

Plant-Powered Plates:

Nurturing Healthy Habits in K-12 Cafeterias

Illinois SNA Conference October 17, 2025



**Humane
World for
Animals™**

Formerly called the Humane Society
of the United States and
Humane Society International

A close-up photograph of a white ceramic bowl filled with oatmeal. The oatmeal is topped with a generous amount of golden-brown granola. Fresh fruit is scattered on top, including several blueberries and three raspberries. A ring of sliced banana pieces is arranged around the perimeter of the oatmeal. The bowl sits on a colorful, patterned cloth. In the background, a bunch of ripe yellow bananas is visible. Some oatmeal and fruit are scattered on the cloth around the bowl.

Welcome!

This presentation discusses why plant-based school meals are important & how to successfully implement them in your district.



Today's speaker

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Agenda

- Introductions
- The importance of serving more plant-based foods
- Culinary discussion
- Marketing tips & tricks
- How do I implement more plant-based meals in my district?



About us

Forward Food Collaborative – forwardfood.org

Customizable culinary resources at no cost

- Menu and marketing support
- Staff trainings and student engagement events
- Educational workshops
- Climate impact assessments
- 100+ K12 recipes – and more!

A close-up photograph of a white ceramic bowl filled with a vibrant plant-based salad. The salad consists of short, ridged pasta tubes, bright red cherry tomatoes, white beans, and dark green leafy vegetables. A light-colored dressing is visible, and the dish is garnished with a sprinkle of yellow crumbled cheese. A silver spoon is partially visible on the right side of the bowl. The bowl sits on a blue textured cloth, with a blurred green outdoor background.

**The importance of serving
more plant-based foods**

What is plant-based?

- Meals without meat, fish, egg, dairy, or other animal products
- Think: Fruit, vegetables, grains, legumes, nuts and seeds
- Focus on **ADDING** options, not restricting foods





Benefits of plant-based meals

- Student and public health
- Sustainability
- Quality options for everyone
- Demand
- Cost

Health

“

Focusing on whole foods from plant sources can reduce body weight, blood pressure and risk of heart disease, cancer and diabetes – and it can make your environmental impact more sustainable.”

- Dr. Reshma Shah, Stanford University



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Children's health

- 1 in 3 children will develop type 2 diabetes during their lifetime.
 - 1 in 4 children ages 5-10 years have high cholesterol levels, high blood pressure or other early warning signs of heart disease.
 - Plant-based meals **promote health** because they are free of cholesterol, low in saturated fat, and full of fiber.
- Physician's Committee of Responsible Medicine, 2022

Which of the following will have the greatest environmental impact for your operations?

1. Eliminating single-use plastics
2. Reducing animal products on your menus
3. Mandating all students carpool to school
4. Swapping all classroom lights to be LEDs



Sustainability

“

*A substantial reduction of climate impacts **would only be possible** with a substantial worldwide diet change away from animal products.”*

- International Panel of Sustainable Resource Management, UNEP

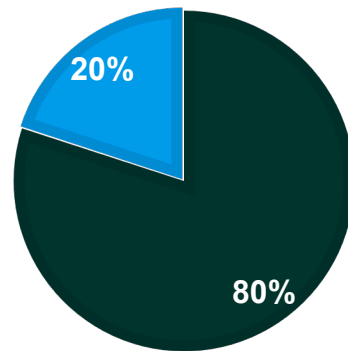


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Animal farming uses the majority of Earth's agricultural land

- 80% of farming land on Earth is used for animal agriculture.
- Meat production causes more than twice the amount of deforestation compared to soy, palm oil, and wood products.
- Shifting to plant-forward diets could reduce land use and deforestation.
- Source: Meatless Monday

- Animal agriculture
- Plant-based agriculture





NYC Public Schools' Plant-Powered Fridays

- February 2022
- Served a nutritious, plant-based dish as main menu item in NYC K-12 public schools every Friday

Carbon, Water and Land Footprint of Food Purchases

- NYC + Humane World for Animals + WSP
- Collaboration **calculated greenhouse gas, water, and land savings** from Plant-Powered Fridays' menus and recipes

Plant Powered Fridays: results

New York City Public Schools' Plant Powered Fridays program eliminated over 19,000 tons of GHG emissions in one month. That is the equivalent of...



Recycling
760,000 bags of
trash **instead of**
landfilled



Planting 290,000
trees and **taking**
care of them for
10 years



Driving about 43
million miles, or
about 1.5 million
NYC **round-trip**
commutes to work

Plant Powered Fridays: results, cont.



NYC reduced the total water footprint by about 35%. That's **enough drinking water for 4.3 million people for a year.**



NYC reduced the carbon footprint per student by about 40%. That's about the same as **planting a tree for every five students served every month.**



NYC reduced the total land footprint by about 40%. That's **enough farmland to feed about 8,000 people for a year.**

Student demand

- Some students are eating less meat and dairy for a variety of reasons: food sensitivities and allergies, religious, health, animal welfare, and environmental concerns
- Students are becoming more educated about our foods' impact on the planet
- Increased demand for foods with lower environmental impact





Options for everyone

- 37% of students would eat school lunch more often if there were more vegetarian and vegan options
- Plant-based options can be enjoyed by all, not just vegetarian and vegan students



Affordable plant-based protein options

- Beans, lentils, and tofu are some of the most budget-friendly sources of protein
- One can of beans = several servings of protein at a very low cost
- Less expensive than meat and cheese, especially when buying in bulk





**Culinary discussion:
tips from our chefs**

Getting enough protein... is easier than you think!

- Tofu
- Nuts
- Lentils
- Chickpeas
- Beans
- Edamame
- Quinoa
- Tempeh
- Broccoli
- Spinach
- Potatoes
- Chickpea Flour
- Hemp Seeds
- Pea / Pea Flour
- Nutritional Yeast
- Oats and Oatmeal
- Wild Rice
- Chia Seed
- Soy Milk





Budget-friendly storage and inventory

- Many plant-based foods are shelf-stable (like dry lentils, canned beans, and tofu), which helps reduce waste
- Shelf-stable items can help manage fluctuating participation and reduce spoilage
- Commodity dollars can be used on beans and vegetables where available



Budget-friendly plant-based proteins

- Lentils – use in tacos, sloppy joes, veggie patties
- Tofu – stir-fried, baked, or scrambled; great for bowls, sandwiches, and wraps
- Beans – ideal for burgers, chili, dips
- Chickpeas – mash for sandwiches, roast for snacks, use in curries





Kitchen and labor efficiency

- Most PB meals use simple ingredients already found in school kitchens
- Lower labor costs – many recipes require little prep or cooking time
- Saves time and resources while still offering nutritious meals

Menu versatility

- PB meals can be served hot or cold – ideal for leftovers or Grab & Go
- Flexible enough for breakfast, lunch, or snack menus
- Perfect for rotating into existing menus without major changes



Cooking with beans & lentils

- Many varieties that offer different sizes, texture and flavors
- Fast and easy source of protein and fiber
- Work well on their own as well as stewed or pureed and as a binder for patties, meatballs and more
- Offer a high yield, making them a cost-effective source of protein



Ingredient + recipe demos



Ingredient + recipe demos





Let's get cooking!

Visit our website for over
100 K-12 recipes:

forwardfood.org





Mighty Marinara



Loaded Beach Burger



Crazy Chickpea Salad

A close-up photograph of two street tacos on a wooden surface. The tacos are made with soft, white corn tortillas and filled with a dark, crumbly meat. They are topped with diced red tomatoes, sliced pink onions, and fresh green cilantro. A lime wedge is placed next to the tacos. In the background, there are whole red tomatoes and a bunch of fresh cilantro. The text "Street Tacos" is overlaid in white on the bottom left.

Street Tacos



Nacho Cheez

Plant-based Bento Box

- Fun and easy way to meet nutrition guidelines!
- Low labor and reduces staff stress
- Great for grab n go!
- Can be kept cold / served cold
- Longer shelf life, reducing food waste
- Select 1 fruit, 1 grain, 2 MMA's, 1 veggie, and 1 optional dip or sauce



PHOTO BY TRACY BURGIO/HSU!

A photograph of a kitchen scene where a woman in a blue uniform and white apron, wearing gloves, is handing a pizza to a young woman in a striped shirt. The young woman is smiling and looking up at the pizza. In the background, another person in a blue uniform is visible, and there are various kitchen items like a sink, stove, and food containers.

What's working in other districts across the country?



El Paso Independent School District, TX

- Serves 60,000 meals / day at 76 schools
- Goal of 55% plant-based meals
- HWA hosted a district webinar for 200+ staff across 70 schools in 2023
- “Save the Planet Mondays” feature a 50% plant-based menu
- Taste testing and samples

Los Gatos Union School District, CA

- Serves 1,200 meals / day at 5 schools
- Goal of 60% plant-based meals
- LGUSD started with a focus on reducing cheese-based vegetarian options and teaching staff about the importance of plant-based foods in schools
- Gets parents involved (e.g., passing out samples)
- Colorful signs highlighting daily options and creative labels (don't call it vegan)





Trenton Special School District, TN

- 1,400 students
- Goal of 33% plant-based meals
- Desire to incorporate more scratch cooking, whole food recipes
- Introducing plant-based meals will teach students about ENTIRE food system

*More plants,
less meat*



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Marketing tips and tricks



Start slow and keep it simple

- Roll out in phases.
- Modify existing recipes to be plant-based.
- Use products that mimic current favorites.
- Get your staff on board.
- Get parents involved.

Menu suggestions

- Use descriptive language.
- Emphasize flavor and texture.
- Use a symbol to highlight plant-based options rather than including “vegan” in the name.
- List plant-based option first.
 - Loaded beach burger (v)
 - Pot roast

What to avoid

- Dairy-free potato soup
- Vegan cookies
- Healthy mixed vegetable salad
- Meat-free burger

What to try instead

- Creamy potato soup (v)
- Peanut butter cookies (v)
- Kick’n kale salad (v)
- Loaded beach burger (v)



Cafeteria display

- Switch up the order and placement of your plant-based dishes.
- Increase the availability of plant-based dishes.
- Put signs near plant-based options stating their health and environmental benefits.

Encourage student engagement

- Offer samples.
- Seek student feedback on new recipes.
- Highlight plant-based options in newsletters or on social media.
- Ask teachers or other faculty to try new options with students.





How to increase take-rate

- Rename recipes to focus on flavor and ingredients.
- Feature plant-based options first.
- Offer samples.
- Market the environmental benefits of the plant-based entrees.
- Modify popular offerings to be plant-based.



Create a menu for all students

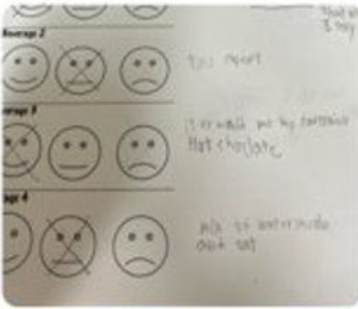
- Offer plant-based entrees that will satisfy all customers, not just your vegan and vegetarian customers.
- Use small insignias or logos to denote vegan, climate-conscious or allergen-friendly options.
- Consider a DefaultVeg approach.
- Remember – good food is just good food.



How do I implement more plant-based meals in my district?

- Think of your goals
- Think of your available inputs and resources
- Think of important stakeholders
- Think of the desired outcomes and impacts on your students

Humane World for Animals' Food Service Innovation is here to support you



Goal-setting worksheet

IL SNA Conference 2025

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District _____

Number of Students _____

Meals Served Per Day _____

Goal Setting	Inputs	Stakeholders	Activities	Outcomes	Impact
<p><i>What is your initial goal in increasing plant-based options?</i></p> <p>Current estimated plant-based percentage of entrees served _____</p> <p>Goal for percentage of plant-based entrees served _____</p> <p>Year by which you'd like to achieve this percentage _____</p>	<p><i>What resources are needed to achieve this goal (staff training, menu suggestions/recipes, marketing assistance, etc.)?</i></p>	<p><i>Who are key stakeholders involved in achieving this goal (parents, staff, student groups, district leadership, community, etc.)?</i></p>	<p><i>What activities will you undertake to achieve this goal (seek new recipes, seek new plant-based products, do taste testing, culinary training for staff, marketing, collaborate with student groups, etc.)?</i></p> <p><i>If you encounter obstacles, what activities could you pursue to overcome those obstacles (scale back and test/trial more options, change location/school/grades, utilize outside assistance, etc.)?</i></p>	<p><i>What short- and medium-term outcomes do you expect as a result of these activities (increased awareness, higher take rates, more student input, etc.)?</i></p>	<p><i>What are the long-term changes you hope to achieve (improvements in student health, positive impacts on the environment, students' eating ranges expanded, etc.)?</i></p>

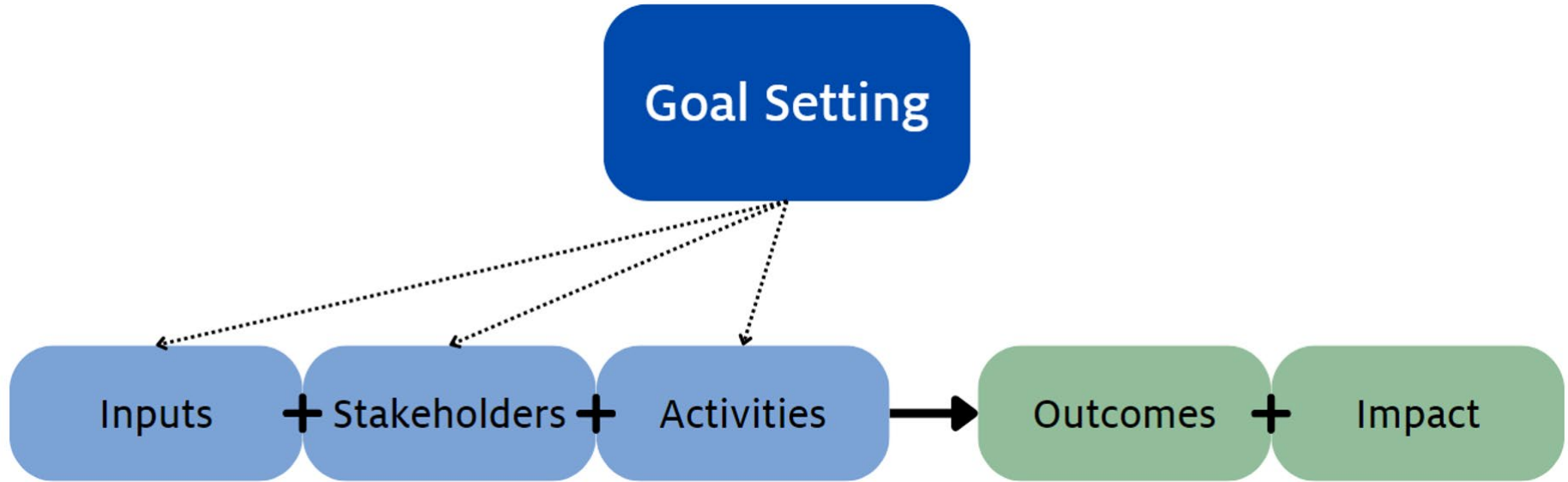


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Goal-setting worksheet



You truly make a difference



Questions?

Email:

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Thank you



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QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

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