

Written Testimony of Chef Ann Cooper
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House of Representatives, Committee on Rules
“Ending Hunger in America: The Role of Schools in Ending Hunger and Improving Nutrition”
Roundtable
Wednesday, September 15, 2021

Chairman McGovern, Ranking Member Cole, and distinguished Members of the Committee,

My name is Ann Cooper, and I am the Founder and President of the Board of the Chef Ann Foundation as well as a founding member of the ScratchWorks Collective and a former School Food Service Director for over two decades.

I am grateful for the opportunity to address this committee regarding childhood nutrition and the benefits of scratch cooking in school meal programs. Our country, our planet, our food system, and our children are facing many challenges today. We have an opportunity to address some of these challenges through our national school food programs.

I grew up in Hingham, MA and became a well-known chef in my early career, focused on creating culinary art in high-end restaurants. Through my work in sustainable food and agriculture, I was introduced to Alice Waters who helped me understand that our nation's school food system was broken and adding to our challenges around childhood wellness, planetary health, academic achievement, and health equity. As a young—and somewhat naive—chef, I was drawn to the challenge of school food and blazed a new career path in the early 2000's as the Food Service Director for Berkeley Unified School District in California.

I was shocked to learn of the reliance on packaged, processed foods there and felt that I had found my life's mission in helping to create the food that would shape the life-long nutritional habits of children. With the experience I had built from opening and running kitchens in restaurants, hotels, and cruise ships as well as overseeing catering events of 20,000 people, I worked with my school food team to create a new paradigm, relying on my culinary, procurement, labor training, and fiscal modeling skills. Dubbed “The Renegade Lunch Lady” by the media for serving fresh food, cooked from scratch in schools, I began to understand that the road I was embarking on would be a long one.

Nearly 20 years later, one of the things that makes me smile is meeting, hearing stories from and reading about all of the “Renegade” School Food Professionals in their communities across our country striving—under seriously adverse conditions—to serve kids fresh, scratch-cooked meals made with whole ingredients.

The Healthy Hunger Free Kids Act of 2010 was our nation's most monumental legislation passed to support healthier school meals. Over the last decade, even as it got “watered-down,” that act has ensured that our kids have access to more fresh fruits, veggies, and whole grains, as well as less sodium and saturated fat. It is now time to build on those 10 years of success.

While we have been able to increase the nutritional guidelines through HHFK, we have not been as successful moving the school food system away from ultra-processed foods. Large food manufacturers have simply reengineered their packaged, processed foods to meet the new guidelines. Chairman McGovern, you yourself have said that “we shouldn’t have to wait for a once-in-a-century pandemic to think boldly about addressing fundamental injustices in our society.” Myself and our school food partners across the country couldn’t agree more. Because of the pandemic, some people learned for the first time how important school meals are and how reliant families are on them. We need to make sure that we are not just addressing hunger relief through calorie relief, but that through a health equity lense we provide nutrition relief.

Over two-thirds—or 67%—of the calories consumed by children and adolescents in 2018 came from ultra-processed foods, a jump from 61% in 1999, according to a [peer-reviewed study published in the medical journal JAMA](#). “A diet high in ultra-processed foods may negatively influence children's dietary quality and contribute to adverse health outcomes in the long term,” says the study's author, [Fang Zhang](#), a nutrition and cancer epidemiologist at Tufts University's Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy. School food cannot keep contributing to kid’s increased consumption of ultra-processed foods; it is simply not okay.

By supporting scratch cooking in schools, we are putting the power of procurement back into the hands of school food operators. I have worked with school districts to help them take their ultra-processed chicken nuggets, mac and cheese, and pizza off the menu and replace them with scratch-cooked items. A processed chicken nugget has up to 30 ingredients in it, many of which you can’t even pronounce. When you replace that with oven-fried chicken that has only 8 ingredients in it, you are able to affect the health of the meal, procure (some) higher quality, more sustainable ingredients, and build out your workforce that has more value and skill. I don’t want to paint an unrealistic picture. Districts still only have about \$1.30 to spend per lunch on the food; the reimbursement rate needs to be increased. However, even with that small amount of money, districts can start making better procurement decisions and create impact in their local economies when they scratch cook. In fact, a 2017 study from the National Farm to School Network found that every dollar invested in farm to school stimulates an additional \$0.60-\$2.16 of local economic activity. In other words, scratch cooking can ultimately support small and medium sized farms and help to stabilize our country’s farmers.

Over 30 million kids eat school lunch in our country every day, and that number is growing with increased need. Approximately two-thirds of those children qualify for “Free & Reduced” meals, which means they are living in households with total income within 180% of the poverty line; many are children of color. Our country spends almost \$19 billion annually on school [breakfast](#) and [lunch](#), so it’s time that we made sure those dollars are working hard for our children and for

our planet. It should be a birthright in this country, one of the richest on the planet, that every child has access to healthy food every day and that no child is ever hungry!