use of school kitchens by the local community. These "non-school use of facilities" policies range from simple to complex, revealing a diversity of approaches for joint use of public assets. In most cases, the use of district kitchen facilities is very tightly controlled (including, for example, requirements that renters apply for use permits, demonstrate insurance coverage, and hire district staff at 1.5 times their normal rate to be present whenever the facility is being used).

Coeur d'Alene School District
Coeur d'Alene, ID
http://www.cdaschools.org/cms/page_view?d=x&piid=&vpid=1236521723002

Harford County Public Schools
Bel Air, MD
www.hcps.org/publicinformation/UOF/FacilitiesUseProcedures.pdf

Medway Public Schools
Medway, MA
http://www.medwayschools.org/schoolcomm/facilities_usage/default.htm

Albuquerque Public Schools
Albuquerque, NM
http://www.aps.edu/about-us/policies-and-procedural-directives/procedural-directives/k.-school-community-home-relations/buildings-and-grounds-non-school-use-of-school-facilities

Great Neck Public Schools
Great Neck, NY
http://www.greatneck.k12.ny.us/gnps/pages/policies/1500PublicUse.pdf

Seattle Public Schools
Seattle, WA
http://district.seattleschools.org/modules/groups/homepagefiles/cms/1583136/File/Departmental%20Content/nutrition/Community%20Use%20of%20Kitchens.pdf?sessionid=97219ca9b7ee094de7ac5e159cb4628b

Endnotes

[1] Economic Research Service, United States Department of Agriculture, *Food Security in the United States: Key Statistics and Graphics.* http://www.ers.usda.gov/briefing/foodsecurity/stats_graphs.htm.

[2] According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, more than one-third of U.S. adults are obese. (CDC, *U.S. Obesity Trends.* http://www.cdc.gov/obesity/data/trends.html.) The percentage of children aged 6–11 years in the United States who were obese increased from 7% in 1980 to nearly 20% in 2008. Similarly, the percentage of adolescents aged 12–19 years who were obese increased from 5% to 18% over the same period; in 2008, more than one third of children and adolescents were overweight or obese. Children and adolescents who are obese are likely to be obese as adults. (CDC, *Childhood Obesity Facts.* http://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/obesity/facts.htm.)

[3] Obesity-related medical costs are nearly 10 percent of all annual medical spending—$147 billion in 2009, double those of a decade before. Kenneth Thorpe of Emory University has projected that the U.S. will spend $344 billion yearly in obesity-related medical expenses by 2018 if current trends continue. Reuters, "Obesity Costs US Health System $147 Billion: Study" (July 27, 2009). http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE56Q36020090727.

[4] Alameda County Public Health Department, *Life and Death from Unnatural Causes: Health and Social Inequity in Alameda County* (2008). http://www.acphd.org/data-reports/reports-by-topic/social-and-health-equity/life-and-death-from-unnatural-causes.aspx, p. vii.

[5] In Oakland, California, for instance, only 54 percent of African Americans and 56 percent of Latinos graduate from high school while 75 percent of white students and 79 percent of Asian American students graduate, and many go on to college. Oakland Unified School District, *Community Schools, Thriving Students: A Five-Year Strategic Plan: Summary Report. Version, 2.0* (June, 2011). http://thrivingstudents.org/, p. 4.

[6] Action for Healthy Kids, *The Learning Connection: The Value of Improving Nutrition and Physical Activities in Our Schools.* http://www.actionforhealthykids.org/resources/research-andreports/the-learning-connection-the-value-of-improvingnutrition-and-physical-activity-in-our-schools.html, p. 13.

[7] Wendell Berry, "Solving for Pattern." In *The Gift of Good Land*. (New York: North Point Press, 1983).

[8] Oakland Unified School District, *Five-Year Strategic Plan*, p. 5.

[9] "Wraparound" services are highly individualized community-based intervention services, which usually focus on identifying and enhancing an individual's or family's natural or informal supports or assist clients in finding new informal supports.

[10] Oakland Unified School District, *Five-Year Strategic Plan*, p. 6.

[11] Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP). In addition, the HFRP has produced helpful documents, including a complementary learning overview and the report "Complementary Learning: Emerging Strategies, Evolving Ideas." http://www.hfrp.org/complementary-learning.

[12] Washington, D.C. http://www.dccentralkitchen.org/.

[13] Sebastopol, California. http://www.ceresproject.org/.

[14] Seattle, Washington. http://www.communitykitchensnw.org/.

[15] The nine criteria by which potential sites were evaluated are:

1. *Fiscal Responsibility*: Construction planned or school already has a cooking kitchen.
2. *Existing Infrastructure/Planned Construction*: The kitchen is currently a cooking kitchen or was a cooking kitchen within the last 10–15 years (these schools have plumbing and utilities in place), or the campus has already planned construction that will include a cooking kitchen.
3. *Instructional Garden Space*: Open space is available on school property that is or could be used for an instructional garden.
4. *Community Commitment*: Community has expressed interest to Nutrition Services that they want change in meal program or have supported programs like produce markets.
5. *Instructional Leadership*: Instructional leader has started work on creating community school, expressed interest to Nutrition Services about being a community kitchen, or has supported other health initiatives.
6. *Community Accessibility*: School can easily be reached via public transportation/walking.
7. *Free/Reduced* %: Free and reduced-price meal eligibility is 50% or higher.
8. *Enrollment*: Current enrollment is 300 or higher.
9. *Location in a Food Desert*: The school is located in what would be considered a food desert.

[16] Oakland Unified School District, *Five-Year Strategic Plan*, p. 16.

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About the Center for Ecoliteracy

The Center for Ecoliteracy is dedicated to education for sustainable living. Through its initiative Smart by Nature™, the Center offers expertise, inspiration, and resources to the sustainability movement in K–12 education, including its Rethinking School Lunch projects and the book *Smart by Nature: Schooling for Sustainability*, which showcases inspiring stories about school communities across the nation. The Center's services include seminars, academic program audits, coaching for teaching and learning, in-depth curriculum development, keynote presentations, technical assistance, and a leadership training academy. Learn more at www.ecoliteracy.org.

About Rethinking School Lunch

The Center for Ecoliteracy's Rethinking School Lunch collection of publications and projects includes an extensive online *Rethinking School Lunch Guide*; workshops and professional development seminars; consulting with schools and districts; essays on the Center for Ecoliteracy website; a conceptual framework for integrating learning in K–12 classrooms (*Big Ideas: Linking Food, Culture, Health, and the Environment*); the *Cooking with California Food in K–12 Schools* cookbook and professional development guide; and discussion guides for films such as *Food, Inc.* and *Nourish: Food + Community.*

RETHINKING SCHOOL LUNCH

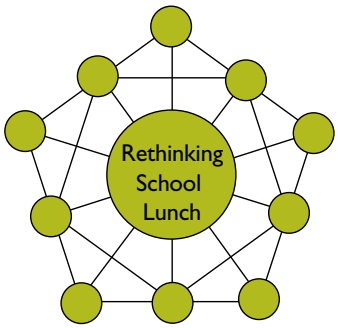
FOOD AND HEALTH

WELLNESS POLICY

TEACHING AND LEARNING

THE DINING EXPERIENCE

PROCUREMENT



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