

Welcome to the Healthy Kids Collaborative Connect Newsletter

April 2026 Edition



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Welcome!

Welcome to the *HKC Connect*, a newsletter published twice a year, in April and October. The *HKC Connect* provides information about the [HKC-engagement calendar](#), webinars, member meetings, social media and events. Member updates from our strong alliance partners, industry sponsors, and HKC operator members, include case studies, working group highlights and member spotlights.



Announcements

Congrats to [Nicholas Vedia](#) (Training Executive Chef, Chesapeake Public Schools) for winning the FREE registration to the conference of his choice- [World of Flavor](#) or [Menus of Change](#)! All HKC members that submitted a response to the HKC Annual Meeting survey were entered into the drawing. Thank you to all that participated, the feedback and input is much appreciated!

HKC Mission, Vision, Priorities, Goals and Strategies

Mission

The CIA Healthy Kids Collaborative brings together the culinary expertise and experience of operator members, corporate members, alliance organizations, and invited content experts to accelerate innovation in K–12 school food. Together, members explore flavor and menu strategies, elevate successes and best practices, and develop practical training materials and resources.

Vision

Working collectively, the Collaborative identifies and advances culinary solutions that increase the availability and appeal of healthy foods in school meals. Members engage with leading industry partners and stakeholders to gain insights, spark new ideas, and influence meaningful solutions. Through this shared work, the Collaborative empowers both its members and the broader K–12 community to expand scratch cooking, strengthen local and sustainable procurement, embrace cultural inclusivity, and deepen student engagement—ultimately helping to instill lifelong healthy eating habits in children.

Priorities

1. Lead the school nutrition community in menu innovation and collaboration that offers healthy, culinary-focused recipes.
2. Reach the broader school nutrition community with HKC focused networking and partnerships.
3. Create resources and support strategies to help the broader school nutrition community accomplish culinary-focused innovation.

Goals and Strategies

Goal 1: Menu Innovation and Collaboration

- Develop best practices from HKC members that can amplify the HKC work and assist others.

HEALTHY KIDS COLLABORATIVE

- Develop resources for ease of activation from the school nutrition community.
- Increase culinary training opportunities.
- Utilize data and research to inform decision-making and measure impact.

Goal 2: Networking and Partnerships

- Identify potential new members that continue to diversify HKC Membership.
- Continue to strengthen HKC operator/corporate member partnerships.
- Increase reach to school nutrition professionals via social media platforms and HKC website.
- Open access webinars for all school nutrition professionals.
- Networking events at other school nutrition professional conferences.

Goal 3: Resources and Support

- Share stories and accomplishments from HKC members.
- Develop resources and tools to support menu innovation and sustainability.
- Identify funding opportunities to expand the reach and support for the HKC mission.
- Advocate for policies that support healthy school meals and a strong school foodservice workforce.

Recap of the 2025 HKC Annual Gathering

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.



HEALTHY KIDS COLLABORATIVE

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 Menu 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.

For more details, read the [HKC 2025 Meeting Top Takeaways](#).

Member-driven Initiatives

HKC Peer Mentoring In Action!

The HKC Peer Mentoring pilot has launched! As we work together, leverage our membership's combined expertise and experience. Together, we will be sharing in a more targeted way, flavor discoveries, menu strategies, and best practices. Through our first set of partnerships, our members are already working directly with each other to transform the food served at school into more healthy, delicious, sustainable options that fuel learning.

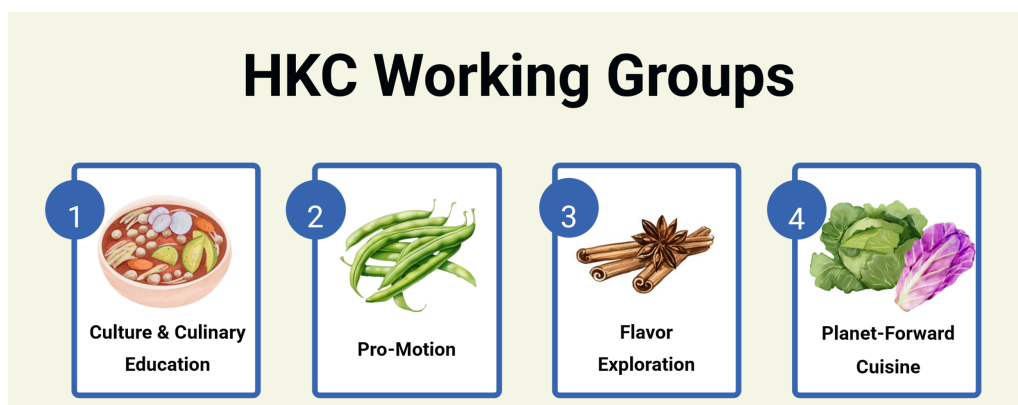
By matching across the following competencies, partners are engaging to directly address many common challenges and opportunities identified across the business of school meals. Using these competencies as a framework for connection, we hope to strengthen the Collaborative Membership's engagement and empower operator members to elevate food quality, engage students, and build resilient systems that align with USDA or other standards and community values. They will also help to guide the continued research, development, collaboration, innovation, and resource outputs of the Collaborative- all which are essential for scaling impact and achieving HKC's vision of healthier school meals nationwide.

- Culinary Skill Development
- Menu Innovation & Cultural Relevance
- Local Procurement & Sustainability
- Nutrition Knowledge & Compliance
- Operational Excellence
- Student Engagement & Feedback Integration
- Data-Driven Decision Making
- Leadership & Mentorship
- Collaboration & Networking
- Innovation in Technology & Tools

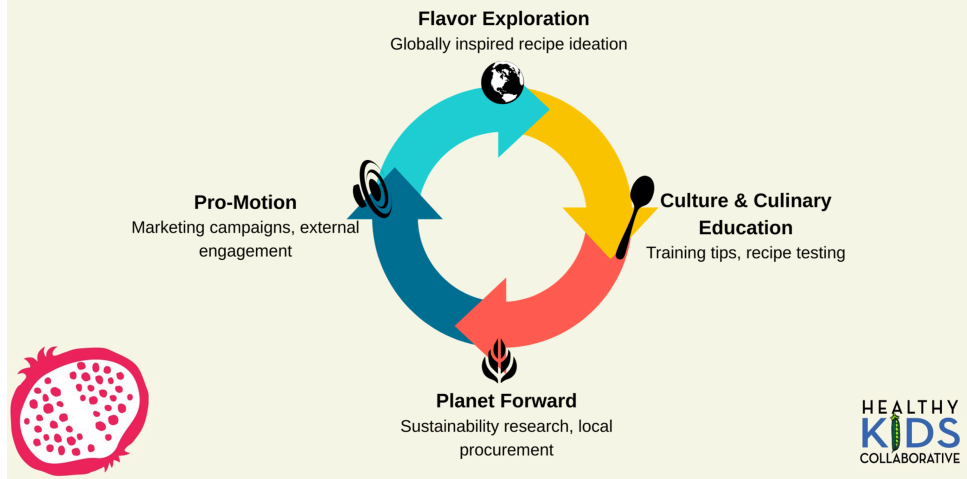
If you missed out in signing up to participate, changed your mind, or joined us since the December meeting, and are interested in participating, reach out to Jamie Hartz, Co-Chair of the Planet Forward Working Group at Jamie.Hartz@sodexo.com , and she'll do her best to match you with a partner!

Working Group Updates

Each of the four Working Groups are led by a HKC Operator member Chair and Co-Chair, with membership comprised of Operator members, Industry, and Alliance. Each Working Group develops an annual project and collaborates with each of the other groups to bring the projects to fruition, to then be shared to the broader K12 community.



Working Group Focus Areas “Flywheel”



Culture and Culinary Education Working Group

The Culture and Culinary Education Working Group is currently focused on developing a practical Training Field Kit designed to support school nutrition teams through real-world, operator-friendly resources. This work includes creating short micro-trainings, adaptable templates, and a growing job aid library that districts can use to strengthen staff training, support equipment-specific needs, and build confidence in day-to-day culinary execution. The group is also working to organize these resources into clear categories so they are easy to navigate, easy to apply, and relevant to a variety of production environments.

In addition to the field kit, the group is exploring how these materials can live in a shared hub where members can access, customize, and build on resources over time. The overall goal is to create training tools that are practical, scalable, and flexible enough to support both immediate operational needs and longer-term staff development across school meal programs. As the work continues, the group is also identifying opportunities to align existing materials with future training needs and expand the library in a way that is useful across districts of different sizes and levels of culinary maturity.

Member Spotlight: We are excited to welcome new working group members [Alessandro Palumbo](#) of Farmingdale School District, [Ryan Cengal](#) of Manor ISD, and Regina Camera of Pacific Coast Producers. Each brings valuable perspective to the group through experience in scratch cooking, local procurement, and industry partnership, and we are glad to have their voices contributing to the work ahead.

Pro-Motion Working Group

The Pro-Motion Working Group met in February and March. We are excited to have new and returning members this year! We have spent time reviewing the breakfast menu cycle, removing older recipes and adding in the new recipe collaborations developed in 2025. In this next month, the WG members will be transitioning these recipes into the established template so the final cycle will have consistent formatting and be more user friendly to showcase the wonderful recipes built out of the partnerships and collaborations between operators and corporate members.

Flavor Exploration Working Group

Flavor Exploration: Big Flavor, No Compromises

What if cutting sodium and sugar didn't mean cutting flavor? That was the challenge taken on by the Healthy Kids Collaborative Flavor Exploration Working Group in 2025 and they delivered. By tapping into the creativity of school nutrition professionals nationwide, the group built a collection of 30+ salt free spice blends, low sodium sauces, and low sugar dressings designed for real school kitchens.

These recipes prove that bold flavor comes from layering herbs, spices, and acids, not just salt and sugar. Even better, they show how simple staples like chicken and rice can be transformed into globally inspired, student-approved meals.

Check out the full collection

here. <https://www.ciaprochef.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/HKCFlavorExplorationV2.pdf>

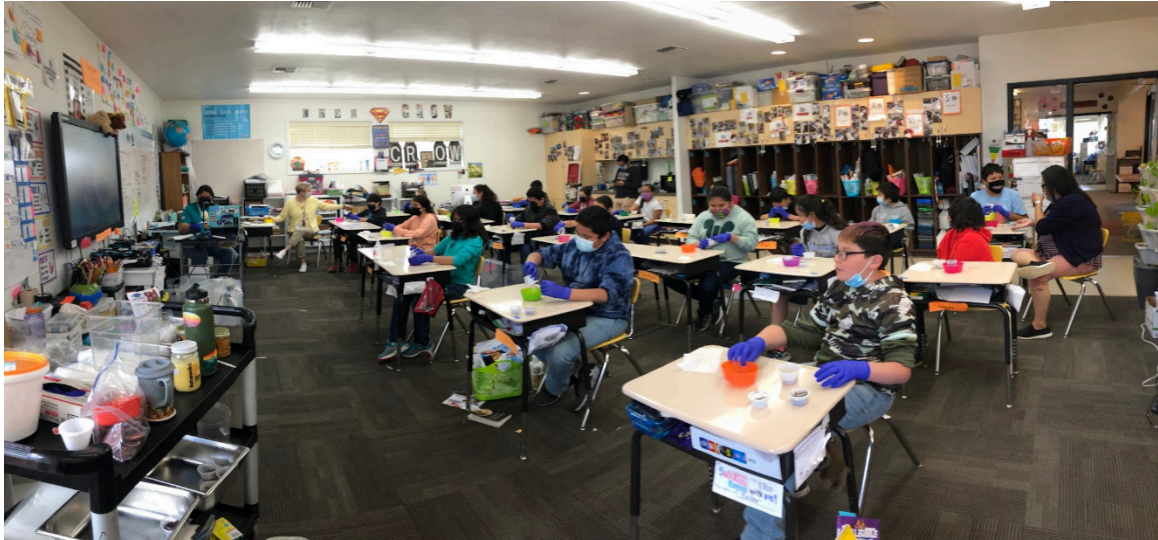
Montana Marinara Brings Local Flavor to Hardin Schools

Hardin Public Schools is proud to be one of the largest purchasers of Montana Marinara through the [Northwest Food Hub Network](#). Made with Montana grown tomatoes, carrots, onions and squash Montana Marinara helps bring local flavor to school meals while supporting farmers and producers across the region. In Hardin, the sauce has become a student favorite. Our School Nutrition team has hosted "Marinara Madness" taste tests, where students sampled dishes featuring the sauce and shared their feedback. The events were a fun way to introduce students to locally sourced foods while celebrating the partnerships that make farm-to-school programs possible.

Honoring Crow Food Traditions Through Pemmican

Hardin Public Schools' Farm to School program is helping students reconnect with traditional Crow (Apsáalooke) foodways through a hands-on pemmican project. Guided by elders and educators, students learn the cultural history and significance of pemmican, a traditional Plains food made from dried meat, fat, and berries that sustained generations. Through storytelling, taste testing, and making pemmican in class, students experience the knowledge and traditions

connected to the food. Students also prepare take-home kits to share with their families. The project strengthens connections to culture, land, and community while honoring the importance of traditional Indigenous foods.



Planet Forward Working Group

As we look ahead to the future of the Planet Forward working group, we've taken time to review and reflect on the work already accomplished and the lessons learned. This reflection led us to identify four core pillars that will serve as the foundation for our work in the year ahead:

1. **Choice Architecture**

Designing food environments where the healthiest choices are the most appealing, accessible, and intuitive—while preserving student choice.

2. **Wellness Commitment**

Translating wellness policies into daily practice through clear standards, accountability, and decisions that consistently prioritize student health.

3. **Farm-to-School, Reimagined**

Building practical, scalable connections between schools and local producers to strengthen nutrition, education, and regional food systems.

4. **Culinary-Led**

Putting culinary skill, flavor, and technique at the center of school food to drive acceptance, participation, and lasting impact.

Member Spotlight: Cody Nore is a corporate member representing Pacific Coast Producers, a farmer-owned cooperative of over 150 independent family farmers. The cooperative grows apples, apricots, peaches, pears, tomatoes, and mixed fruit that are packed at the peak of ripeness to lock in natural flavor and freshness—without added sugar, just as nature intended. Pacific Coast Producers recently acquired the rights to the Del Monte Fruit brand, further strengthening its commitment to supporting American farmers and nourishing students with high-quality fruit and tomatoes.

New Resource: Do you make beautiful food but are challenged with capturing the shot? NxtGen Network has generously developed a Food Photography guide for HKC Members. [Healthy Kids Collaborative - Google Drive](#)

Alliance Member Updates

[The Chef Ann Foundation](#)

Introducing Fresh Proteins to Your School Food Menu

Transitioning your school kitchens from heat-and-serve to scratch-cooked recipes opens up exciting opportunities to serve delicious meals with fresh proteins.

Watch The Chef Ann Foundation's [new training video](#) to learn food safety best practices and practical techniques to add fresh animal proteins to your school menu. Explore our [Fresh Animal Proteins webpage](#) for more valuable resources and guidance for each step when working with fresh proteins in a school production setting.

Find additional [scratch-cooking resources and recipes](#) for schools on The Lunch Box.

[FoodCorps](#)

Leadership Development Spotlight: Welcomes Inaugural Cohort of Kindred Fellows

The Kindred Fellowship is a seven-month program designed to equip school nutrition professionals and emerging school food leaders in transforming their fields. Built on FoodCorps'

15 years of expertise in school food systems, the fellowship will provide leaders with evidence-based, community-centered tools they can bring to their own schools.

See a full list of fellows [here](#) and stay up to date with all things Kindred by signing up for alerts at the bottom of [this](#) page.

[The Center for Ecoliteracy](#)

New Resources from the Center for Ecoliteracy



- *California Flavors: Fresh Recipes for the Future of School Meals* includes 12 freshly-prepared, plant-forward recipes that reflect the rich cultural diversity of California students, meet meal pattern guidelines for breakfast and lunch, and are scaled for school food service. The Center for Ecoliteracy collaborated with the Culinary Institute of America to develop these recipes. Visit ecoliteracy.org/california-flavors.
- *Nourishing Students: Recipes for Discovering Fruits and Vegetables with Early Learners* includes innovative strategies and 12 real school cafeteria recipes to strengthen connections between the early education classroom and cafeteria. Visit ecoliteracy.org/nourishing-students.
- Read about our 2026 Advocacy Priorities: The Center for Ecoliteracy advocates for policies to advance food justice and provide children with equitable access to free, nutritious school meals. Visit ecoliteracy.org/article/2026-advocacy-priorities.
- Join our Farm to School Innovator Series: Formal Purchases for School Nutrition Programs. Register and learn more at ecoliteracy.org/download/farm-school-innovator-series.



Culinary Institute of Child Nutrition

Cooking Up Change: How the Culinary Institute of Child Nutrition Is Transforming School Meals Nationwide

School meals feed approximately 30 million children every day in the United States. Yet for decades, the culinary capacity to prepare those meals from scratch – with real ingredients, real technique, and real nutrition – has lagged behind the aspirations of school nutrition professionals who want to do more. The Culinary Institute of Child Nutrition (CICN) exists to close that gap, and as a proud Alliance Member of the Healthy Kids Collaborative, we are committed to doing that work alongside the programs and communities this network serves.

What CICN Offers HKC Members and the SFAs They Serve

As an Alliance Member of the Healthy Kids Collaborative, CICN is here to serve the members of this network and the school food authorities in their regions – directly and at no cost. No matter where a program is on its culinary journey, we have resources and support to help move it forward:

- **Access CICN training opportunities**, including national events, regional workshops, and customizable on-site training tailored to your SFAs' needs and context.
- **Request culinary technical assistance** for the SFAs in your region – including recipe support, menu assessment, scratch cooking implementation, and operational guidance.
- **Access ICN's full suite of free resources** through theicn.org, including CICN tools, training materials, and culinary guides developed specifically for school nutrition professionals.
- **Bring CICN training to your region** by integrating our programming into your state or regional conferences, advancing culinary capacity where it matters most – in the communities your members serve.

The school nutrition space is changing – and culinary culture is at the center of that change. As fellow Alliance Members committed to the health and well-being of America's children, CICN stands ready to support the work happening in your communities, your states, and your school cafeterias. Let's build something better together.

National Association of State Departments of Agriculture

The National Association of State Departments of Agriculture represents the commissioners, secretaries and directors of the departments of agriculture in all 50 states and four U.S. territories as a nonpartisan, nonprofit association. As the chief agricultural official in their state, NASDA members ensure that agriculture and food production is safe and sustainable across



the nation. As a representative of and voice for all American agriculture, NASDA encourages all types of agricultural production. NASDA's mission is to enhance American food and agricultural communities through policy, partnerships and public engagement. Learn more at [NASDA's website](#).

New Alliance Members

[Nudge to Nourish](#)

[Sheryl Allen](#) leads Nudge to Nourish, an evidence-based nutrition program focused on making healthy food choices easy for K-12 students. By applying principles of behavioral science, the program restructures the dining environment to ensure nourishing foods are the most accessible, convenient, and appealing options.

Update: *We are currently wrapping up a successful two-school pilot, where we have gathered key insights into student preferences and operational flow. We are now iterating the program for scalability, with a refined V2 model expected to be ready for broader implementation this summer.*

[BALANCED](#)

Balanced is a nutrition security and public health advocacy organization. We're committed to preventing and reducing the impact of diet-related, food-system-created chronic disease. We're focused on improving the balance between health-promoting and disease-causing foods on menus in schools, hospitals, offices, universities, and other critical community institutions.

APPLY NOW TO JOIN BALANCED'S PLANT-POWERED SCHOOL MEALS COHORT

This is a paid learning opportunity for school nutrition professionals who want to bring more delicious, nutritious, and operationally realistic plant-powered meals into K-12 cafeterias. Over the course of one school year, the cohort provides tailored, hands-on support to help schools successfully pilot, scale, and sustain plant-powered menu options that students actually enjoy.

- ✓ \$5,000 in Funding
- ✓ Peer Learning & Community
- ✓ Student Taste-Test Support
- ✓ Menu-Ready Plant-Powered Recipes
- ✓ Vendor & Product Exposure
- ✓ Operational & Procurement Support
- ✓ Marketing & Promotional Resources
- ✓ Tools that Work for YOU

APPLY NOW!

balanced

The graphic is a vertical rectangle with a dark teal top section containing the title in white. Below is a light teal section with text and a list of benefits. A pink button with white text and arrows pointing towards it is centered in the lower half. The bottom of the graphic features the Balanced logo and name in white on a dark teal background.

Pro-Veg International

We are delighted to welcome ProVeg International as an Alliance member! Operating across 14 countries, ProVeg works to accelerate the shift toward a sustainable global food system by increasing the accessibility of plant-rich foods and alternative proteins. Their work includes award-winning school food programs in the UK, Europe, and South America, as well as founding and leading the Global Plant-Based School Food Network—a collaborative of 150+ members across 46 countries focused on getting more plants on plates in school canteens. Our primary contact is Colette Fox, ProVeg’s Public Food Lead and a certified nutrition coach based in the UK. Colette previously scaled the School Plates program across the UK, and now focuses on scaling international public food interventions to deliver health-conscious, sustainable meals in K12, college and healthcare settings.



Corporate Corner

National Peanut Board



Built by Healthy Kids Collaborative members, this Peanut Butter Toast Bar concept started with an idea from [Rachel Petraglia](#) at Georgia DOE and was expanded by [Aaron Smith](#) at Seattle Public Schools into a nutritious, customizable option students choose. Watch how to bring it to your menu. Watch [here](#).

[Bridgford Foods](#)

Easily create a delicious, [school-friendly breakfast parfait](#) by layering creamy yogurt, fresh seasonal berries, and Bridgford® Heat & Serve White Whole Wheat Blueberry Flavored Biscuits for a wholesome, satisfying start to the day. This simple build delivers both flavor and nutrition, offering whole grain-rich biscuits paired with fruit and protein for a balanced K12 menu option. [Product Information](#).



Create a bold, craveable handheld by filling Bridgford® Proof & Bake White Whole Wheat Roll Dough with savory sliced beef, sautéed peppers and onions, and melty mozzarella for [a classic cheesesteak-inspired Kolache](#). Served with a tangy horseradish sauce, this protein-packed option delivers familiar flavors in a K-12 friendly format with 2 oz. equivalent grains per serving. Recipe adapted from Healthy Kids Collaborative, [Rachel Petraglia](#). [Product Information](#).

More resources from Bridgford Foods

- [K12 Recipe Guide](#)
- [“Better for You!” Product Brochure](#)
- [All Product Specs and NFPs](#)

[50 CUT](#)

In March, we hosted a webinar with Padraic Doherty from 50CUT on Plant-Forward Approaches in School Nutrition. If you missed it, you can view the slides [here](#).

Membership

Become an HKC member. Nominations will be accepted year around with regular check-ins to onboard new members. Please visit the website for [the application](#). Nominate Today!



Engagement Calendar

We hope to see you in some of our [upcoming events!](#)

[Food is Life, Food is Health | May 6-8, 2026 \(CIA at Copia, CA\)](#)

- 15% of discount for HKC Members with code: HKCFLFH

[Menus of Change National Leadership Summit | June 2-4, 2026 \(Hyde Park, NY\)](#)

- For 15% off registration, HKC members can use code: MOCHKC
- CIA will host a fun and informal networking mixer of the CIA's year-round Menus of Change collaboratives, including HKC.

[Worlds of Flavor International Conference & Festival | November 5-7, 2026 \(Napa, CA\)](#)

[HKC Annual Meeting December 8 - 10, 2026 at CIA at Copia, Napa, CA](#)