



## JUST FOOD | Season 2, #3 – Rethinking School Lunch: Health Equity

[theme music plays]

**Twilight Greenaway:** You're listening to JUST FOOD, a podcast brought to you by the Berkeley Food Institute at the University of California Berkeley. I'm Twilight Greenaway.

**Edmond Allmond:** I'm Edmond Allmond.

**T:** This season, we're exploring the complex web of people and places that provide us with our food. We're talking to the people who grow it, prepare it, and work hard to rebuild the broken parts of our food systems.

Last episode, we met Moira O'Neill, a Berkeley researcher who is part of a collaborative effort to redesign school nutrition in the Oakland Unified School District here in the Bay Area. She really made it clear that this is about way more than what kids are eating. It's about helping them learn to get curious and get excited about their food and how it connects them to the world around them.

**E:** And in this episode, we're continuing that conversation. Moira's going to tell us more about this effort called Rethinking the School Lunch Oakland.

**T:** And we know that school nutrition is actually about a lot more than lunch. About three quarters of the kids in Oakland get help paying for school meals and a lot of them are actually a majority of their daily calories at school. These meals have the potential to help improve kids' diets, particularly the number of fresh fruits and vegetables they're eating. And at a time when youth onset diabetes and other food-related health issues are front and center, this is an especially important piece of the puzzle.

**E:** We're going to leave the classroom and head to the kitchen. One of the school district's more robust kitchens where there's a new focus on fresh food.

**T:** Every day in Oakland, they're preparing tens of thousands of meals, including 21,000 lunches. But not every school in the district has a proper working kitchen where staff can prepare meals from scratch. So, kitchens like this one really stay busy preparing meals for a lot of these schools, while Oakland Unified works on a big new facility that's going to serve the whole district.

**E:** But first, we're going to speak again with Moira O'Neill about the hard work, the research, and the knowledge game that's being put to use in Oakland Unified School District.

Moira, tell everybody why feeding children in school is so important.

**Moira O'Neill:** Well, as a starting point, nationally on average, students typically eat a third of their calories in school. In Oakland Unified, for some students, they're eating three meals a day at school. For students that qualify for free and reduced meals, at some sites, they're eating breakfast, lunch, a snack, and supper at school. So that means that the quality of the school meal really matters for that person. What you're giving them matters in terms of nutritional content, but it also matters



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that they like the food and that they'll eat it. Because it's a false assumption to assume that a child that's hungry is always going to eat the school meal.

**E:** How do you produce healthy and tasteful? I mean there's always that argument "Oh, kids won't eat vegetables. They won't fruit and all this other stuff. They throw things away". How did Oakland get kids to come to the table and enjoy?

**M:** So, at this point, the implementation is still in progress, right? So, they're still doing actually a lot of work to create healthy and tasteful at the same time. So, some of the innovations that emerge from this work are that taste-testing is a way both to engage students as well as to get them excited about the meal program and understand the changes that are happening. Procurement shifts, ones that are occurring within Oakland and now across the state, are about changing the actual quality of the food and increasing the amount of fresh food in the school meal program. And that's a big way to increase the health of the school meal program, is to give students increased access to fresh food, particularly produce.

It's complicated work and that's where this initiative comes in to really demonstrate that you have to think about all of these different pieces at the same time and approach all of the work in an integrated fashion. The network creates a formal structure in that sense for these districts to share knowledge and advance information around innovations, but all of those that are coming into this network are very similarly engaged and trying to make a difference in the school meal program. These are people who care. The fact is that the current operational central kitchens are producing more meals than they were constructed to produce. But they can't go beyond what they're doing, so for example, supper programs are for the most part outsourced to school sites that don't have access to a cooking kitchens or close proximity to cooking kitchens. That means that they have to contract with outside vendors. That costs more than what they can really afford. So, the demand is there, but they can't with the current resources meet that demand on their own. And they cannot sustain outsourcing all of those contracts for supper programs or other meals. That's just not fiscally sustainable in the long run.

**E:** So, what's the obstacle here, to carrying out this strategy? Tell me about the plan to make this scratch-cooking available to all the kids on a bigger scale.

**M:** So, the primary barrier to implementing Rethinking School Lunch in Oakland had a deep relationship to facilities' limitations. So, they needed to invest in infrastructure in order to accommodate that. The issue here was that they needed to move to a central kitchen model, but because of the integrated nature of Rethinking School Lunch, that it contemplates so much more than preparing fresh food, it contemplated a facility that would be described as a central kitchen, instructional farm, and education center. So, indoor-outdoor learning, with at least an acre of instructional farm. So, this facility would provide the opportunity for the district to switch to increasing fresh food by having a centralized operation that had been worked with a network of kitchens. So, at the central facility, it would act as a hub where it could create ingredient kits and do some cooking for certain types of ingredients, send out those ingredient kits to the school site, which then could be finished. So, they would still be cooked in part at the school site, so you still get



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the benefit of the children smelling the food and so on at their school site, but at the same time, this would allow for an operation that was fiscally sustainable, that could manage within budget in terms of being able to increase the offering of fresh food. It would also allow the district to be able to do more with raw ingredients, which is an important element when you're thinking about increasing the amount of fresh healthy food in an operation.

So, what's really amazing about this particular work is that it was put in front of voters. In the end, 84% of the electorate passed this bond measure, and that showed that from the voting public this was an important issue. And part of that, of course, was dedicated towards this facility. This was one of the projects that was listed on the bond measure, and it reflects how important improving school meals was for the community at large.

**E:** But there is some remarkable work happening right now in the Oakland School District, places where people are making really big strides to the goal of better school lunch, just working with what they have. And we're going to take listeners to one of those locations now. Tell us about Place at Prescott.

**M:** Place at Prescott is where you have one of the current operational central kitchens, and you can see the work of nutritional service employees that, by the way, are some of the first people within a school site to know which students are hungry, which students need food, and are doing tremendous work to try to transform the menu. You can see some of these people doing actual cooking. And all of the work and love that goes into what they're trying to do for students in the district at large.

*[sound of door opening and background kitchen sounds play under voiceover]*

**Jennifer LeBarre:** Hi I'm Jennifer LeBarre. I'm the Executive Director for Nutrition Services for Oakland Unified School District.

**Donnie Barclift:** My name is Donnie Barclift. I'm a field supervisor for OUSD Nutritional Services.

**J:** So today, we're visiting Prescott Central Kitchen. It's our largest central kitchen that is located at an elementary school place at Prescott. And it was a facility originally designed to make and prepare 9,000 meals a day. And now they do about 20,000 meals a day. We're trying to eliminate 80% of the prepackaged food that's served to our students in Oakland Unified.

**D:** When I first started, we were doing more frozen packaged food. Now we're doing a lot more speed-scratch cooking.

*[sounds of children playing outside play under voiceover]*

**J:** So, you're standing right now in our back dock. This is where we receive all the deliveries from our different vendors. We have about three to four deliveries coming in and then every day, we have



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four to five trucks leaving out of here to serve schools throughout the district. Prescott serves about half of the meals that we serve in the district for the entire day, so this is quite a big operation.

*[sounds of heavy-duty refrigerators running play under voiceover]*

J: So, we're walking in right now into our refrigerator and freezer space. You can come on in. It's a little chilly. We have two story shelves here, just because we're getting in that much food and we need to store it. Our goal is to have as little frozen food as possible, but we still have to have frozen food coming in and we have to be able to store food when we have extra. Some of the other things that you're seeing in here are for example, big two-pound bags of cabbage, and this is going to be used for our chow mein that we're making as well.

*[J in the background: We can exit the refrigerator so it's warmer.]*

*[sound of refrigerator door shutting]*

J: Now we're going to go into the kitchen

*[background conversation: Hey how y'all doing? Good, how are you? Alright.]*

**Tremaine:** This is top chef Erica, right here. I'm top chef Tremaine. Preparing some veggie chow mein. You know we're just putting all our ingredients in our pot here mixing it up

J: We are scrambling the eggs. We're using whole grain yakisoba noodles, putting it together and also putting edamame, so it can be a vegetarian option for our students and still have all the proteins and grains that it required.

**Tremaine:** ...and trying to make it look as good and tasty as possible for the kids. You know, they love this stuff.

*[Tremaine in the background: This needs a little more sauce.]*

J: So, if you turn around, we're seeing the chow mein they've prepared. Now, it's being packaged.

What happens is we put a bowl down on the conveyer belt, fill it with the chow mein. It is then wrapped. After the chow mein is wrapped, it comes to the end of the line and it is put in wire baskets. They'll be put in the refrigerators and then we'll start counting out for the schools.

D: It's just important, I think, to get away from packaged food. It's good food in a package. It's good wholesome food in a package, but the fact it's in a package turns kids off. You lose a lot; a lot gets lost. We have high school students that can't tell what a peach is because the only one they've seen comes from a can. So, my dream about this whole deal is to be able to educate students and reconnect them with the earth and where the food actually comes from. And then to see them eat on plates again, like it was when I went to school. And to have them look forward to lunch again at school.



**J:** If you don't have your basic things taken care of that you need to just live, then you cannot become self-actualized. You cannot become the person that I think everybody should be able to become, and so if we're not providing healthy food that the students want to eat, then we're not helping them with that process. And that's our job when it comes to the education of the students. It's making sure they're ready to learn.

*[sounds of kids playing outdoors fades out]*

**E:** You get the sense that these people are the heart of the school nutrition program. So, Moira, in the last episode, we talked about how nutrition education, along with what's happening in the classroom and in school gardens, is one part of the formula for rethinking school lunch. And the other part is what we've just heard at Place at Prescott, changing the food itself on the whole system that delivers food to the table for these kids. Help us understand how these things go hand in hand.

**M:** So, Place at Prescott can only do what it's doing. It can't keep advancing school meal reform within its current limited infrastructure. And if you're going to Cleveland Elementary, you're seeing an amazing development of an ecoliteracy program take hold in a school community and just flourish. And at the same time, you're going to a school site that doesn't have access to a cooking kitchen, so the students aren't getting access to fresh food. And so, those two sites offer you a glimpse into the complex and integrated nature of this. On the one hand you want to increase programming that advances a young person's understanding of both the importance of healthy eating, where food comes from, thinking about how school meal programs can also connect with STEM learning, and at the same time you need to do something about the food because you can't provide all this learning and then put a meal in front of students that contradicts everything they just learned about healthy eating, food access, food systems, fresh food versus food. Otherwise, one is undermining the other and vice versa.

**E:** Knowing all the things that you've told us now, what can we as community members around a school, part of a school district, do to push forward initiatives like this that really benefit the children?

**M:** There's a lot of things that people can do within the community. There are often going to be presented to them ways of publicly financing these kinds of shifts. Those could come through the efforts of a bond measure, so pay close attention to what the bond measure's proposing. Is it advancing an infrastructure switch that could shift operations within your local school district? That's something you can support even if you don't have a child in the school. Another mechanism that can fund the nutrition curriculum is soda tax measure. Those are really important ways to generate resources at the city level, that could advance the nutrition and garden education of a program.

Other ways that the community could get involved is sometimes maybe they just want to give. There's ways, for example, to give money to fund the gap that exists between the number of



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students that are being fed and those that can pay. I think the other way that parents and community members and stakeholders that are really interested in this can advance the work is to get engaged and to reach out and communicate with nutrition services directly if they're interested in seeing menu shifts or if they're interested in seeing links between the cafeteria and garden curriculums, to reach out to their board directors to let them know this is a priority for them, to connect with district leadership, to support all of the people at school site level whether it's cafeteria managers or teachers trying that are trying to improve this work. Support them. You know, I think having a voice in this really can advance the work. There's so many different priorities within districts, all of which are really important to improve learning outcomes for young people, particularly in urban spaces like this. So, it's important to make that this particular issue isn't lost, that we don't lose sight of it.

**E:** Moira O'Neill, thank you so much for talking with us about this important work on JUST FOOD.

**M:** It's been wonderful to talk to you about it.

*[theme music plays under voiceover]*

**E:** Thanks for listening to JUST FOOD. I'm Edmond Allmond.

**T:** I'm Twilight Greenaway.

**E:** This podcast is a project of the Berkeley Food Institute at the University of California Berkeley and is produced in coordination with the Berkeley Advanced Media Institute. Francesca Fenzi reported this episode. Graelyn Brashear is the producer, with editing by Ben Manilla. The music you heard was by Blue Dot Sessions. To learn more about Berkeley Food Institute, find us online at food.berkeley.edu. You can find the JUST FOOD podcast on iTunes, PodBean, or on our website, or anywhere else you listen to podcasts.

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