Next Course Cafeterias: A Structural Shift for School Meals That Drives Health and Performance

A White Paper from A Longer Table

Executive Summary

A Longer Table's Next Course Cafeteria model reimagines what school food can be: chef-created, culturally responsive, shaped by student voice, financially sustainable, and rooted in fresh, whole ingredients.

Early results from A Longer Table's three pilot schools show measurable gains in attendance, academic performance, student satisfaction, and waste reduction — all achieved within existing school food budgets.

This is a pivotal moment for school leaders, funders, and policymakers to co-invest in scaling a model that delivers beneficial health and academic outcomes for every child.

> "One of the things I love about our lunch options is it gives kids exposure to food that they don't typically eat, but also it gives them something that's healthy to eat. Even if it's the only healthy meal they get throughout the day, they're at least getting something."
> — *School staff member, Next Course Cafeterias school*

School Meals as a Strategic Public Health Lever

Children consume nearly half of their daily calories at school. School meals are much more than food service; cafeterias are vital parts of our public health infrastructure. The quality, availability, and experience of these meals shape both nutrition and academic opportunity—and ultimately, public health outcomes.

Food insecurity raises obesity risk by thirty-two percent (32%)[1] and contributes to chronic disease. Childhood obesity rates have **tripled since 1970**[2], with projections showing that **eighty-five percent (85%) of Americans** could be overweight or obese by 2035.[3] In Indiana, **more than thirty-two percent 32.4% of adolescents** are above a healthy weight.[4] Children consume **up to half of their daily calories at school**[5] — making the quality of those meals a powerful public health intervention with lasting benefits for health, education, and economic equity. The true cost of poor-quality school food is measured

not just in dollars, but in long-term health and opportunity lost. There is a tremendous societal cost to poor-quality school food.

Nationally, expansion of universal free meal policies has been associated with **improved participation**, **reduced barriers like stigma**, and promising links to **attendance, health, and behavioral outcomes**.[6,7] A recent systematic review of universal free school meal (UFSM) programs found stronger evidence for gains in participation and modest evidence for attendance and health outcomes.[6]

> "I'm 30 years old and I've got health issues from the things that I ate when I was a child."
> — *Parent of a student, Next Course Cafeterias school*

The Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) already allows high-poverty schools to offer free breakfast and lunch universally, **removing paperwork burdens and increasing reach**.[8] In the 2023–24 school year, approximately sixty percent (60%) of National School Lunch Program (NSLP)-participating schools operated universal free meals under federal or state options, up from about eighteen percent (~18%) in 2014–15.[9]

Offering free meals is necessary but not sufficient: **quality, consumption, student satisfaction, and operational feasibility** remain the barriers to turning access into impact.

Consumption Gaps in Schools

While school meals ensure availability, they do not guarantee intake. At many schools, quality is the determining factor:

- At a future partner school currently using a heat-and-serve model, surveys showed that **two-thirds of students do not eat the meals they are served**, despite taking them.[8] Students cited poor taste, limited choice, and lack of freshness.
- This highlights a systemic gap: *participation data may overstate nutrition impact when food goes uneaten*.
- Families and staff further emphasized that long-term health outcomes are tied not only to access, but also to quality. Stress, nutrition, and chronic disease prevention were repeatedly named as pressing concerns.[9]

National and State Context

School Meals served

- 29.4M daily lunches (+6.8% year-over-year)
- 15.4M daily breakfasts (+8%)
- 261,193 daily breakfasts in Indiana
- 481,099 daily lunches in Indiana[8]

Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) — Universal School Meals in 2025

- 73.8% of eligible schools nationally adopted CEP.[8]
- In Indiana, only **48.3% of eligible schools** and **43.3% of eligible districts** participate in CEP .[8]
- Enrollment: **401,103 Indiana students in CEP schools**, +46,136 from prior year.[8]

The Next Course Cafeteria Model

Next Course transforms school cafeterias from reheating-only into culinary operations fueled by fresh ingredients, student co-design, workforce pathways, and sustainability practices. What distinguishes it is not just better ingredients — but **better systems** designed for more student participation at scale.

Pillar	Description	Why It Matters
Chef-led, scratch cooking	Meals are made fresh daily with whole foods and fewer ultra-processed ingredients	Boosts flavor, nutrition, and appeal — helps convert access into actual consumption
Student voice & co-design	Taste panels, surveys, student menu committees	Aligns menus with preferences, strengthens buy-in, reduces waste
Integration with CEP	Aligned to schools already operating universal school meals via CEP	Ensures universal reach and reduces administrative barriers

Workforce & training	Internships, culinary apprentices, staff training	Builds pipelines and strengthens staff retention
Sustainability	Uses the same federal dollars that other schools have access to.	Ensures long-term viability of operations for the school

Evidence From Three Pilot Schools

Early outcomes from three Next Course Cafeteria sites show **consistent positive impact** across key domains. While free meals matter, without quality and relevance, they risk being wasted every day. At A Longer Table, scientific outcome tracking and surveys are conducted in coordination with the **IU School of Medicine**, ensuring data collection is rigorous and credible. Schools report their own data, which is analyzed as well.

Outcome Domain	Results
Attendance / Absenteeism	+9% attendance and -44% chronic absenteeism at one elementary; -10% absenteeism at a high school
Academic Proficiency	+26% reading proficiency; higher rates of meeting math/ELA benchmarks
Health & Well-Being	Nurse visits dropped ~25%; students reported meals as “the only healthy meal of the day”
Participation & Satisfaction	Participation ≥95%; satisfaction rose from ~39% to ~80%
Environmental Impact	Landfill waste reduced by 50–72%

These are not isolated anecdotes — they represent clear signals of the benefits to students when cafeteria systems are upgraded.

> "If we can educate them, not only in math and English, but also in ways of being healthy, then they and their children will have better lives."
> — *School staff member, Next Course Cafeterias school*

National Evidence That Supports the Approach

While Next Course Cafeterias bring an innovative, systems-level solution to school meals, the model is grounded in evidence-based practices for changing youth outcomes by connecting school food practices to predictors of short-term success and lifelong health, as well as connecting risk factors in school food environments to chronic conditions like obesity and diabetes.

Decades of research show that improving the availability, appeal, and quality of school meals drives measurable improvements in long-term health, academic performance, and even measures of prosperity. The following key findings demonstrate how and why this model works:

- **Participation & equity**: Universal Free School Meal programs consistently boost uptake and reduce barriers such as stigma.[6,10]
- **Health outcomes**: Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) adoption has been associated with modest improvements in youth blood pressure[7] and reduced obesity risk in some longitudinal studies.[11]
- National School Lunch Program (NSLP) exposure reduces food insecurity and increases educational attainment: **a 10-point increase in participation yields nearly 1 year more schooling for boys, 0.365 years for girls**.[19]
- **Dietary quality**: Stricter nutritional standards — increased fresh fruits and vegetables, more whole grains, less sodium and sugar — drive measurable improvements in children's diets leading to reduced risk for noncommunicable diseases.[12,13] Studies use the HEI (Healthy Eating Index) to determine the quality of meals .
- **Learning & behavior**: Free meal access has been linked with attendance gains and fewer disciplinary incidents[6,14].

- **Cost-effectiveness**: Recent models show strengthening school nutrition standards yields health benefits that can offset incremental costs.[15] They do this by boosting participation, thereby making the meals more efficient, and by shifting procurement trends over time.

- **Economic multipliers**: Independent analyses suggest that local food procurement generates significant secondary benefits. Studies show each dollar spent on locally produced food generates between **$1.32 and $1.90** in additional local economic activity.[16] True Cost Accounting applied to U.S. school meals estimates that **for every $1 invested, more than $2 in human health and economic benefits are returned**.[16,17]

This literature reinforces that upgrading school meals is not just a social good — it is a structural intervention with durable benefits.

Indiana Policy Context
401,000 students currently attend schools that participate in CEP (Community Eligibility Provision - universal free access to all students) but only about forty-eight percent (~48%) of eligible schools have adopted CEP, leaving **significant room for expansion**. Other states provide matching funds to the school meal programs to encourage these types of programs or to incentivize particular cooking or procurement (such as local foods) methods to boost health or economic benefits of the program. Indiana does none of these. As a result, the state misses an opportunity to make school meals a powerful driver of food security and healthier outcomes for Hoosier youth.

Policy levers
Federal rules such as USDA nutrition standards, meal counting, and procurement thresholds set the compliance framework. State grants and innovation **funds could be created** to support kitchen upgrades and training.

Upcoming federal updates on sodium, whole grains, and added sugars may **favor scratch-cooked operations**.[17,18] Environmental goals such as waste diversion and local sourcing create additional policy alignment opportunities.

Scaling the Next Course Cafeterias Model
Scaling requires readiness across **infrastructure, staffing, procurement, and evaluation**. Building this capacity ensures that schools can not only launch scratch-cooking

operations but also **sustain quality, measure outcomes, and expand impact across entire districts**.

Dimension	Scaling Considerations
Kitchen Infrastructure	Equipment and space upgrades may be needed in many schools and districts.
Cost	When done at scale, schools operate their labor and direct operations budget using the same federal dollars they used before – the reimbursement programs of National School Lunch Program (NSLP), School Breakfast Program (SBP), and other Child Nutrition programs.
Staffing	Recruiting and training culinary staff, reducing turnover, creating a larger, upstream workforce and industry-wide interest in scratch cooking
Procurement	Adapting vendor contracts, increasing local sourcing, centralizing and leveraging larger buying power
Evaluation	Systems for consumption, cost, outcomes, and waste metrics
Partnerships	Leveraging health systems, and funders for technical support
Rollout to multi-site school networks and districts	Offering schools and districts capacity building in the areas they need the most assistance with while maintaining fidelity with essential parts of model

External Policy Agenda

Scaling Next Course Cafeterias requires **investment and supportive policies**. Funders, school leaders, and policymakers can help remove barriers and expand proven models by

aligning resources, incentives, and priorities — turning successful pilots into sustainable, district-wide solutions.

Funders, school leaders, and policymakers can **accelerate transformation** by:

Providing seed capital for kitchen equipment and startup costs.

Funding evaluation systems to capture consumption, cost, health, and learning outcomes.

Offering technical assistance grants to districts (for menu design, procurement, workforce training).

Aligning policy with incentives for scratch-prepared models and to incentivize fresh foods in their procurement.

Leveraging sustainability funding to support waste diversion and local sourcing.

Expanding Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) adoption so more schools can offer universal access and pair it with quality upgrades.

Conclusion

Next Course Cafeterias show what's possible when school food moves beyond **minimum compliance to maximum impact**. Three pilot schools have already demonstrated measurable gains in **attendance, academic proficiency, satisfaction, and sustainability**, proving the model's potential.

Scaling this approach is not about charity — it is a **strategic investment in public health and the future of our communities**. Now is the moment to act, ensuring that every student has access to meals that fuel learning, health, and lifelong success.

References

1. Pan, L., Sherry, B., Njai, R., & Blanck, H. M. (2012). Food insecurity is associated with obesity among U.S. adults in 12 states, 2009. Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, 112(9), 1403–1409. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jand.2012.06.011
2. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2022). Prevalence of Childhood Obesity in the United States, 2017–2020. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Retrieved from https://www.cdc.gov/obesity/data/childhood.html

3. Wang, Y., Beydoun, M. A., Liang, L., Caballero, B., & Kumanyika, S. K. (2008). Will all Americans become overweight or obese? Estimating the progression and cost of the U.S. obesity epidemic. Obesity, 16(10), 2323–2330. https://doi.org/10.1038/oby.2008.351
4. Indiana Department of Health. (2022). Appendix 2: Food Insecurity and Obesity – HEA 1007 Guidance. Based on data from the 2021 Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS). Retrieved from https://www.in.gov/health/hipp/files/Appendix-2-HEA-1007-Food-Insecurity-Obesity-Guidance.pdf
5. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2015). Vital Signs: Progress on Children Eating More Fruit, Not Vegetables. Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (MMWR), 64(33), 902–904. https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm6433a3.htm
6. Spill MK, Trivedi R, Thoerig RC, et al. Universal Free School Meals and School and Student Outcomes: A Systematic Review. *JAMA Netw Open*. 2024.
7. Cohen JFW, et al. Universal free school meals and child blood pressure: A quasi-experimental study. *Nutrients*. 2025.
8. Food Research & Action Center. The Reach of Breakfast & Lunch: Community Eligibility Provision. 2025. Congressional Research Service. School Lunch and Breakfast Participation Trends. 2025.
9. UC Nutrition Policy Institute. Universal free meal policies boost participation in U.S. schools. 2025.
10. Schwartz AE, Rothbart MW. Universal free meals and child BMI. *Econ Dev Q*. 2023.
11. Au LE, et al. School meal standards and diet quality: income disparities reduced. *Am J Prev Med*. 2023.
12. Healthy Eating Research. Rapid Health Impact Assessment of School Nutrition Standard Changes. 2024.
13. Gordanier J, et al. Universal free school meals and student outcomes. *Educ Finance Policy*. 2024.
14. Mozaffarian D, et al. Health and economic modeling of school meal standards. *Health Affairs*. 2025.
15. The Rockefeller Foundation. *Maximizing the Impact of Nutrition Interventions With Local Food Procurement*. Press Release. 2025.
16. The Rockefeller Foundation. *Increasing Investment in School Meals Pays for Itself and Then Some*. Grantee Impact Story. 2024.
17. USDA Food and Nutrition Service. Proposed updates to school meal nutrition standards. 2025.
18. RAND Corporation. Reimagining school meals to improve child health. 2024.
19. Hinrichs P. The effects of the National School Lunch Program on education and health. *J Policy Anal Manage.* 2010;29(3):479-505.