

THE PROMISE OF PLANT-FORWARD PROCUREMENT

A Policy Trifecta for Child Nutrition,
Farm Resilience, and Economic Growth



Culinary Institute
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THE PROMISE OF PLANT-FORWARD PROCUREMENT: A POLICY TRIFECTA FOR CHILD NUTRITION, FARM RESILIENCE, AND ECONOMIC GROWTH

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THE OPPORTUNITY: SMARTER SPENDING FOR NUTRITION AND AGRICULTURE

Each year, billions in public food purchasing dollars offer a powerful but often overlooked opportunity for systems change. School meal programs and a highly efficient use of federal dollars, with [every dollar spent on school meals providing a 2x return in human health and economic benefits](#). With U.S. schools serving over 7 billion meals annually, making them [America's largest restaurant chain](#), their collective purchasing power has the potential to strengthen our food system while also investing in the health and wellbeing of kids and communities.

A strategic, evidence-based plant-forward menu and procurement approach can unlock a rare policy “trifecta”: improving public health, delivering economic advantages for farming and rural communities, and building resilient regional supply chains.

THE SOLUTION: A PROVEN, FLEXIBLE FRAMEWORK

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[The Menus of Change \(MOC\) framework](#), developed by The Culinary Institute of America (CIA) and the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, provides a science-based, chef-driven model for driving food system change through menu design and sourcing guidance.



- **“Plant-Forward”:** This flexible approach emphasizes and celebrates whole, plant-based foods without being exclusively vegetarian. It’s a “meet in the middle,” science-based solution that rebalances the plate to prioritize flavor, nutrition, and an abundance of plants, appealing to all eaters.



- **Emphasize fresh, local sourcing:** The MOC framework prioritizes local and regional sourcing of minimally processed whole food ingredients.



- **Leverage globally-inspired culinary strategies:** The framework encourages the creation of delicious, culturally-relevant meals that are well received by students, driving meal participation.

THE PROOF: DATA-DRIVEN RESULTS

The MOC framework is the foundation of the [CIA Healthy Kids Collaborative](#) and is accelerated by the [Menus of Change University Research Collaborative \(MCURC\)](#), which provides data-driven proof that the plant-forward model works to achieve multiple positive outcomes.



- **Improves Child Nutrition:** Plant-forward procurement led to a [19.7 point increase in Healthy Eating Index \(HEI\) scores](#) at participating MCURC institutions, demonstrating significant nutritional improvements.



- **Drives Farm Resilience:** Every [\\$1 invested in local farm-to-school programs generates a \\$2.16 return in economic activity](#), supporting farmers and jobs on farms and in schools.



- **Supports Economic Growth:** A recent MCURC study found an average [10.7% reduction in food costs from shifting food purchases to align with MOC principles](#) across 33 MCURC institutions. In K-12 schools, these savings can be reinvested into increased purchasing of fresh, local produce and essential staff training, boosting local economies and meal quality.

A ROADMAP FOR POLICY LEADERSHIP

The Menus of Change framework aligns with the bipartisan-supported policy priority of encouraging healthy diets with whole foods and offers a proven, scalable model ready for broader policy implementation. We urge policymakers to implement the following proven strategies to unlock positive change for child nutrition, farm resilience, and economic growth.

1. MODERNIZE PROCUREMENT TO PRIORITIZE 'BEST VALUE' AND LOCAL SOURCING

Shift public procurement criteria from 'lowest cost' to 'best value,' factoring in local economic impact, student nutrition, and food system resilience. Codify and expand Federal Flexible State-Led Purchasing (LFPA, LFS) for school meal programs to source from local farms, which stabilizes supply chains and market access.

CASE STUDIES:

- **Virginia:** [The Centralized Local Procurement Pilot Program](#) (CLPPP) directed \$2.1 million in Virginia-grown foods to 54 school districts, funding hundreds of farmers through partnerships with regional food hubs.
- **Texas:** The ["Local Food for Schools" program](#) directed \$22.3 million of federal funds for schools to purchase unprocessed or minimally processed Texas food products.
- **Maine:** The [Local Foods Fund](#) offers a higher reimbursement rate for districts that buy local and train their staff in cooking with local foods, boosting the state economy and improving student nutrition.



2. INCENTIVIZE PLANT-FORWARD MENUS IN SCHOOL MEALS

Strengthen cornerstone programs like the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and School Breakfast Program (SBP) by ensuring reimbursement rates reflect current commodity and bulk food costs and by rewarding menu innovation that achieves nutrition and economic goals.

CASE STUDIES:

- **Federal:** The bipartisan [Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act](#) (HHFKA) successfully improved meal quality by offering a 7-cent reimbursement for menus meeting higher USDA standards.
- **Michigan:** The [“10 Cents a Meal”](#) program provides schools a matching incentive of up to 10 cents per meal to purchase Michigan-grown produce.

3. FUND INFRASTRUCTURE FOR PLANT-FORWARD, SCRATCH COOKING

Increase funding for key infrastructure—such as cold storage, kitchen upgrades, and transportation—and invest in essential culinary training for staff. Well-prepared, flavor-driven meals increase participation and build lifelong healthy eating habits.

CASE STUDIES:

- **California:** [California Assembly Bill 167](#) allocated \$150 million for kitchen infrastructure and Assembly Bill 185 directed \$600 million to fund food service staff training and continue kitchen updates, creating jobs, spurring business growth, and improving the nutrition quality.
- **Urban School Food Alliance (USFA):** [USFA Member districts](#) like LA Unified, Boston Public, and San Antonio North East ISD partner with the [CIA's Cooking for Healthy Kids program](#) to train staff, achieving measurable increases in meal participation and staff retention while teaching a plant-forward approach.

We encourage policymakers to support these proven strategies at the state and federal level. By modernizing procurement, incentivizing plant-forward menus, and funding essential infrastructure, you can deliver a trifecta of benefits for America's children, farmers, and communities.

[For more information](#) and to explore partnership opportunities, please contact the [Culinary Institute of America](#).

