

Cafeteria Chronicles: Hopewell Valey Regional School District



During National School Lunch Week, Timberlane Middle School in Pennington, NJ, hosted representatives of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), New Jersey Department of Agriculture (NJDA), and Action for Healthy Kids (AFHK). The event celebrated Hopewell Valley Regional School District's (HVRSD) innovative nutrition program, which recently earned the Healthy Meals Incentives (HMI) Recognition Award for Innovation in the Preparation of School Meals. This honor, a part of the USDA and AFHK's Healthy Meals Incentives (HMI) Initiative, in partnership with Chef Ann Foundation and RMC Health, highlights schools that prioritize fresh, scratch made meals and local sourcing.

A standout feature of the visit was the scratch-made Vegetable Fried Rice, incorporating local bok choy, carrots, corn, peas, cabbage, rice, and ginger – an example of the district's farm-to-tray philosophy. HVRSD's Farm Stand program also offers students unlimited fresh fruits and

vegetables, expanding access to nutritious options and reducing food waste by allowing students to select their favorites from a variety of choices.



Scratch cooking allows us to serve meals that are both nutritious and appealing, bringing fresh, local flavors directly to student's plates. Seeing students' faces as they try these meals is incredibly rewarding.

Toni Marie Bowman, MBA, RDN, SNS
Director of Nutrition Services



Scratch cooked meals help increase student interest and participation by offering more local, fresh, and appealing options. There is an elevated level of excitement amongst the students when they see fresh cooked food.

Rudy Vilardi
Food Service Director

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HVRSD's focus on scratch cooking goes beyond the cafeteria, using taste tests and nutrition education to encourage students to explore new flavors and build healthy habits. These strategies have enhanced the appeal of school meals and strengthened the connection between students, local agriculture, and the broader community.



Best Practices for Scratch Cooking

Vilardi offered practical advice for districts aspiring to incorporate scratch cooking:

- 1 **Start small:** Focus on "quick scratch" methods, elevating pre-prepared items gradually. Transitioning to scratch cooking takes time, so have patience.
- 2 **Train your team:** Invest in cross-training staff in knife skills and equipment use. Providing all the necessary ingredients to set them up for success will help build confidence, which in turn will motivate staff to want to continue elevating the menu.
- 3 **Partner locally:** Build relationships with nearby farms to source fresh, high-quality ingredients.

Fueling the Future with School Nutrition

HVRSD's commitment to nutrition, education, and sustainability exemplifies how innovative practices can transform school meals. By combining local partnerships, thoughtful menu development, and a commitment to student health, the district proves that nutritious meals can be both delicious and impactful.

Feeling inspired by HVRSD's commitment to healthy meals? Share your school nutrition successes by applying for an **HMI Recognition Award!**

For more coverage of this event, visit **NJDA**, **MercerMe**, or **Pomptonian Food Service**.

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