

## **PATASCHOOL**

PataSchool Scratch kitchens assure reliable access to healthy school food, impacting positive educational and health outcomes while creating thriving wage jobs. This project improves the nutritional quality of the food served, ensures that children are food secure, and reduces their risk of obesity and related diseases by positively influencing their eating attitudes and behaviors.

Early evaluation results also show positive trends in attendance and academic performance. These results may lead to further hypotheses to be studied.

PataSchool leverages The Patachou Foundation's 10 years of childhood hunger relief experience to help schools overcome barriers to implementing scratch kitchens so children can access healthy food.

## **SCHOOL FOOD IS HUNGER RELIEF**

The National School Lunch Program provides over 4.9 billion meals yearly to over 30 million students (1). That amounts to 15% of all food security relief in Indianapolis (the second-largest hunger relief program in number of meals distributed) (2).

School food environments are the most efficient route to intervene in youth diets in Indiana. Kids rely on school meals and up to 50% of a child's daily calories are consumed at school (3).

## **FOOD INSECURITY AND OBESITY ARE LINKED**

Food insecurity and low access to fresh foods lead to poor health outcomes: Food insecurity produces a 32% higher risk of obesity (4). This affects some populations more than others: Black families are more likely to be food insecure than their white counterparts in Indianapolis (2).

Childhood obesity has tripled since 1970 according to the CDC (5). Without significant change, over 85% of the US population is projected to be overweight or obese by 2035 (6). Obesity represents a true cost to society: by merely halting the increase in obesity prevalence over the next 20 years, the US would save \$549.5 billion in medical costs (6).

In Indiana, the 2021 BRFSS found that adolescents have an obesity rate of 17.6% and an overweight rate of 14.8% for a total of 32.4% above a healthy weight, and over two-thirds (69.6%) of adults are overweight or obese.

## **SCHOOL MEALS ARE THE BEST OPPORTUNITY TO CHANGE OUTCOMES**

School food represents an opportunity to provide high-quality, culturally relevant meals for children that can form the basis of lifelong eating habits. However, this potential is underrealized because food service operations have been disinvested since the 1970s. The predominant model of school food in Central Indiana relies on both highly processed and quick-service food options. These foods are specifically manufactured to meet nutrition requirements but do not give children a balanced, high-quality diet (7). Highly processed foods create addictive-like patterns that lead to overconsumption of calories, which contributes to obesity (8, see also 9, 10).

While wholesale disinvestment from school food has negatively impacted food quality, a lack of equitable resource distribution has also led to disparities in food quality for low-income children. Better-resourced schools and districts have the funding and personnel bandwidth to invest in their school food service operations, but low-income schools do not. Anecdotal evidence abounds about the difference in the quality of food between food options in wealthier areas versus low-income schools (11), and the school food impacts of resource inequities are seen in Central Indiana schools.

In Indiana, 42.7% of adults eat fruits less than one time per day, and 20.9% eat vegetables less than one time per day (2021 BRFSS). Providing fresh fruits and vegetables in schools has shown a strong association with more requests for vegetables by children outside of school time (12). Early eating behaviors modeled at school shape lifelong habits that can ultimately shift these inadequate fruit and vegetable consumption rates.

School food environments ultimately lead to lifelong food and eating habits (9, 10). Schools are food systems in and of themselves, and the food available within them shapes kids' behaviors for a lifetime. The national PTA advocates enlisting chefs to retrain food-service staff because schools lack culinary and business knowledge to operate a from-scratch food operation (11).

School food environments are governed by school wellness policies. These wellness policies are often created once but not often referenced. The committees creating these policies do not offer meaningful feedback loops for parents and community members to impact these food environments for their children.

### **RADICAL CHANGE IN SCHOOL FOOD NEEDS TO OCCUR**

Institutional food conglomerates, distributors, and manufacturers often make school food decisions without significant student and parent/guardian feedback. But when the New York Times asked students how to improve school meals, their solutions were simple: increase fresh ingredients, create culturally relevant menus, ask students to participate in making the menu, and make the cafeteria more inviting. (14) Equipping schools and communities with the skills to fully leverage the National School Lunch Program is precisely what PataSchool does.

PataSchool improves the quality and experience of school food, which has been linked to reducing childhood obesity and improving food and nutrition security for children. Improving school food also affects other outcomes, including behavior, attendance, and academics (15, 13).

### **SCRATCH COOKING AT SCHOOL FOOD MODEL IN THE LITERATURE**

The Tisch Food Center (16) examined the necessary systemic changes within schools to shift to scratch cooking with a similar model based out of New England area schools called Brigaid. They identified a systems change lens that addresses the three components of the school food system: elements, interconnections (including policies, practices, people, and promotion), and purpose. This framework and the study's findings are often reflected through PataSchool because the model is so similar.

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