

SAFE FOOD COMMITTEE REPORT

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PHOTO BY MICHAEL BERMAN

PLOW TO PLATE PRESENTS: OUR FOOD CHAIN

By Adam Rabiner

As the parent of two high school students who came up through the public school system, I know firsthand that school lunch in New York City is not that great. In elementary school they could occasionally be coaxed by the promise of chicken nuggets or pizza Fridays. Once they hit middle school, though, they went cold turkey and either packed something from home or discovered every deli, diner, or take-out restaurant within a two-block radius of their school. Though this has been hard on the family wallet, it is difficult to blame them. The average cost of a school lunch is about \$1.30, and it is extremely hard to make a tasty meal on that tight of a budget.

Yet, somehow the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) found a way, without an infusion of cash, to transform its school lunch program, making it healthier and tastier at the same time. While New York City public schools served roughly 90 million meals during the pandemic as of February 2021, LAUSD has served more than 100 million, even though its student population is about 600,000, just over half the size of New York City's. The documentary *Our Food Chain*, Plow to Plate's screening from earlier this month, tells the story of how they made it happen and provides a useful blueprint for other school districts seeking to make similar changes.

A lot of factors came together to turn the system around. Leaders at the top wanted to make the change, introducing salad bars, breads and pastries made with whole grain flour, more fresh fruits and vegetables and fewer processed foods. But it was also necessary to get buy-in from the bottom. Teachers and even principals were enlisted to teach about healthy eating habits. Parents were also involved in the conversations around health and nutrition.

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Crucially, students were brought in, for example, through school gardens. Kids of all ages who planted, tended, watered and then harvested their own produce really liked eating it. They also liked salad bars that provided lots of à la carte choices or dishes that were familiar to many of them, like rice and beans or other Latino foods. Nutrition was incorporated into the language arts and history curricula, and some high schools instituted preprofessional culinary education courses and formed teams to compete against one another in a "Cooking up Change" challenge to create a typical school lunch. The winners of one of these competitions even had their recipes recreated at a UCLA cafeteria and served to students there.

LAUSD also partnered with local farmers and other businesses like packing houses,

warehouses, manufacturing and distribution centers. One farmer, Bob Knight of Old Grove Orange, whose oranges were too small to be commercially viable, was a perfect fit for the district because students liked the smaller and sweeter oranges, and there were more of them by weight to distribute to the schools. These partnerships with suppliers and companies involved with product development, equipment and packaging eventually led the district to source more than 50 percent of its ingredients locally, benefitting not just the students but also the local economy. It also resulted in typical unappealing and unaesthetic school food being transformed into meals that looked like those one might find in any local supermarket, healthy but appetizing.

The results of all these changes were broader access to healthier food for students, parents and communities; a decline in obesity and hunger; improved attention, energy levels and academic performance; and a lot less food waste.

Here in New York City, Mayor Eric Adams is a big advocate for healthy foods. In 2016, he woke up blind one morning and learned from his doctor that he had diabetes. He made some radical changes to his diet by committing to a healthy, plant-based diet and was able to reverse the diagnosis. In September, he hired Rachel Ray and a small group of other celebrity chefs—known as the Chefs Council—to develop, with input from students and parents, more than 100 better-tasting vegan school lunches.

In soliciting input from all the stakeholders involved and testing the results in the five boroughs, it appears that the LA School district's inclusive model, demonstrated in *Our Food Chain*, is providing some useful guidance to New York City. Hopefully the city's Vegan Fridays, which debuted with bagged chips and burritos with non-vegan cheese, has a tastier future in store.