



A LOOK INSIDE THE FALL 2025

# VIRTUAL HEALTHY MEALS SUMMIT



In partnership with



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## Dear School Nutrition Professionals and Healthy Meals Incentives Friends,

Over the last few years, the Healthy Meals Incentives (HMI) Initiative has been all about one big, bold idea: when we invest in school nutrition teams, we're not just improving meal programs, we're fueling futures. It's amazing to see how school food authorities across the nation are stepping up to the plate (literally) to provide nourishing food that students are excited to eat.

Through grants, recognition awards, and a whole lot of collaboration, HMI has helped districts test new recipes, upgrade equipment, boost staff confidence, and bring more nutritious meals to the lunch line. Think of it as a nationwide test kitchen, where school nutrition professionals are the head chefs and students are the very honest food critics.

You're doing the amazing work. HMI has helped to spotlight it.

Our recent **HMI Virtual Summit** captured that energy and amplified it. Over just a few hours, we celebrated accomplishments, learned from peers, and shared practical strategies for serving healthier meals every day.

### Attendees:

- Heard from operators who turned tiny budgets into big innovations.
- Swapped strategies for getting kids genuinely excited about fruits, veggies, and whole grains.
- Celebrated the creativity, grit, and heart behind every tray served.
- Completed **10 on-site coaching visits** with the Chef Ann Foundation.
- Traveled across the country for **8 regional roundtables and 15 site visits** across all 7 USDA regions.
- Captured **59 Cafeteria Chronicles stories** celebrating innovation and student voice.



These numbers represent more than accomplishments. They reflect the dedication of school nutrition teams working every day to nourish students with healthy, high-quality meals.

This Digizine extends the HMI experience. Inside, you'll find:

- Highlights from the Virtual Summit
- Stories from small and rural districts
- Inspiration from Recognition Award recipients
- Cafeteria Chronicles videos
- Practical ideas to take back to your teams
- A snapshot of the national impact of the HMI Initiative

As you explore these pages, we hope you see your own work reflected, your dedication to students, your commitment to nourishing foods, and your belief that every child deserves healthy, delicious meals at school.

We are deeply grateful to everyone who contributed to this initiative:

- To the school nutrition professionals who continue feeding, caring for, and inspiring students every day.
- To the students whose honest feedback shaped menus and flavor profiles.
- To our partners and collaborators for their insights, guidance, and partnership.
- To our presenters for openly sharing both successes and challenges
- To our **Advisory Council** thank you for your guidance, your wisdom, and your willingness to keep raising the bar.

Finally, we want to acknowledge that **this work is made possible with support from the USDA's Food and Nutrition Service**. Their investment in small and rural schools, recognition programs, and capacity-building has strengthened school nutrition across the nation and fueled the progress you'll read about here.

School meals may only last 20 minutes on a tray, but their impact stretches much, much longer. Thanks for being part of the Healthy Meals Incentives story and for everything you do to nourish the next generation.

Warmly,



**Barbara Mechura**

*Program Director, USDA Programs  
Action for Healthy Kids*



**Sarah Thomas**

*Professional Learning Specialist,  
Healthy Meals Incentives Initiative*

## WHAT'S INSIDE

- 4** Highlights from the HMI Virtual Summit Learning Sessions
- 6** Behind the Scenes of the Virtual Healthy Meals Summit
- 8** Healthy Meals Incentives Initiative National Impact Recap
- 10** Welcome to the World of USDA HMI's School Food Systems Transformation (SFST) Grants
- 11** On the Road with HMI: Celebrating What's Possible in School Nutrition
- 12** Cafeteria Chronicles: HMI Recognition Award Success Stories
- 13** Innovation in Action: A Spotlight on the Healthy Meals Incentives Virtual Summit Exhibitors
- 14** Celebrating Success Coast to Coast
- 15** A Cause for Celebration!
- 16** Making Change Happen, One Meal at a Time: A Note from Action for Healthy Kids

# Highlights from the HMI Virtual Summit

## LEARNING SESSIONS

The goal of the HMI Virtual Summit learning sessions was to equip school nutrition professionals with the knowledge and resources to continue elevating the health of school meals. Speakers shared their expertise on a wide variety of topics, including farm to school, scratch cooking, marketing, data collection, and procurement. As a result, school districts left feeling empowered with practical strategies and best practices to take back to their district and start implementing right away.

Check out a few sessions!

### Introducing Raw Proteins to Your School Food Menu with Chef Ann Foundation



Fresh animal proteins can offer better taste and flavor, opportunities to lower overall sodium in your school meals, health benefits and even support your local economy! Watch as Chefs Brandy and Eli from Chef Ann Foundation lead attendees through safely cooking raw burgers and chicken drumsticks.

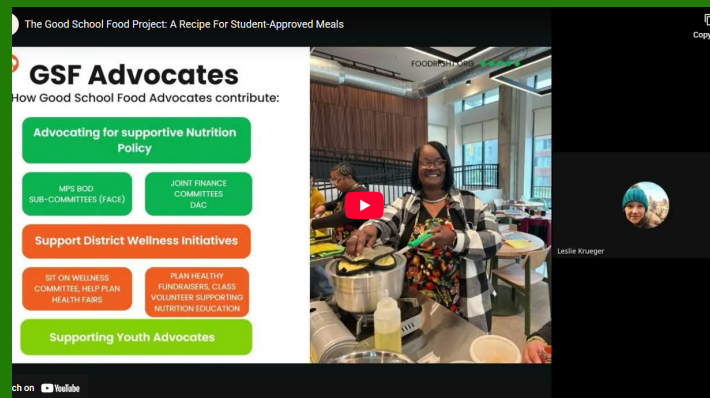
### KEYNOTE SPEAKER

### Cook with Love. Feed Possibility.



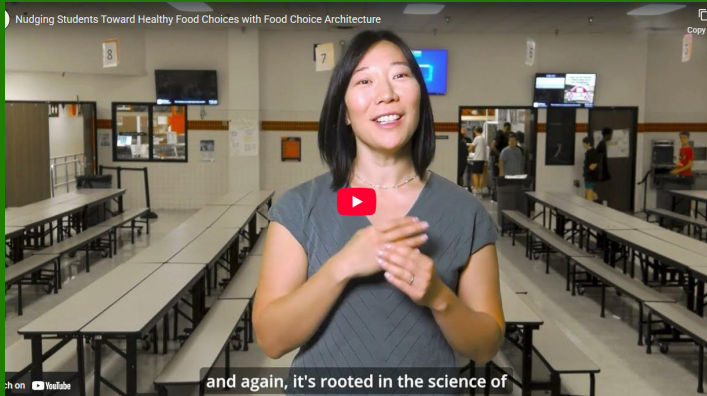
Our inspirational closing speaker was chef and tv personality Carla Hall! Tune in for a message of inspiration and love for all school nutrition professionals.

### The Good School Food Project - A Recipe for Student-Approved Meals



Discover how parents and students can become influential change-makers, supporters, and advocates for school food and wellness with the Good School Food Project.

## Nudging Students Toward Healthy Food Choices with Food Choice Architecture



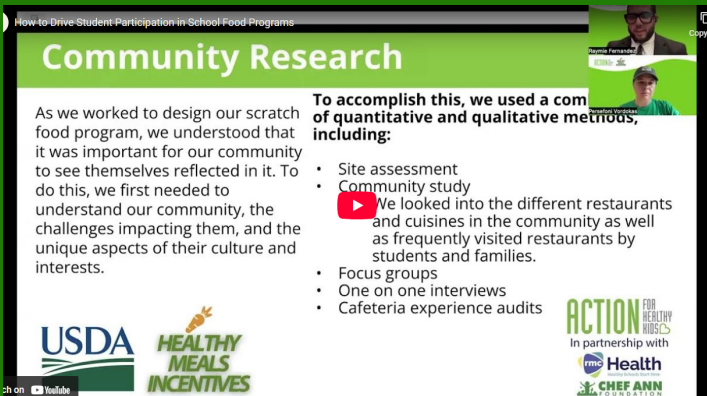
Discover fast, low-cost “choice architecture” strategies, like smart placement and simple visual cues, that make healthy foods more appealing and convenient for students. Learn practical behavioral design tips you can put into action right away to boost engagement and drive healthier choices.

## Smart Swaps, Big Impact: Engaging Students in Healthy Change



Discover best practices from districts who reduced sodium and added sugars while boosting student engagement! See real-world examples and brainstorm creative solutions to enhance your nutrition program without straining your budget.

## How to Drive Student Participation in School Meal Programs



Explore DREAM Charter Schools’ scratch-cooked food program and learn a replicable, community-centered framework that raised breakfast participation 36% and lunch 45% in two years.

## Fresh, Local Food, Big Impact: Measuring & Communicating the Economic Power of Farm to School



Join Feed Our Future to understand how to share key data points that demonstrate the true value of local procurement for funders, district leaders, and policymakers.



**Hungry for more knowledge and inspiration?  
View the full list of HMI Virtual Summit Learning Sessions.**

# Reaching New Heights in School Nutrition

## BEHIND THE SCENES

### of the Virtual Healthy Meals Summit

The Healthy Meals Virtual Summit, held November 5 - 6, 2025, was a national gathering dedicated to advancing school nutrition. Hosted by USDA and Action for Healthy Kids, the Summit united school nutrition leaders to share innovative strategies for improving school meals, including scratch cooking, student engagement, farm to school programs, nutrition education, and marketing, among others. The Summit brought expert training and real stories to hundreds of attendees across the country, strengthening a growing network committed to nourishing healthier students and stronger schools. Check out what went into making the Summit come to life!



On-location filming expands the Summit beyond a studio, reflecting the diverse settings where school nutrition work happens.





Summit planning and live coordination in action—aligning speakers, sessions, and storytelling to ensure a seamless national experience.



District voices take center stage—sharing practical insights on student engagement, operations, and meal quality



The collaborative team behind the Virtual Healthy Meals Summit—industry partners, organizers, and storytellers working toward a shared mission.



Live panels connect districts across the country, strengthening a growing network committed to healthier school meals.

Thank you to the partners fueling the Healthy Meals Incentives (HMI) mission: **USDA, Chef Ann Foundation, RMC Health, Amplus Agency, CS Effect, NxtGen Network.**

And a special thank you to the **HMI Summit Advisory Group.** Your insight and creativity helped shape the Virtual Summit - thank you for lending your time, voice, and leadership to this year's event:

**Anji Branch**  
(Gooding School District, ID)

**Leah Botko**  
(Littleton Public Schools, MA)

**Barbara Burns**  
(Carrollton Exempted Village School District, OH)

**Sabina Garrett**  
(Altus Public Schools, OK)

**Jennifer Gordon**  
(Laveen School District, AZ)

**Sonia Hall**  
(Oklahoma City Public Schools, OK)

**Carlee Johnson-McIntosh**  
(Petersburg Borough School District, AK)

**Maggie Livingood**  
(Grant County Schools, KY)

**Jordyn Parsons**  
(Zeeland Public Schools, MI)

**Jessy Sadler**  
(Urbandale Community School District, IA)

**Lisa Seiber-Garland**  
(Trenton Special School District, TN)

**Jason Tepper**  
(Alexandria City Public Schools, VA)

**Sal Valenza**  
(West New York School District, NJ)

**Cassandra Worden**  
(Coffeyville United School District, KS)

# Healthy Meals Incentives Initiative

# NATIONAL IMPACT RECAP

In 2023, USDA's Healthy Meals Incentives (HMI) Initiative was launched in partnership with five national cooperators (Action for Healthy Kids, Boise State University, Chef Ann Foundation, Full Plates Full Potential, and the Illinois Public Health Institute) to transform school nutrition by elevating innovative solutions for the K-12 school food marketplace, strengthening local programs, and celebrating excellence—especially in small and rural communities.

Over the past several years, HMI has invested in building local partnerships to improve meal quality, modernize equipment and operations, expand professional development, and highlight the remarkable work happening in school cafeterias every day. Together, these efforts are helping schools nationwide serve healthier meals and build stronger, more resilient nutrition programs.

## Learning, Training & Collaboration

To strengthen staff skills and build peer connections, the five HMI cooperators provided a wide range of professional development opportunities, including webinars, national conference presentations, regional roundtables, and specialized technical assistance. These efforts reached thousands of participants across the country and created meaningful spaces for learning, collaboration, and shared problem-solving. Participants consistently expressed appreciation for the personalized coaching, practical guidance, and opportunities to connect with peers facing similar challenges and successes.

## National Reach and Investment

The HMI Initiative provided both financial and capacity-building support to school food authorities (SFA) across the country.

- **264 school districts** in **44 states + D.C.** received HMI subgrants for kitchen equipment upgrades, scratch cooking tools, staff training, and nutrition education
  - **Nearly \$30 million** awarded to support meal quality and program innovation.
  - **93% of grantees** also earned a Healthy Meals Incentives Recognition Award.
- **981 total HMI Recognition Awards** distributed to **655 individual SFAs**
- HMI Recognition Awardees represent **all 50 states and Puerto Rico**, ensuring national visibility and inclusivity.
- **52 sub-grantee projects** were awarded under the HMI Initiative's School Food System Transformation (SFST) Challenge to actively advanced connections between school districts and food producers, farmers, suppliers, distributors, and community partners—building a more resilient and sustainable school food system nationwide.

## What Participants are Saying



*Scratch cooking takes effort, but our kids deserve it. When you know what's in the food, you know you're feeding them well. That meal, that smile, that love—they give students hope."*

— Paul Brown, School Nutrition Area Manager,  
Brooks County School District

## Stories That Inspire: Cafeteria Chronicles

Cafeteria Chronicles showcased the real stories behind the data—spotlighting operators, scratch cooking successes, student engagement, cultural menu innovation, and community pride.

- 63 total stories published
- 158 school districts featured
- Average of 5,800 YouTube views per story
- One Innovation in Nutrition Education story reached 41,000+ views

These stories amplified local voices, celebrated creativity, and helped districts learn from one another.

## Trends We Saw Across the Country

Across hundreds of schools, several clear themes emerged:

### 1. Scratch cooking is resurging

Districts invested in tools, staff skills, and new recipes—moving away from reliance on highly processed items.

### 2. Student voice drives participation

Taste tests, feedback surveys, and student leadership shaped menus and increased buy-in.

### 3. Small and rural schools are innovating boldly

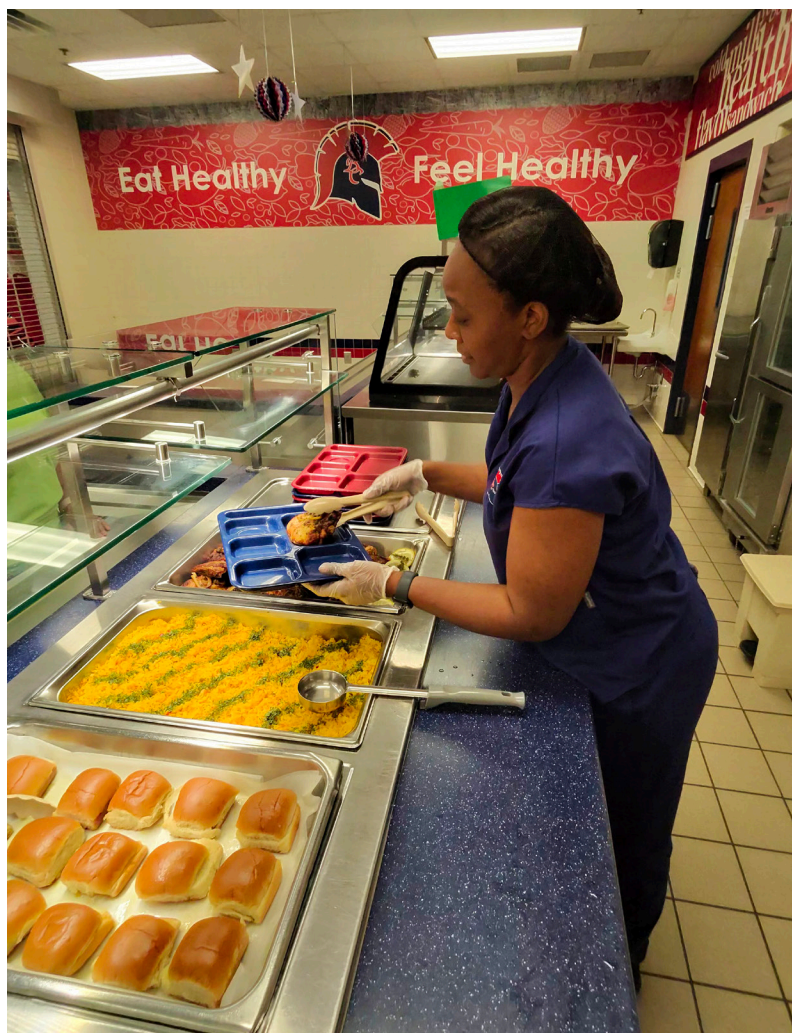
Despite limited budgets, these districts demonstrated some of the most creative solutions - supported by targeted technical assistance from HMI nutrition program managers..

### 4. Personalized support matters

Many participants said this was the first time anyone had reached out simply to recognize their work. Award outreach in particular helped directors feel valued and confident.

### 5. Collaboration accelerates progress

Roundtables, webinars, and cross-district connections created a sense of national community.



## Looking Ahead: What SFAs Can Carry Forward

The most successful HMI SFAs embraced simple but powerful practices:

- Start small and celebrate progress.
- Invest in staff skills and training.
- Let students lead through taste tests and feedback.
- Build partnerships with local organizations and producers.
- Adopt scratch cooking one step at a time, progress over perfection.
- Follow what SFST sub-grants are doing.
- Stay tuned for SFST sub-grant additional funding opportunity to expand the HMI Initiative's reach.

# School Food Systems Transformation (SFST) Grants

As part of the HMI initiative, USDA awarded four cooperative agreements to support the creation and execution of collaborative efforts linking school districts with producers, suppliers, distributors, and community partners. Together, these partnerships are working to build a stronger, more resilient, and more nutritious school meal system.

Meet the cooperators:

## Center for School and Community Partnerships at Boise State University

- **Project SCALES: Supporting Community Agriculture and Local Education Systems**
- Their first round of grants were made to 12 rural school districts and charter schools across the U.S.
- Their second round of grants were made to 9 SFAs and partners across the U.S.

## Chef Ann Foundation

- PLANTS Grant: Partnerships for Local Agriculture and Nutrition Transformation in Schools
- 8 sub-grantees across the nation whose projects focus on advancing systemic approaches to

transforming school food supply chains.

## Full Plates, Full Potential

- Funded 7 sub-grantee programs within the state of Maine to pilot projects that aim to create sustainable and scalable food systems change for schools.

## Illinois Public Health Institute and the Lake Michigan School Food System Innovation Hub

- The Spark Awards and Innovation Collaborative Awards support school food system and marketplace improvements to promote systems-level change throughout the Lake Michigan region.
- Thus far, they've awarded grant funds for 16 projects with 48 project partners and more to come with their newest round of grants open.

## SFST Highlights:

- A partnership between schools and a local jail where seeds are planted by students, grown and processed at the prison, and then returned to the schools.
- Creating classroom and

community connections through local procurement, family education, and a District Farmers Market.

- Connecting regionally grown whole grains into schools in the Lake Michigan region, such as locally grown corn used in delicious, fresh nixtamalized whole-grain corn tortillas.
- PLANTS grantees are collaborating with districts to develop scratch-made, K-12 compliant products that are delicious and easy to use.

## Why we love SFST:

- The cooperators gave grantees creative agency to identify their needs and imagine their own programs to strengthen local food systems.
- SFST represents a wide array of projects that support resilient food systems, including education, partnership building, creative strategies, and so much more.
- SFST projects are bringing new flavors into schools through creative, locally grown foods.
- SFST sees the need for stronger training around scratch cooking and procurement and is piloting projects to meet these challenges.

## ON THE ROAD WITH HMI

# Celebrating What's Possible in School Nutrition



(Clockwise from left) Bellton SD 124; Brooks County SD; Hunterdon Central Regional High School District; Littleton Public SD

A cross-country series of eight Regional Events brought school nutrition leaders together to share innovations, celebrate achievements, and reimagine what's possible for healthy school meals.

### Bringing HMI to Life

Action for Healthy Kids hit the road to recognize school food authorities improving meal quality, engaging students and families, and leading innovative practices. Each Regional Event combined roundtables and site visits, giving participants a chance to see award-winning work firsthand—scratch-cooking kitchens, student-led hydroponics, farm-to-school programs, upgraded serving lines, and more.

These events brought together school nutrition directors, state agencies, students, families, and

community partners across all seven USDA FNS regions, creating vibrant spaces for collaboration and celebration.

### Why These Events Mattered

The Regional Events were designed to:

- Highlight best practices and replicable strategies.
- Celebrate HMI Recognition Awardees.
- Boost awareness and participation in the awards program.
- Strengthen peer connections across states and regions.
- Showcase real innovations improving student meals.

Participants consistently shared how meaningful it was to learn from peers, see solutions in action, and leave with ideas they could implement immediately.

## BY THE NUMBERS

8

Regional Events

7

USDA FNS regions

169

total attendees

50

school nutrition directors

382,606

students represented

11

states reached

5

new Recognition Award applications submitted after attending

### Voices from the Road

"The Regional Event gave us space to collaborate with peers we rarely get to see. I walked away with ideas I could use the next day." — Nutrition Director, Midwest Region

"Seeing solutions live—rather than hearing about them—made all the difference." — Child Nutrition Administrator, Southeast Region

"We left feeling energized and connected. The events sparked momentum we desperately needed." — Leader, Northeast Region

### Looking Ahead

The HMI Regional Events showed what's possible when passionate school nutrition leaders come together. Action for Healthy Kids will continue supporting districts with resources, partnerships, and evidence-based programs that elevate meal quality, expand student engagement, and create healthier school environments nationwide.

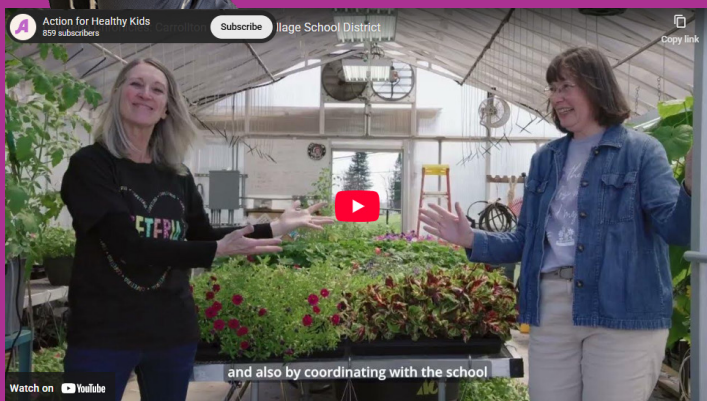
# CAFETERIA CHRONICLES

## HMI Recognition Award Success Stories



Recognizing the passion, dedication and innovation required to improve the health of school meals was key to the Healthy Meals Incentives (HMI) Initiative. SFAs that earned HMI Recognition Awards invested in innovation, trained staff, and engaged with students, all in an effort to provide healthier school meals. Their stories are featured in the **Cafeteria Chronicles** blog, and serve as a blueprint for transforming the health of your school meals!

Let's check out some of the inspiring work from HMI Awardees:



**Carrollton Exempted Village School District** in Carrollton, OH teaches students to grow their own food- right at school! Their "edible school garden" produces lettuce, tomatoes, sweet potatoes and herbs. With over 80 heads of lettuce grown each week, the district now serves only school-grown lettuce at lunch!

**District of Columbia Bilingual Charter School** in Washington, DC hosts "Cook Camps" twice per year to train staff in scratch cooking techniques, allowing the district to improve nutrition and incorporate local produce in new recipes. As a result, the district saw a 10% increase in participation when their new scratch-made recipes were served!



For more inspiring stories like these, visit [healthymealsincentives.org/cafeteria-chronicles](https://healthymealsincentives.org/cafeteria-chronicles)

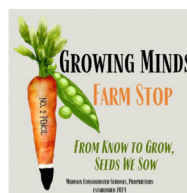
# INNOVATION IN ACTION

## A Spotlight on the Healthy Meals Incentives Virtual Summit Exhibitors

At the 2025 Virtual Healthy Meals Summit, the Exhibit Hall brought together an inspiring collection of school nutrition professionals, partner organizations, and School Food System Transformation (SFST) projects—all dedicated to advancing healthy school meals. This collaborative space celebrated innovation happening across the country and showcased free tools, models, and resources designed to help school nutrition teams strengthen their programs. Explore the exhibitors below to keep learning from their ideas, stories, and solutions.

## School Food Authority Stories & Projects

*Click on the logos to learn about the real-world innovation from the field*



## Organizations Offering Support & Resources

*Click on the logos to access tools, training & expertise to strengthen your program*



# Celebrating Success Coast to Coast

During the HMI Virtual Summit, the Celebrating Success Coast to Coast photo contest invited school districts to share a photo celebrating their team's efforts to earn an HMI Recognition Award. **The photo contest winner was... Cincinnati Public Schools in Cincinnati, OH!**



## A rainbow of colorful produce is served to students at Cincinnati Public Schools.

Cincinnati Public Schools (CPS) earned several HMI recognition awards for reducing added sugars at breakfast, lowering sodium at lunch, developing scratch-made recipes, and educating the school community about the benefits of eating fresh fruits and vegetables. Congratulations to Cincinnati Public Schools, our Celebrating Success Coast to Coast photo contest winner!

The runner-up in our photo contest was Quitman Independent School District (ISD) in Quitman, TX!



## Quitman ISD staff Vicki Isom and Crystal Widemon proudly stand with their district's HMI Recognition Award banner.

Quitman ISD earned both the Breakfast Trailblazer and Innovative School Lunch Makeover HMI Recognition Awards, and you can hear more of their story [here](#).

Congratulations to our photo contest winners: Cincinnati Public Schools (1st place) and Quitman Independent School District (2nd place) and thank you to all of the school districts who participated!

# A Cause for Celebration!



At its heart, the HMI Virtual Summit celebrated the achievements of HMI Grantees and Recognition Awardees—school nutrition professionals whose dedication, creativity, and hard work are transforming meal programs for students across the country. Their early mornings, late nights, and unwavering commitment to child health form the foundation of the HMI Initiative.

The Summit also showcased the innovative work of the School Food System Transformation (SFST) Challenge partners and their grantees—another key component of the broader HMI Initiative. These projects are piloting new models in procurement, workforce development, scratch cooking, and regional supply chains, complementing and amplifying the progress made by SFST grantees.

Together, HMI Grantees, Recognition Awardees, and SFST innovators are driving powerful momentum toward a healthier, more equitable future for school meals.

Here's to the school meal teams who fuel learning and brighten children's days. What you do reaches far beyond the cafeteria, you nurture confidence, health, and belonging. Your impact is profound, your dedication inspiring, and your work is absolutely worth celebrating.

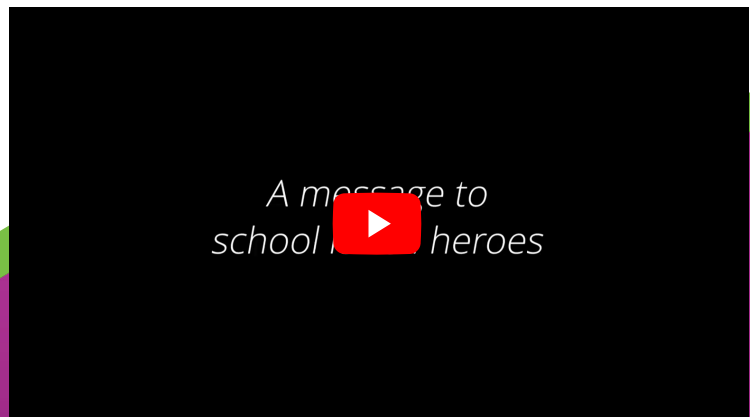
## Every Tray Tells a Story



## From Scratch to Community



## Because of You



# Making Change Happen, One Meal at a Time

A note from Action for Healthy Kids

**The Healthy Meals Incentives (HMI) Initiative** brought together passionate, determined professionals united by one belief that has driven extraordinary work: kids deserve access to healthy, high-quality meals at school every single day.

This year's Virtual Summit showed what's possible when that belief takes center stage. Across the country, school nutrition professionals like you are leading the way in creating healthier schools and brighter futures for students, and I want to thank you for all that you do. Your leadership, heart, and hard work are shaping student health, strengthening school communities, and reminding students that they are cared for, seen, and valued. Whether you shared your school nutrition innovations with us through the HMI Initiative, or inspired healthier students out of the spotlight, you are raising the bar for what school meals can be, and the impact of your work goes far beyond the cafeteria.

At Action for Healthy Kids, we believe healthy children make a better world, and that belief fuels everything we do. School meals are at the heart of that mission. Studies show that nutritious school meals lead to better academic performance, stronger emotional well-being, and reduced absenteeism. Every meal you serve builds upon the next, shaping a healthier future for every child who walks through your cafeteria doors.

While the recognition awards and grants for small and rural schools have concluded, the momentum you've built should continue forward. I'm not sure there has ever been a more important moment for all of us to work together to ensure kids have what they need to grow, learn, and thrive. Kids' needs cannot be put on hold – their nutrition, their health, and their mental well-being depend on what we do today.

I urge you, as leaders in school nutrition, to keep pushing, keep improving, and keep believing in the power of your work. Continue fostering partnerships with local farms. Involve parents and your community. Empower students to share ideas and take ownership. These are the foundations that make strong school nutrition programs, and the way we'll continue to grow and scale our impact on child health.

As you move forward, we want to remain in your corner. As we celebrate your incredible work, we are thrilled to invite you to continue your journey with Action for Healthy Kids as part of our **National School District Health and Wellness Impact Network** – a no cost national community for districts committed to whole child health. Together, we can continue sharing ideas, supporting one another, and lifting up the stories that inspire change.

School nutrition is powerful, essential, and rooted in care. Thank you again for bringing that to life every day, with every meal served. Every decision, every program, and every partnership brings us closer to our ultimate goal: stronger schools and healthier kids. We're grateful to you for joining us in making that vision a reality, and we look forward to continuing this work together.

With gratitude,



**Rob Bisceglie**  
Chief Executive Officer  
Action for Healthy Kids



HEALTHY  
MEALS  
INCENTIVES

