



Vegan Meals in LAUSD

A case study and lessons-learned for
alternatives in school food service

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Introduction and Acknowledgements

The Urban & Environmental Policy Institute (UEPI) at Occidental College has a long history of both advocacy and collaboration with the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD). In the late 1990s, UEPI organized the Healthy School Food Coalition—a group of parents, students, and school stakeholders within LAUSD schools—to advocate for healthier school food environments. The result was the “Soda Ban” (officially the Healthy Beverage Resolution) of 2002, which for the first time outlawed the sale of soda and similar sugary drinks on school campuses. The group went on to successfully advocate for two other District policies in 2003 and 2005, which collectively outlawed junk food sales, guaranteed the opportunity to eat school breakfast, specified enough time for students to eat, and eliminated the meal ticket system. Since these successes, UEPI has worked collaboratively with the District as part of the Central Coordinated Health and Safety Committee and as a contributor to the Blueprint for Wellness, the compilation of all health policies and official Wellness Policy for all LAUSD schools. UEPI has worked with the District on numerous projects and pilot programs to improve the healthfulness of school meals and ensure that students are well-fed each day. [1]

Today, one of LAUSD Food Services’s most noteworthy innovations is the vegan pilot program. In September 2017, LAUSD implemented the Vegan Pilot Program across seven LAUSD schools. This program was the first of its kind to be introduced to public school students in the Los Angeles area and also among the first vegan school meal programs in the country. In response to pressure from students, faculty, and other stakeholders starting in 2016, the district piloted daily vegan meals in order to meet the requests and needs of their students. According to nutrition services representatives, by the end of the 2017-18 academic school year, the program will be active in 42 different Los Angeles schools.

This report recounts the history of the introduction of vegan food in Los Angeles schools, the timeline of the pilot’s implementation, and the overarching changes and trends in LAUSD food services. This information was collected through feedback from students, district members, and other important nutrition services stakeholders such as cafeteria managers and non-profit workers associated with LAUSD. The implementation of the Vegan Pilot Program has been a work in progress met with many challenges and triumphs. Although the pilot has received positive reception and is widely supported by students, cafeteria workers, and food service employees, the amount of individuals regularly selecting vegan meals remains low. However, despite a lack of demand, the pilot’s introduction has provided benefits for many nutrition services stakeholders and has led to an increased interest about health and nutrition in LAUSD schools.

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School Food in LAUSD

Los Angeles Unified School District's \$394 million Food Services division serves more than 700,000 meals each day through its breakfast, lunch, supper, and summer programs. LAUSD endeavors to "nourish children to achieve excellence," an accomplishment that is illustrated in the 700,000 meals served each school day. [2]

The vegan meal pilot is the latest initiative in a long history of innovation in school food service. LAUSD implemented internal health policies limiting junk food and imposing nutrition standards on food served in school long before state and federal regulations required it. LAUSD was an early adopter of new federal nutrition regulations in 2010, which dramatically increased nutrition requirements, and hired an executive chef to oversee the complete overhaul of the menu to include diverse cultural foods and a process of student taste testing to approve new dishes. LAUSD signed on to the Good Food Purchasing Pledge in 2011, committing to standards for local purchasing and labor practices for its food contracts. LAUSD also took the bold step of implementing Breakfast in the Classroom across the entire school district in 2012, dramatically increasing the number of students who receive this important meal at school and turning it into the largest school breakfast program in the nation.

LAUSD had committed to offering a vegetarian option at each meal since 2003, and had recently featured "Meatless Mondays" menus as well, and now with the vegan pilot is offering more school fully plant-based foods for students. The vegan pilot program is the one of the first among its kind to be implemented in a public school district in the United States.



LAUSD lunches through the years. Photos by UEPI.

The Pacific Palisades Call to Action: From Animal Rights to Choice Expansion

The discussion of vegan food availability in LAUSD schools was originally sparked by student campaign at Pacific Palisades High School. A group of vegan students started the “Earth Peace Healthy Freedom Campaign” and came to the school board with support from actress Pamela Anderson advocating for the adoption of a vegan menu in LAUSD schools. [3] While the campaigns background was rooted in promoting animal rights, as the discussion of vegan food continued, the idea of increasing options for students gained traction and became a key selling point in the pilot’s adoption. In May 2017, Steve Zimmer, vegetarian and member of the LAUSD school board, drafted a resolution for the Vegan Pilot Program. This ultimately led the pilot’s implementation 6 months later. [4]

The idea that vegan and plant-based meals are healthier than traditional meals is becoming increasingly popular; however, providing healthier meals has more to do with maximizing options and choice. According to both Senior Nutrition Specialist Ivy Marx and Food Services Director Joseph Vaughn, all food served at LAUSD schools must comply with national health regulations, and thus, is all “healthy.” [5] LAUSD Food Services has a continual general interest in increasing meal options and meeting student demand by nature of the way that school meal systems operate. School meals are funded through a reimbursement system with the federal government. The cost of running a meal program is reimbursed to the school district on a per-student, per-meal basis. School districts must maintain participation rates in the meal program at a certain level in order for the program to break even. Any methods to increase meal participation—be they new foods or more popular items—are therefore of interest to the school district.

Despite high popular demand for the vegan pilot, there was a yearlong delay for program implementation between the Earth Peace Healthy Freedom Campaign’s first petition to the school board and the roll out of Vegan foods in September 2018. Two major challenges stalled the implementation: the appointment of a new director of Food Services in 2016 and a lack of vegan food vendors within the budget of Los Angeles Unified School District.

In 2016, Joseph Vaughn joined LAUSD as the director for the Food Services Division of Los Angeles. Due to the fact that Vaughn was appointed amidst the beginnings of Vegan Pilot implementation discussions, he played an active role spearheading the program’s adoption across seven schools in Los Angeles. Although, he is no longer with LAUSD, his cooperation with student demands and fast execution helped made a successful year with the Vegan pilot possible.

In May 2017, the Los Angeles Unified School District Board of Education officially approved the Vegan Pilot program. The district subsequently came up with a marketing strategy, worked closely with the selected vendors, and organized a timeline for vegan pilot food rollout. During summer 2017, Vegan taste test sessions were organized for select cafeteria managers, district members, and students. In August 2017, Cafeteria Managers were trained on vegan food prepared prior to September 2017 vegan rollout.

Pilot Implementation and Students Perspectives at Roosevelt High School

Since September, the daily vegan pilot menu has been as follows: **Monday Vegan Chili & Tortilla Chips, Tuesday Teriyaki Veggie Sandwich, Wednesday Bean Tamale, Thursday, Italian Sub Sausage, Friday Vegan Burger.** [6] According to Joseph Vaughn, Ivy Marx, and other Nutrition Services staff, the number of students participating in the vegan pilot on a weekly basis is approximately 13%.

According to cafeteria managers and students, while the 13% figure was accurate throughout the introduction of the program, interest has fallen significantly in the past several months. However, these rates are not necessarily reflective of the attitudes towards vegan meals within LAUSD and also don't necessarily suggest that this pilot was unsuccessful in the eyes of the district or students. Students are heavily in support of this pilot program which is most clearly reflected in the Roosevelt food organization group Healthy School Meals Advocacy Project. HSMAP is a group at Roosevelt high school that organizes around nutrition, health, and wellness. While this group initially formed in 2014, it regrouped upon the announcement of LAUSD vegan pilot implementation and met with Joseph Vaughn director of Food Services in 2016 to lobby their school's selection for the pilot program.

During the Vegan Pilot's implementation, HSMAP surveyed students at school about their opinions on the vegan meals. According to their findings, while the number of students opting for vegan choices was still relatively low, the reception was generally positive among those who tried them. Although the number of students is low, students found that there was less vegan food thrown away and the people who selected them did in fact finish the meal

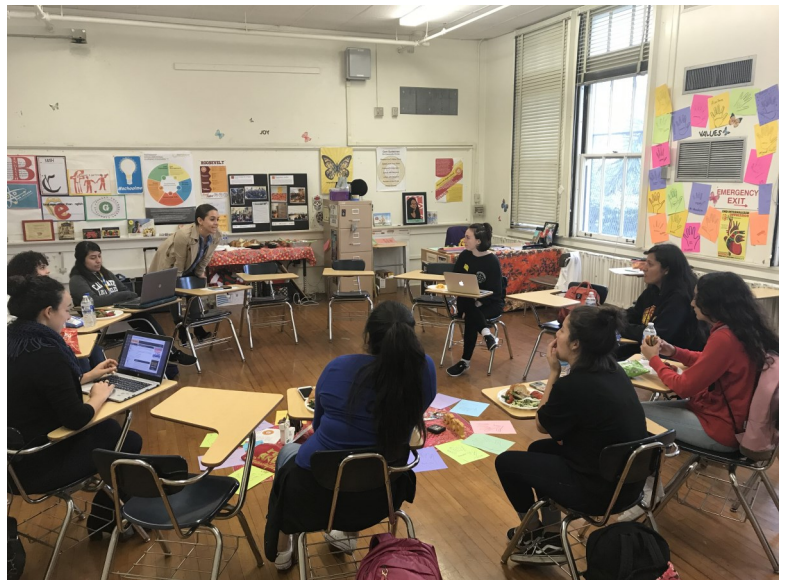
Voices of HSMAP students

The actions surrounded the vegan pilot program has sparked a new era of student involvement in LAUSD nutrition ser-

A Student Perspective: Why They Joined HSMAP

"There is no other club that fights for better food for students."

"My friends were going to the club and I didn't know what food justice was. I didn't think I could do anything until I came to this club."



Students discussing findings from recent student-run Vegan Pilot Survey at Roosevelt High School.

LAUSD's Major Challenge: Food Waste

The Vegan Pilot's implementation has brought to light the food waste problem present in LAUSD schools. According to LAUSD Cafeteria Manager Kikada Tarrant, many of the main entrees are thrown away. Federal policies mandate that students select at least 3 out of the 5 items with a school lunch; a policy intended to ensure that students are eating a nutritionally adequate meal, but with the side effect that students are forced to take food that they don't necessarily want. A typical LAUSD school lunch at a high school offers student a choice between two entrees, 2-3 fruit or vegetable sides, and milk. However, many students are unsatisfied with the taste of the food and prefer to take only chocolate milk and eat fruit, leading many students to discard their entree upon exiting the meal line. This trend of food waste is associated with two main factors. First, students are required to take an entree item regardless of their level of hunger. Furthermore, in compliance with federal nutrition regulations, entrees contain low sodium levels and fats which leaves the food relatively bland in comparison to foods that students eat at home or the processed foods that comprise most snack foods for high school students. According to Cafeteria Managers, LAUSD meals are often poorly rated in taste tests not necessarily because of the content itself, ingredients, or freshness of the food, but rather, the lack of flavor. This is something that Cafeteria managers and district staff members are unable to change, leading to a high level of school meal disapproval, and ultimately, an abundance of food waste.

In the eyes of the district and cafeteria managers, providing vegan meals offers an additional option that has the potential to offset the extreme amount of food waste. While only one or two vegan lunches may be sold in a day, these could potentially be two meals eaten and thus unwasted by students. Additionally, additional meals increase the district's sale numbers, ultimately increasing their bottom line, providing a practical remedy to the food waste problem.



Students throw away lunch trash at Roosevelt High School. Photo by UEPI.

Looking Ahead and Looking Back: Persistent Problems and Emerging New Attitudes Towards School Meals

While innovative new menus and following trends toward more plant-based meals is important, the longest-standing issues is school food service continue to persist. To improve the school food experience for students and ultimately reduce hunger and improve nutrition, UEPI has the following recommendations for schools seeking to improve their food environments:

1. Invest in cafeteria improvements

Improvements to the menu and the food itself will not have an impact if the conditions in which students eat food is unpleasant or unwelcoming. School cafeterias and kitchens need to be viewed as integral parts of the school that are as necessary to the student experience as other campus infrastructure. Cafeteria staff should also have access to adequate equipment to produce an enjoyable meal experience for students. While cafeteria infrastructure decisions are typically made separately from other campus improvements, schools can still advocate for their cafeterias.

2. Build respect and collaboration between Cafeteria staff and school staff

Cafeteria managers and staff face numerous challenges that other school staff are largely unaware of, and are often at odds with the interests of teachers, students clubs, and support groups on campus. Including Cafeteria Managers in administrative meetings, Wellness Committees, and campus decision-making is important to establish common goals for students' wellbeing.

3. Commit to full participation in meal application submission

Missing or inaccurate meal applications can mean the difference between a child going hungry and having access to 3 meals a day at school. Additionally, full participation in the meal program is the only way for more funding to go into the meal program. Making sure that all students submit accurate meal applications is a critical first step in maximizing participation.

4. Advocate for universal free meals for all of LAUSD

As of the 2016-17 school year, nearly 80% of all LAUSD students are eligible for free or reduced-price meals at school. With these rates, universal free meals should be a goal of the entire district. While the regulatory steps needed to take this action are at the District level rather than at each school site, it is important for schools to know that such steps are possible.

5. Follow nutrition requirements for food sold outside of the cafeteria

Unhealthy snacks and junk food sold at school vending machines, student stores, and at fundraiser events continue to be one of largest barriers to healthy environments on campus. While there are regulations against junk food at school, these rules remain almost completely unenforced, and not only give student unhealthy food, but also undermine the success of the school meal program by competing with school lunch and breakfast. School administration should take snack and fundraiser rules seriously and consider it part of supporting the school meal program.

6. Encourage student and staff efforts to reduce food waste

The federal rules and regulations about school meals encourage a certain amount of food waste, however, individual cafeterias can take steps to reduce this waste on their campuses. Student-run share tables can divert unwanted entrees away from the trash can and give options to students who may want second helpings; un-sold school meals can also be donated to local food pantries. These and similar efforts can provide leadership opportunities for students while also preventing hunger and food waste.

Citations

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