

# KERN ENGAGES STUDENTS IN SCHOOL MEALS

## ABOUT THE DISTRICT

Kern County Superintendent of Schools (KCSOS) is located in Central California in Kern County. KCSOS has 10 preschools, two schools for students with disabilities, five juvenile court schools, six community schools, and seven Valley Charter Oak Schools, serving 5,473 students, 71 percent of whom were eligible for free and reduced-price school meals during the 2022–2023 school year. Their central kitchen prepares more than 700,000 breakfasts, lunches and snacks each year.

## ACTIVITIES

- Developed two standardized scratch-cooking recipes featuring local ingredients
- Involved students from four schools in recipe taste-testing
- Sourced local tomatoes, spinach, zucchini, and yellow squash from Farmhouse Farms
- Offered nutrition education and provided family-sized version of the recipes
- Conducted professional development through training and participation in the California Department of Education's Workshop series

***“Locally Grown or Home-Grown Ingredients make kids more excited about veggies...”***

Rafael Juarez, Director of Food & Nutrition

When KCSOS's food service team embarked on the Taste of California Standardized Challenge journey in October 2021, little did they know that it would be one of their most rewarding journeys. They trained staff, educated students, and marketed healthier options all while engaging students through live, onsite cooking demonstrations and taste-testing events. Their efforts also contributed to the building movement towards sustainability in school food service by procuring ingredients locally as well as by serving scratch-cooked, minimally processed foods.

## LOCAL INGREDIENTS

KCSOS developed two recipes featuring locally grown tomatoes, spinach, zucchini, and yellow squash from Farmhouse Farms.



*Garlicky Chicken Ratatouille*



## RECIPE TESTING WITH STUDENTS

Students from several schools, including Valley Oaks Charter School, DiGiorgio Elementary, Kelly F Blanton Learning Center, and East Kern Community Center were given the chance to taste-test the two new recipes developed by the KCSOS Central Kitchen. Welcoming this change in their normal lunch routine, over 400 students excitedly savored the Beefy Pizzeria Pasta and Garlicky Chicken Ratatouille samples and provided detailed recipe feedback. The recipes achieved an 88 percent approval rating. Rafael Juarez, the Director of Food and Nutrition Services, considered both recipes a success and was happy that students who normally didn't like vegetables were enthusiastically eating zucchini, squash, and spinach-the featured ingredients in both recipes.

## NUTRITION EDUCATION

KCSOS was able to involve the students in on-site cooking and tasting experiences. They also encourage at home experiences by converting the recipe to family-sized portions and sending it home with the students. KCSOS has made a commitment to continue these taste-testing opportunities by investing in the needed equipment to support taking tasting events on the road to educate students on the importance of healthy eating.

## STAFF DEVELOPMENT

KCSOS Director of Food and Nutrition Services, Rafael Juarez, played an integral role in the development of the California Department of Education's recipe standardization trainings. He helped to develop the overall training and led several of the hands-on cooking experiences offered at these workshops. He also contributed to the CDE's sessions at the California School Nutrition Association.

## LESSONS LEARNED

Their biggest "learned and confirmed" best practice was to fully engage students when developing new recipes. While taste tests were a great way support to recipe development, taking the time to collect candid feedback in person increased acceptability and viability. Through hands-on cooking demonstrations, KCSOS engaged students and parents. By preparing the recipes from freshly picked garden ingredients and turning them into colorful, fragrant, hot-plated meals in front of their eyes, perceptions of a pasta featuring spinach and an Italian dish consisting mostly of squash and other fresh vegetables was radically transformed. The education provided about where their food came from, how it was grown, and how fun cooking can be will strengthen the connections between students, families, and KCSOS.



*Beefy Pizzeria Pasta: Featuring Spinach*

One of their achievements was finding a local small farmer who will continue to be their source for fresh ingredients as KCSOS does more scratch cooking. The two newly-developed recipes will be integrated into the current lunch menu, and supported by cooking demonstrations. KCSOS plans to continue partnering with even more local farmers and creating even more standardized recipes to keep kids excited about vegetables.

## Kern County Superintendent of Schools

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*Recipes: Beefy Pizzeria Pasta  
Garlicky Chicken Ratatouille*



*This publication was created with funding from a 2021 U.S. Department of Agriculture Team Nutrition Grant awarded to the Nutrition Services Division (NSD) of the California Department of Education (CDE). The CDE awarded subgrants to school districts to develop standardized recipes and share their success stories. The CDE is an equal opportunity employer.*

