



Top Takeaways: 11th Annual CIA Healthy Kids Collaborative Meeting

Meeting Summary

On December 9th-11th, 80 members of the [CIA Healthy Kids Collaborative](#) (HKC) gathered at our CIA Copia campus for the 11th Annual HKC All-Member Meeting.

The year-round collaborative brings together K-12 school nutrition thought leaders from across the country with corporate sponsors and affiliate organizations, including the USDA, to advance a culinary-driven culture in K-12 nutrition by co-developing recipes, resources, and accessible marketing materials that promote culinary skill building and healthy, sustainable school food. Collectively, HKC members serve over 40 million meals daily.

[Operator members](#), [alliance members](#), and [sponsors](#) hailing from 19 states and representing 52 organizations, including 26 school districts, spent two and a half days discussing culinary innovation in healthy scratch-cooking, student and staff education, scientific guidance to inform plant-forward menu design, consumer trends, and collaboration opportunities to drive a Menus of Change-aligned culinary movement in the broader K-12 school food industry.

Meeting highlights included:

- The announcement of our new HKC Program Manager, [Sandy Curwood](#), PhD, RDN, formerly of Virginia DOE, who has been serving as an interim program manager this fall; Sandy will step into an expanded role with the CIA as of February, 2026, leading the Healthy Kids Collaborative to new heights in the coming years!
- A hands-on cooking challenge where four teams produced K-12 breakfast and lunch dishes that were judged by a team of K-8 and high school students.
- A regional salsa innovation activity featuring a salsa base and regional trend variations as a vehicle to increase local produce consumption and reduce food waste. A [salsa making activity guide](#) was developed for both staff and students to help members incorporate scratch-made salsas into their districts in the new year.
- Working group presentations to share the great work done by members throughout the year, including a review of the [resources created by the Pro-Motion Working Group](#), a [video from the Planet-Forward Working Group](#), a demo and [new recipe resource](#) from the Flavor Exploration Working Group, and a hilarious skit and [job aid template](#) by the Culture and Culinary Education Working Group!





- The launch of an [HKC mentorship network](#), designed to help peers learn from each other on core competencies in K12 school nutrition programming that advances a healthy, sustainable culinary culture.
- Presentations by Menus of Change Advisory Council members, Dr. Christopher Gardner and Jackie Bertoldo, PhD, on the science-informed nutrition recommendations, the scientific recommendations for the US Dietary Guidelines, and plant-forward procurement strategies that increase economic and health outcomes.
- A speed solutions session designed to enhance relationships among school district representatives and industry partners through direct meetings, and a collaboration showcase featuring seven case studies on [new recipes](#) and ways of amplifying the mission of HKC across the year, from corporate and operator members.
- A meeting of HKC alliance members to evolve areas of collaborative impact among groups like the Chef Ann Foundation, Center for Ecoliteracy, Culinary Institute of Child Nutrition, and new members from Action for Healthy Kids and Nudge to Nourish.
- A presentation by the CIA Consulting team on their 2025 K-12 workforce trainings, enabled by HKC members, which reached 2,000 K-12 workers who feed 1.5 million students in over 70 school districts.
- A strategic brainstorm that will inform a 5-year strategic vision for the collaborative that will align with the broader aims of the CIA.

Top Takeaways from the Sessions

The Core Philosophy: "Rooted" & Student-Centric

- **The "Rooted" Theme:** The meeting was grounded in the concept of being "Rooted"—finding stability in community, history, and the CIA partnership to nourish growth. To be rooted is to belong, providing the strength necessary for new ideation in school food.
- **The "Soft Touch" Approach to Education:** Inspired by the UC Davis tour and ideas discussed in the Planet-Forward Working Group, members discussed using dining halls as educational spaces. By focusing on food literacy, seasonality, and where food comes from, operators can "groom" future customers (who move from high school to college) to appreciate nutritious food.
- **Voice, Choice, Less Waste:** The key to student engagement is providing agency. Trends show students want customization to move out of their comfort zones safely. The shift in language from "culturally diverse" to "**student-driven**" empowers operators to tailor menus to their specific "micro-demographics."



Culinary Strategy & Flavor Innovation

- **Flavor is the Hook:** Healthy food must taste good to succeed. The Flavor Exploration Working Group emphasized layering flavors through sauces, drizzles, spice blends, and texture contrasts to excite the palate, sharing a [new resource](#) for the broader industry.
- **Plant-Forward Procurement:** There is a continued push to increase the intake of beans, peas, and lentils while reducing red and processed meats, with proven data that even slight shifts in procurement lead to cost savings, increased healthy eating index scores, and improved environmental footprint. Strategic K12-ready recipes (like the "Three Sisters" concept or Thai Lentil Burgers) prove that plant-forward can be award-winning, culturally relevant, and supportive of local farm communities.
- **"Schoolifying" Trends:** Successful execution often involves adapting commercial trends for K-12 scale. HKC members crowd-sourced ideas on how to schoolify popular trends, including Chef Kue Her (UC Davis)'s taco-style bao buns (using Bridgford rolls) utilizing Rational ovens to slow cook, or combi ovens to smoke tri-tip (LAUSD & CA Beef collaboration).
- **Smart Waste Reduction:** Culinary techniques can solve operational waste. For example, slow-roasting leftover vegetables at the end of the day creates charred, flavorful ingredients for the next day's recipes while reducing food waste.

Operational Excellence & Leadership

- **The Fly-Wheel Effect:** Cross-collaboration is critical. The distinct Working Groups (Pro-Motion, Planet-Forward, etc.) are designed to feed into one another—marketing the menus developed by the culinary teams—creating a self-sustaining cycle of innovation.
- **Leading Through Relationships:** Successful HKC leaders are disconnecting politics from food priorities. The focus is on building honest relationships with school boards and farmers, using "asset-framing" (abundance mindset), and leveraging data (investment in school food yields 2x ROI) to negotiate better outcomes.
- **Removing Ultra-Processed Foods (UPFs):** Dr. Christopher Gardner shared that a major scientific and operational focus is the removal of UPFs, specifically targeting cosmetic additives rather than just the traditional offenders (sugar/sodium), aligning with upcoming advisory reports for the Dietary Guidelines for Americans.

Partnerships & Future Workforce

- **Leveraging Alliance Members:** The Alliance members presentation featured four organizations that provide distinct and amazing resources available, The Chef Ann Foundation, The Center for Ecoliteracy, Action for Healthy Kids, and The Culinary Institute of Child Nutrition. In the Alliance member meeting a new guidance for member



organizations and a lively conversation about parallel paths to change the perception of Child Nutrition Programs, amplifying existing resources and conducting a gap analysis to see what is missing and where the HKC can support and lead.

- Operators are encouraged to utilize the vast assets of Alliance Members not just as resources and tools, but for workforce training, apprenticeship programs, and technical support. In the coming year, HKC/CIA leadership will work with alliance members to define our differentiated offerings and improve resource sharing to clarify who to go to for what purpose.

Alliance Member Presentation & Meeting Highlights

Featured Organizations & Resources

- **Chef Ann Foundation** – advancing scratch cooking and healthy school food.
- **Center for Ecoliteracy** – promoting systems thinking and sustainability in education.
- **Action for Healthy Kids** – mobilizing communities to support child health and wellness.
- **Culinary Institute of Child Nutrition** – providing culinary training and resources for child nutrition professionals.

Key Meeting Takeaways

- **New Guidance Issued:** Member organizations received updated direction to strengthen collaboration and alignment.
- **Parallel Paths to Change:** Discussion centered on shifting perceptions of Child Nutrition Programs by:
 - Amplifying existing resources.
 - Conducting a **gap analysis** to identify missing supports.
 - Determining where the Healthy Kids Collaborative (HKC) can lead and provide added value.
- **Collaborative Energy:** Members engaged in a lively conversation about how to elevate child nutrition programs and ensure resources are maximized across organizations.
- **The Pipeline Problem:** The Collaborative aims to change the cultural perception of K-12 culinary jobs. By framing school nutrition as a career with impact and work/life balance, the CIA can help recruit the next generation of chefs into the sector.
- **Industry Collaboration Works:** Real-world testing yields results. Collaborative pilots—such as Tart Cherry "speed scratch" concepts in Houston ISD or "peanut-curious" spicy breakfast items in Georgia—demonstrate that industry partnerships drive menu innovation.



Immediate Action Items for Members

- **Recruit & Advocate:** Actively recruit members in states not represented yet, including state-level representatives (e.g., NM, KS) to fill gaps in the Collaborative.
- **Share the Narrative:** Use the "Pro-Motion" tools to tell the story of school food; utilize student influencers and social media to showcase the "why" behind the menu.
- **Spread the Word:** Leverage the forthcoming HKC slide deck at various K12 events this upcoming year, identifying key events for HKC members to share collective case studies to help lead the industry in healthy, sustainable culinary innovation.
- **Connect and Mentor:** Join our new format for upcoming quarterly all-member meetings, join our mentorship program, and show up for working group calls. The CIA will schedule time for Alliance Members to meet with MCURC to identify specific data and research needs.
- **Verify your Info:** Please take a moment to review your information on the [HKC roster](#) and [website](#). If you notice any updates or corrections, please reach out to valentina.cordoba@culinary.edu

Photo Highlights



K-8 and High School students judged the hands-on cooking activity challenge, voting for their favorite K-12 ready breakfast and lunch dishes



CIA Copia's Hestan Kitchen was a bustle of activity during the hands-on cooking activity where members divided into teams of four to prepare kid-approved dishes which featured sponsor products.



Members engaged in a regional salsa ideation activity led by Lisa Feldman, Jamie Hartz, Aaron Smith, Kevin Jenkins, and Jason Tepper, as a way to inspire districts to leverage salsa as a platform for increasing local produce use, reducing waste, and integrating trending flavor profiles to increase student nutrition and satisfaction.



Rachel Petraglia, Georgia Department of Education and HKCLeadership Council Member and CIA Grad, Kue Her, Director of Culinary Operations at UC Davis, shared culinary trends from the C&U industry to inspire high school menu innovation for Healthy Kids Collaborative members.



Healthy Kids Collaborative Program Manager, Sandy Curwood, PhD, RDN (formerly of Virginia Department of Education), moderated a panel with alliance members, including Menus of Change Business Leadership Council Member, Patrick Garmon, the Culinary Institute of Child Nutrition, Laura Smith of Chef Ann Foundation, Sarah Thomas of Action for Healthy Kids, and Vince Caguin of Center for Ecoliteracy.