

Cafeteria Chronicles: Scratch Cooking Best Practices for School Kitchens



Are you looking to implement scratch cooking in your school nutrition program but aren't sure where to start?

Action for Healthy Kids (AFHK) sat down with [Chef Ann Foundation](#) (CAF), an organization committed to helping school districts build, implement, and support a self-operated, cook-from-scratch program. We asked them questions to better understand how schools can be successful with scratch cooking.

This material is based upon work supported by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Food and Nutrition Administration. USDA is an equal opportunity provider, employer, and lender.

AFHK: What is one misconception about scratch cooking in schools?

CAF: That it is more work and takes more time. We recommend offering *fewer* items and making them better. Starting out with easy speed-scratch items like a [toasted cheese sandwich](#), you can take that pre-packaged item and make it fresh with very little staff training. Easing your staff into the process and developing skills to take on more complex recipes eventually. More standardized recipes are available on [The Lunch Box](#) and the Institute of Child Nutrition's [\(ICN\) Child Nutrition Recipe Box](#), which includes USDA's standardized recipes.

AFHK: What are some barriers to scratch cooking and how can school districts overcome them?

CAF: The biggest barriers are budget constraints, inadequate kitchen infrastructure, and staffing challenges. Many school kitchens were built for reheating pre-packaged meals rather than cooking from scratch. Schools often struggle to find and retain kitchen staff with the skills needed for scratch cooking or preparing healthier meals. Despite these barriers, many schools are making progress by leveraging grant programs, community partnerships, and advocacy efforts. With the right resources, training, and support, overcoming these challenges is possible.

AFHK: If there is one thing you could share with school districts needing help, what would it be?

CAF: There is no problem that is too small or too big to ask for help. It can be nice to have someone to talk through programs and processes in a safe, judgement-free environment. We are all on the same team trying to provide delicious food to kids and would love to help schools further their goals and programs.

Hear from schools who have implemented scratch cooking successfully in this [video](#).

Ready to get started?

There are many FREE resources for school food professionals interested in scratch cooking, including the [Culinary Institute of Child Nutrition](#) trainings and [The Lunch Box](#), where you can find recipes, sample documents, and step-by-step guides to help districts provide delicious meals to their students.

Thank you to Chef Ann Foundation for sharing how schools can journey toward scratch cooking! To learn more about Chef Ann Foundation, visit their [website](#).

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