



Star quality in school kitchens.

Nutritious and delicious meals everyone will enjoy.

School districts face an almost impossible task – providing nutritious food that kids want to eat for \$1.25 per meal. Could celebrity chefs have the answer?

Plenty of positive things are happening in the world of K-12 foodservice. More schools are introducing from-scratch cooking, snacks are getting healthier and an impressive 42% of public school districts now take part in farm to school activities.

Yet, participation in school breakfast and lunch programs is still far below where it could be, and schools waste \$5 million a day in uneaten food. The solution seems obvious – increase participation and waste less food. However, school foodservice teams are being asked to achieve an almost impossible task: providing hundreds or even thousands of kids with a tasty meal for only \$1.25 every day, while meeting strict nutritional guidelines.

Bringing taste back

Something's got to give, and often it's taste. Which is why the influx of celebrity chefs into school foodservice – with the former head chef of two Michelin starred Noma Dan Giusti at the helm – has the potential to have such a positive impact.

In 2015, Giusti set up a for-profit company called Brigaid, whose mission is to put professional chefs into public schools to cook real, wholesome food from scratch. Since then, he's transformed the school lunch program at six schools in New London, Connecticut, and is now attempting to do the same at six more schools in the biggest school system in the country, New York.

His top priority from day one has been taste. "Every [school-food] conference you go to," he said to CityLab, "[it's] all they talk about: nutrition, nutrition, nutrition. The fact of the matter is, no one eats the food. So the food can't be nutritious if no one eats the food."

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a day**

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Meals he's introduced include barbecued chicken and cornbread and meatloaf and crispy kale, cooked – of course – from scratch. The New London Public Schools'

Child Nutrition Program Manager Samantha Wilson thinks the combination of Giusti and his team's experience and creativity in the kitchen and her knowledge of the USDA nutritional regulations and guidelines is a winning one.

"The beauty of our relationship is you have two very specific and unique sets of expertise and knowledge," she told popular US food and drink magazine Eater. "We really weave all of our strengths in all those spaces together."

Crucially, Giusti is managing to provide tastier food that's just as nutritious for the same cost as New London was spending on their previous foodservice provider. While the switch from processed to raw ingredients saves some money, the schools are also using their kitchens to generate additional revenue through events such as Wednesday night community meals, where people come from all over the state to get a fine dining dinner for \$5 a head.

Creating culinary excitement

Of course, the star quality doesn't hurt either. It's also something the Schwan's Chef Collective, which includes Food Network celebrity chefs Jet Tila and Todd Erickson, plays on when it tours school districts to inspire new lunch recipes and show schools what's possible.

More schools are introducing from-scratch cooking.

"Our partnership with these renowned chefs brings an elevated level of culinary expertise to address the needs of school foodservice operators while creating excitement among the students about what they eat," said Schwan's Senior Vice President of Product Innovation and Development Stacey Fowler Meittunen. Activities include classroom Q&As, recipe creation and a mystery ingredient cook-off competition where teams are pitted against each other to create the perfect school meal.

Celebrity chefs certainly won't be a silver bullet for K-12 foodservice. And there are many challenges ahead of Giusti, including getting buy-in from all stakeholders involved in school food programs – from principals to parents to kitchen staff to students. Moreover, recruiting good chefs to a sector that's far less glamorous than the high-end restaurant world is no picnic either.

You've got to start somewhere, though. And Giusti is doing an excellent job of showing the sector what's possible.

Find out more: k-12-foodservice.com

