Scratch Cooking Initiative: Evaluation Readiness Report

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Background

Program Description and Purpose

National Meal Programs

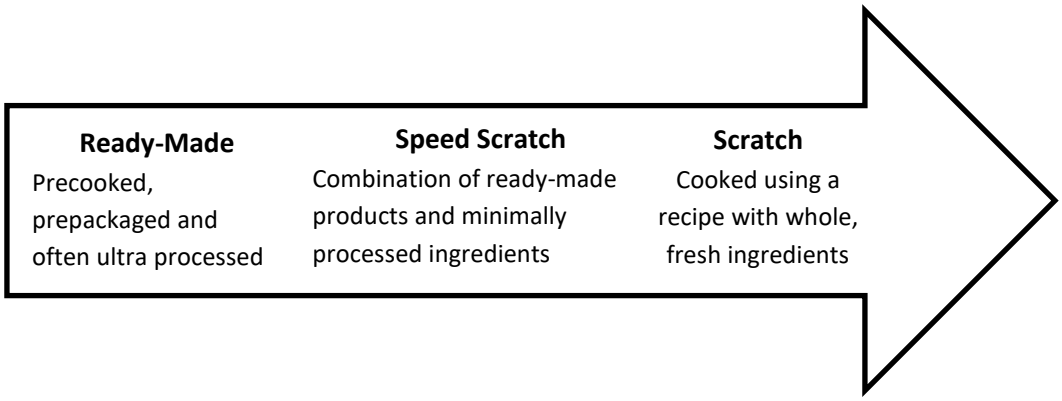
In 1946, the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) was formally established by President Harry S. Truman.[1] One of the major aims of the legislation was to "safeguard the health and well-being of the Nation's children and to encourage the domestic consumption of nutritious agricultural commodities and other food." In 1975, federal funding for the School Breakfast Program (SBP) was allocated. NSLP and SBP are two separate programs and schools can choose to operate one and not the other, but schools typically operate both programs.[2] Participating in the NSLP and SBP is not required by federal law, but in accordance with Virginia Code, public local school divisions must participate in the NSLP.[3] Virginia Code has more stipulations with the SBP as it states that each school board must establish a school breakfast program in each public school in which 25 percent or more of the currently enrolled children are determined to be eligible to receive free or reduced price meals.[4] In Virginia, any and all students have the option to participate in the NSLP. For example, students can participate in the NSLP by either qualifying for free meals, qualifying for reduced meals, or by paying for meals at USDA-subsidized prices. Recent data suggests that approximately 30 million children each day participate in the NSLP and SBP.[5] The program is administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) which provides federal aid to state agencies, typically to state departments of education, for distribution to local school districts. According to the USDA, of the schools that operate the NSLP, approximately 57 percent of children participate in school lunch, and of the schools that operate SBP, approximately 30 percent of children received breakfast.[6]

School meal programs are administered and operated by school divisions. For example, school divisions are responsible for planning meals and ensuring their programs meet USDA standards, procuring food for meals, training and supervising staff to prepare and serve meals, and operating and maintaining equipment for preparing meals.[7] Because school divisions have autonomy for how the school meal programs are administered, they are all run differently. The Scratch Cooking Model for K-12 school meals began in 2009 by Chef Ann Cooper.[8] Scratch Cooking is defined as preparing food using minimally processed ingredients. It gained momentum when child nutrition became more of a focus for school lunch programs.[9] The Scratch Cooking model gained even greater popularity in schools in 2010 when the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 was signed into law because it raised the nutrition standards for school meals. The new standards required more fruits, vegetables, and whole grains; reducing levels of sodium; reducing saturated and trans fats; and meeting the nutritional needs of school children within their age group's calorie requirements.[10] The following sections will discuss how the Scratch Cooking Initiative as a model for the school meal program was piloted in Virginia Beach City Public Schools (VBCPS) as part of the division's school meal program.

Scratch Cooking Initiative in Virginia Beach City Public Schools

The Scratch Cooking Initiative was piloted by the Office of Food Services (OFS) in VBCPS with the help of a consulting firm in the 2016-2017 school year at Old Donation School (ODS). ODS was selected because building modifications were still under Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) funding and any kitchen revisions needed could be covered with CIP funds. The goal of the initiative was to transform school lunch offerings in VBCPS cafeterias from ready-made or mostly heat and serve food items to scratch and speed-scratch menu items. Another goal of the initiative was to focus on healthy eating habits for all students while meeting state and federal nutrition guidelines of the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act (HHFKA) of 2010. Figure 1 displays a visual representation of the scratch cooking continuum.

Figure 1: Scratch Cooking Continuum



Timeline and Scratch Cooking Initiative Evolution

In 2018-2019, the OFS expanded the Scratch Cooking Initiative to Landstown elementary and middle schools. The initial implementation plan was a five-year phased-in approach. This approach required modernizing kitchen equipment in 13 to 16 schools per school year, and only schools with modern kitchen equipment were able to serve students scratch menu items. Kitchen modernization included a combination double stack oven, convection oven, kettle and/or tilt skillet, steamer, mixer, and blender. By 2019-2020, eleven school kitchens were modernized to include scratch cooking equipment. At this time, only schools that were modernized were able to employ bakers/cooks and could offer scratch menu items to students. However, there were several challenges with the original phased implementation plan including impacts from COVID-19 (e.g., school building closure), a reorganization within the OFS, and cost factors. For example, it was determined that some of the schools' kitchens required an exhaust hood replacement that would cost over $230,000 each. These challenges led the OFS to adjust the Scratch Cooking implementation plan to allow all school cafeterias across the division to offer scratch menu items to students regardless of kitchen modernization, which is possible by developing speed scratch recipes on the scratch cooking continuum that do not require complete kitchen modernization to prepare or cook. The current implementation plan began in the 2022-2023 school year and has a three-pronged approach:

1. Divisionwide execution with the goal of increasing scratch and speed scratch offerings across the division without the need for new technology. This includes increasing student meal participation; eliminating non-scratch items; offering samplings, tastings, and school garden sourced items; expanding salad bars; and farm-to-school produce offerings.

2. School garden implementation to support students' nutrition and wellness education, food system sustainability appreciation, and social-emotional learning through positive connections to the environment.

3. Kitchen equipment modernization and understanding the kitchen technology needed to complete scratch and speed scratch menu items. Kitchen equipment modernization will be accomplished in collaboration with the Office of Facilities Services with six to nine equipment upgrade projects per year.[11]

For the Scratch Cooking Initiative, the OFS develops a fall and spring menu about one and a half years in advance. All lunches have the following components: protein, vegetable, fruit, whole grain, and dairy. The menu operates on a three-week cycle and is driven by seasonal food items.

OFS operates as the School Cafeterias Fund which is a special revenue fund within the Department of School Division Services. According to the Scratch Cooking implementation plan, "it is the only VBCPS department that is funded entirely through earned revenues and receives no direct financial support from the School Board's annual operating budget."[12] With the exception of the general kitchen maintenance and collaboration with facility services for kitchen renovations, the Scratch Cooking Initiative is funded through earned revenues.[13] It is worth noting that the School Cafeterias Fund balance can only be used for school nutrition programs service-related purchases, such as equipment replacement, labor including staff and benefits, and food. According to the Scratch Cooking implementation plan, "OFS adheres to a conservative fiscal policy grounded in detailed budgeting and close monitoring of all funded revenues and expenditures."[14]

Scratch Cooking Staff and Resources

To support the Scratch Cooking Initiative, VBCPS hired a sous chef to help guide the initiative, and the OFS created a career ladder focused on developing the talents within VBCPS. The training program focused on providing cafeteria managers and cafeteria assistants culinary training to help them with recipe preparation and teamwork skills needed to implement a scratch-based menu. In addition, a goal is to have one baker/cook at each school to balance the chef scratch menu execution with staff skill level.[15]

In addition to staff, additional resources for the initiative include a Scratch Lab that is being built at Holland Road Annex to support recipe development, professional development, a potential future field trip location for students, and Iron Chef or Top Chef competitions. The lab is supposed to be completed by the end of 2025. The space will house an open kitchen and serve as a hub for the Scratch Cooking Initiative. In addition, with the support of No Kid Hungry and the Hansen Family Foundation, the Scratch Cooking Initiative has acquired a food truck to support the project. This food truck serves Scratch Cooking menu items at select high schools to support the longer lines during lunch. While it typically serves high schools, it can visit any of the schools by request. The food truck also serves as a method for marketing the initiative as it is often used to provide opportunities to sample menu items at school or community events.

Student Engagement Opportunities

Another component of the Scratch Cooking Initiative is related to opportunities for student engagement with the initiative. Several opportunities include student participation in school gardens and greenhouses as well as school involvement in menu item creation, chef mentor programs, and meal competitions. This includes taste tests to introduce students to new scratch foods to gain their insight and tailor menus. It is planned that the Office of Food Services Coordinator of Student Nutrition and Wellness will collaborate with the division's Sustainability Officer and Department of Teaching and Learning (DTAL) staff to update and modify the division's K-12 math and science curriculum to include additional aspects of nutrition education. For the secondary level curriculum, this integration will expand to student electives and involve inclusion of personal student wellness and nutrition goals and will use the cafeteria, gardens, and greenhouse, whenever possible, as learning outlets.[16] In addition, according to the Office of Food Services, there are schools or teachers who have taken initiative in making connections to the curriculum in regards to the Scratch Cooking Initiative. The Office of Food Services has supported these schools and teachers with their interests. For example, at Diamond Springs Elementary School, the Office of Food Services hosted sandwich making lessons for healthy eating for four pre-kindergarten classrooms.

Selection and Approval of Program for Evaluation

The Scratch Cooking Initiative was selected and approved for the 2024-2025 Program Evaluation Schedule based on criteria specified in School Board Policy 6-26, adopted by the School Board on September 5, 2007. The following excerpt is from School Board Policy 6-26:

Existing programs will be evaluated based on an annual Program Evaluation Schedule which will be developed by the Program Evaluation Committee and approved by the School Board annually. On a yearly basis, the Program Evaluation Committee will present a list of programs recommended for evaluation to the Superintendent and the School Board. This listing will include the rationale for each recommendation based on an approved set of criteria. All programs will be prioritized for evaluation based on the following factors:

1. Alignment with the school division's strategic plan and School Board goals;
2. Program cost;
3. Program scale;
4. Cross-departmental interest;
5. Community/stakeholder interest in the program;
6. Availability of information on the program's effectiveness; and
7. Date of most recent evaluation.

On July 24, 2024, members of the Program Evaluation Committee attended a virtual meeting, which included reviewing a PowerPoint with information about the process for developing the school division's Program Evaluation Schedule and the list of eight existing educational programs to review and rank based on the criteria above. Members who were unable to attend the meeting were emailed the PowerPoint and the list of existing educational programs to review and rank with instructions for returning their rankings.

Rankings were compiled and programs recommended for evaluation were determined and shared with the committee. The Scratch Cooking Initiative was selected as one of the top programs for evaluation based on the Program Evaluation Committee members' perceptions that it had the potential to have a large and positive impact on VBCPS reaching its goals and cross-departmental interest with multiple departments being involved in implementation. It was determined that the Scratch Cooking Initiative would be scheduled for an Evaluation Readiness Report to define divisionwide measurable goals and objectives and to develop an evaluation plan. The proposed Program Evaluation Schedule was presented to the School Board on August 27, 2024, and approved on September 10, 2024.

Overview of Current Goals and Objectives

The Scratch Cooking Initiative is guided by School Board policy, federal guidelines, mission statement, and initiative plan. School Board policy states, "The School Board is responsible for any school lunch program operated on school property. The School Board directs the Superintendent to subscribe to the federal School Lunch and Breakfast Programs which provide balanced hot meals. In order to participate, the School Board Chair and the Superintendent are authorized to certify that the School Division complies with state and federal regulations."[17] The Scratch Cooking Initiative is guided by federal guidelines including the HHFKA Act regarding nutrition requirements. The mission of the Office of Food Services is to "Provide students and staff with quality, nutritious meals at affordable prices. We also strive to educate our students about the importance of eating a healthy balance of grains, fruits, vegetables and meats."[18]

The Scratch Cooking Initiative document outlines implementation plans for the initiative and goals. The document discusses the alignment between the initiative and Compass to 2025's Goal 2 of addressing student physical health and wellbeing through nutrition. The implementation plan discusses one of the goals of the initiative to integrate student wellness and nutrition education into the existing student curriculum at all grade levels. In addition, the initiative plan discusses a goal of having one baker/cook at each school and increase scratch and speed scratch offerings across the division.

The next section of this report describes the process for developing goals and objectives for the Scratch Cooking Initiative based on essential input from the program manager and staff of the Office of Food Services.

Process for Developing Revised Goals and Objectives

According to School Board Policy 6-26, for programs selected for an Evaluation Readiness Report, Planning, Innovation, and Accountability (PIA) staff will "assist program staff in defining measurable goals and objectives, as well as linkages with activities and outcomes." An Evaluation Readiness Report focusing on the outcomes of this process and baseline data will be presented to the Superintendent and School Board. The process to complete the Evaluation Readiness Report began during the 2024-2025 school year with a review of existing documentation of the Scratch Cooking Initiative by program evaluators from the Office of Research and Evaluation.

A committee of 15 participants consisting of the director of food services, 4 coordinators of food services, 8 area supervisors, the district sous chef, sustainability officer, and program evaluators was formed to develop goals and measurable objectives for the Scratch Cooking Initiative as stated in School Board Policy 6-26. Committee members initially met on January 30, 2025 to discuss the evaluation readiness process, the overall evaluation of the Scratch Cooking Initiative, and to begin defining the goals and objectives. The discussion also centered on the proposed scope of the evaluation, including the development of the Evaluation Readiness Report. Two questions were considered to frame and focus the discussion:

- If the Scratch Cooking Initiative were successful, in general, what would success look like?
- If the Scratch Cooking Initiative were successful, what specific outcomes would be expected?

Discussion during the initial meeting also focused on reviewing the available information regarding the Scratch Cooking Initiative's background and purpose and identifying additional components that would provide useful information regarding implementation and potential student outcomes. Following the initial meeting discussion and review of documents, goals and specific measurable objectives were developed, which focused on key implementation components and student outcomes. In addition, wording for each objective stated explicitly the manner in which the objective would be measured and evaluated during the evaluation process.

A second meeting was held on May 12, 2025, with the committee to review the draft program goals and measurable objectives and obtain any additional feedback about measuring progress toward meeting each goal. The committee provided feedback regarding the goals and objectives during this meeting and no additional feedback was received. The final version of goals and objectives is included in the next section of this report.

Revised Goals and Objectives

As a result of the evaluation readiness process, 5 goals and 10 objectives were developed for the evaluation of the Scratch Cooking Initiative. Three goals were focused on implementation and two goals were focused on student outcomes.

The implementation goals focused on kitchen modernization, staffing and training, recipe development, and locally sourcing food items. Student outcome goals focused on student participation in the Scratch Cooking Initiative, learning healthy eating habits, and participating in opportunities that connect the Scratch Cooking Initiative with related curriculum.

Implementation Goals and Objectives

Goal 1: The Office of Food Services will modernize kitchen equipment in schools to support the Scratch Cooking Initiative.

Objective 1: Kitchen equipment will be upgraded as measured by an increase in the percentage of schools with upgraded kitchen equipment each year.

Goal 2: The Scratch Cooking Initiative will be fully staffed with trained professionals.

Objective 1: The Scratch Cooking Initiative will be fully supported by having one baker/cook at each school as measured by percentage of schools with a baker/cook.

Objective 2: Staff involved in the Scratch Cooking Initiative will participate in effective professional development as measured by the percentage of Scratch Cooking staff members participating in professional development/culinary arts training and staff perceptions that it prepared them to successfully implement the initiative.

Goal 3: The school division will increase the Scratch and Speed Scratch menu items along with recipe development and access to locally sourced food.

Objective 1: The school division will increase their Scratch and Speed Scratch menu items as measured by an increase in the percentage of scratch or speed scratch items and a corresponding decrease in the percentage of ready-made items by seasonal menu.

Objective 2: The Scratch Cooking Initiative will increase the number of new scratch recipes as measured by the total number of recipes developed each school year.

Objective 3: The Scratch Cooking Initiative will increase the amount of locally sourced food items as measured by the percentage of total food purchase costs spent on local food.

Outcome Goals and Objectives

Goal 1: Students will participate in school meals and learn healthy eating habits as part of the Scratch Cooking Initiative.

Objective 1: Student participation in VBCPS meal service will increase as measured by the number of meals served, average participation in school meals by level, and the percentage of average daily participation in school meals by school level.

Objective 2: Students will learn healthy eating habits as part of the Scratch Cooking Initiative by having access to healthy options as measured by the percentage of students who report that their school Scratch Cooking menu items offer healthy options (e.g., protein, vegetable, fruit, whole grain, or dairy).

Goal 2: Students will participate in the Scratch Cooking Initiative curriculum connections such as related extracurricular activities and school gardens.

Objective 1: Students will participate in extracurricular clubs or programs related to the Scratch Cooking Initiative as measured by the number of students participating and an increase in the percentage of schools offering related clubs or programs each year (e.g., culinary clubs, garden clubs, Jr. Chef Chopped competition, Jr. Chef Mentor Program, environmental club, Sous Chef for the Day).

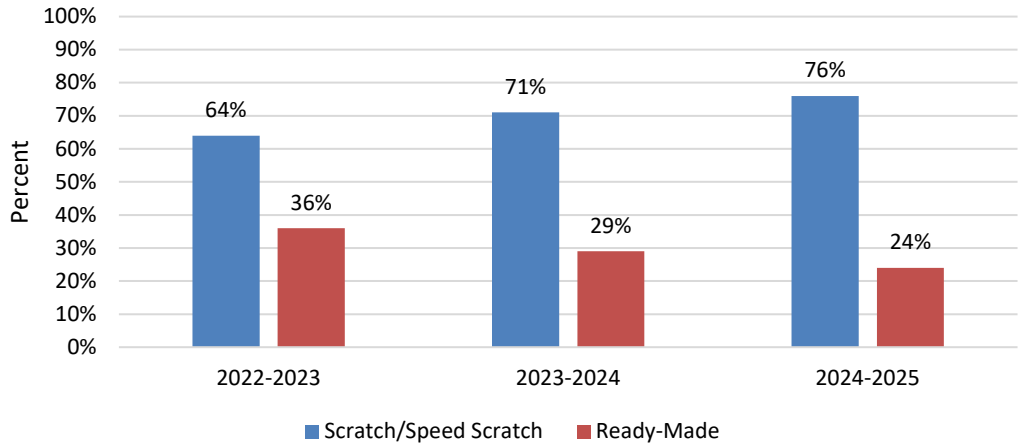
Objective 2: Schools will have active school gardens as measured by the percentage of schools having school gardens.

Baseline Data

Scratch Cooking and Kitchen Modernization

According to OFS, as of 2024-2025, all comprehensive schools in VBCPS participate in the Scratch Cooking Initiative. By June 2025, 60 percent of schools reported upgraded kitchen equipment to help support the Scratch Cooking Initiative. A timeline through 2030 has been developed to track the remaining schools that require kitchen upgrades. Figure 2 displays the percentage of meals in the spring menu that were scratch/speed scratch or ready-made from the 2022-2023 school year to the 2024-2025 school year. Overall, the spring menu has included more scratch/speed scratch items compared to ready-made items, and the trend appears to show that the percentage of scratch/speed scratch items is increasing, while the percentage of ready-made items is decreasing.

Figure 2: Percentage of Spring Menu Scratch/Speed Scratch and Ready-Made Items



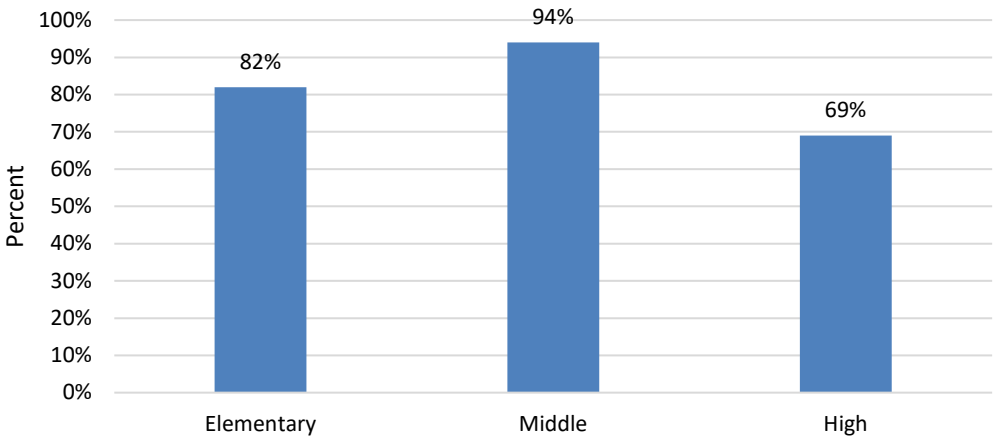
In 2024-2025, the Office of Food Services developed and worked on 14 new scratch/speed scratch recipes. Seventy percent, or 10 of these menu items, were finalized and implemented in 2024-2025. Examples of these new items include: Nashville hot chicken, orange creamsicle parfait, breakfast bake, beefaroni, beach minis, and chicken Caesar pita. The remaining four menu items are planned for implementation in 2025-2026. According to OFS, there was a focus on creating more scratch items for breakfast in the past year. In addition, according to the Virginia Local Food Tracking Tool, 15 percent of total food purchased in 2024-2025 in VBCPS was spent on local food items. Local food is defined as food purchased within a 400-mile radius of the School Administration Building.[19]

Staff Professional Opportunities and Information

In 2024-2025, VBCPS offered a variety of "tracks" or professional development avenues for its food services staff ranging from "Back to Basics" to "Culinary Principles Accredited." The various tracks provided staff with courses related to knife training, culinary terminology, food safety and sanitation, kitchen equipment, cooking methods, and principles of culinary arts. These courses were available at Tidewater Community College. VBCPS also offered its own professional development opportunities for staff. In 2024-2025, Office of Food Services staff had access to 14 different professional learning opportunities. A select list of these opportunities included: American Commodity Distribution Conference, Manager in Training Course, Nutrition and Culinary Bootcamp, and ServSafe. As of May 28, 2025, VBCPS had a total of 73 full-time bakers/cooks. Sixty-nine are site based across the elementary, middle, and high schools. Figure 3 displays the percentage of schools with a baker/cook by school level. Middle schools had the largest percentage of baker/cook staff employed, followed

by elementary schools and then high schools. All schools that had a baker/cook had one with the exception of Old Donation School which had two bakers/cooks.

Figure 3: Percentage of Schools With Baker/Cook by School Level



Note: Old Donation School is included in the Middle School total and Renaissance Academy is included in the high school total.

Student Engagement

Baseline data provided by the OFS for 2024-2025 showed that a total of 10 schools had an active culinary club, including 6 elementary schools, 3 middle schools, and 1 high school. A total of 40 schools had a school garden, including 28 elementary schools, 4 middle schools, and 8 high schools.

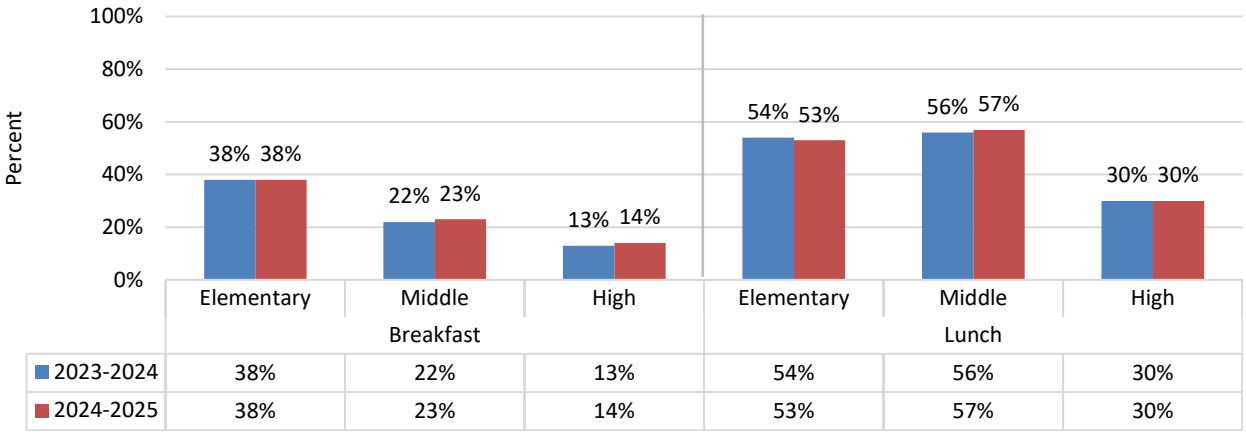
Data about the average participation in school meals was provided by the OFS and is displayed in Table 1. This average is calculated by the total number of meals served for the year by level divided by the total number of school sites by level. Overall, middle schools had higher lunch participation than elementary and high schools across both years. From 2023-2024 to 2024-2025, there were slight increases in the average participation for breakfast at the middle school and high school levels, while there were decreases in the average participation for breakfast at the elementary school level and lunch at all levels.

Table 1: Average Participation in School Meals by Level in 2023-2024 and 2024-2025

School Level	Breakfast		Lunch	
	23-24	24-25	23-24	24-25
Elementary	38,959	37,105	55,681	52,571
Middle	41,024	41,177	103,323	101,204
High	38,238	38,812	87,562	85,664

Figure 4 displays the percentage of average daily participation in school meals by school level. This percentage represents how many students participate in breakfast or lunch on an average day compared to how many students are enrolled. There is little change in the percentage of daily participation from 2023-2024 to 2024-2025. Overall, elementary students participated in breakfast at the highest percentage, followed by middle school students and then high school students. Middle school students had the highest average percentage participating in lunch, followed by elementary students and then high school students.

Figure 4: Percent of Average Daily Participation in School Meals by Level in 2023-2024 and 2024-2025



	Breakfast			Lunch		
	Elementary	Middle	High	Elementary	Middle	High
2023-2024	38%	22%	13%	54%	56%	30%
2024-2025	38%	23%	14%	53%	57%	30%

Table 2 displays the total number of meals served per month in 2024-2025. During the school year, August and June had fewer total meals served because there are fewer potential serving days in those months. The months with the highest total meals served for both breakfast and lunch were October, May, and March. Overall, more than 8.7 million breakfast and lunch meals were served during 2024-2025. With supper and snacks included, more than 8.8 million meals were served in 2024-2025 in VBCPS.

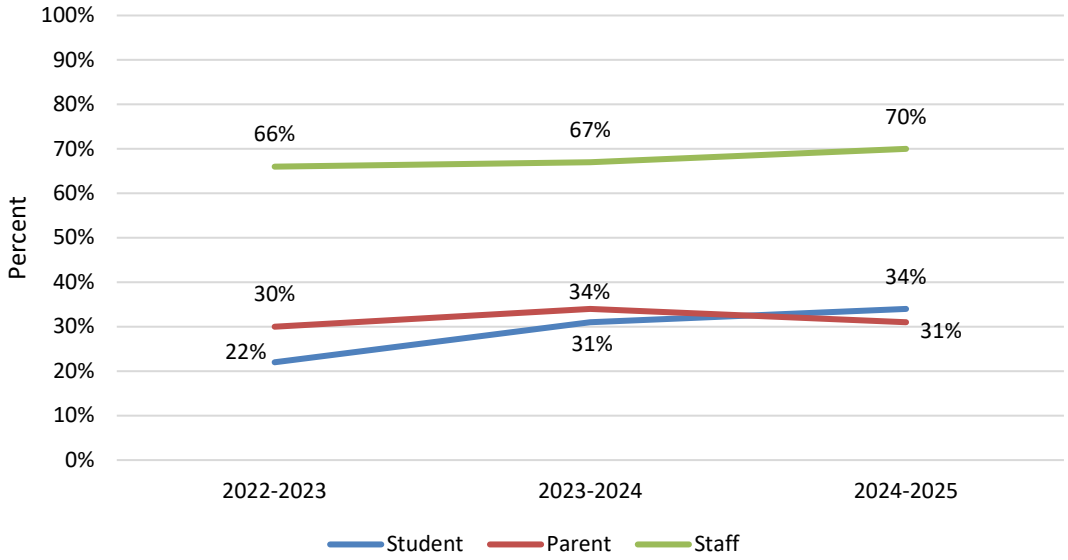
Table 2: Total Number of Meals Served Per Month in 2024-2025

Month	Breakfast	Lunch	Supper	Snack
July	19,565	25,600	0	0
August	56,624	111,610	1,787	0
September	352,190	611,222	7,815	0
October	415,015	701,854	11,043	19
November	287,157	484,104	8,904	0
December	276,715	480,417	8,868	25
January	246,283	472,066	9,832	0
February	292,882	517,784	12,910	0
March	392,171	679,693	17,206	0
April	302,307	522,119	12,970	0
May	393,299	681,456	13,896	0
June	162,980	280,084	4,628	0
Total by Meal Type	3,197,188	5,568,009	109,859	44
Total Meals	8,875,100			

Stakeholder Perceptions

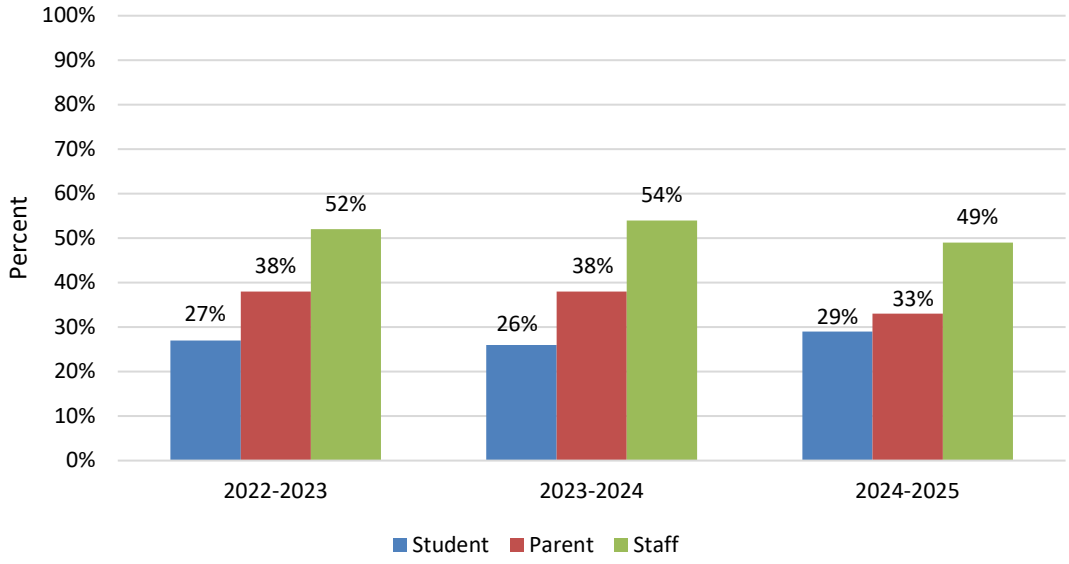
Additional baseline data related to the Scratch Cooking Initiative was gathered from ongoing menu surveys that are conducted by PIA for the OFS. Students, parents, and staff with an active SchoolCafé Account were surveyed each year about their perceptions of various aspects of the Office of Food Services including the Scratch Cooking Initiative.[20] Figure 5 displays results from students, parents, and staff from the survey item, "Are you aware of the Scratch Cooking Initiative and the VBScratch program?" Overall, staff reported the highest levels of awareness with 66 to 70 percent of staff being aware of the initiative. Parents and students had more similar percentages reporting awareness. The percentages of staff and students reporting awareness of the initiative have shown an upward trend over the last three years.

Figure 5: Awareness of Scratch Cooking Initiative and VBScratch Program Over Time



The survey also asked stakeholders to select options from a list that they wanted more of on the school menu. Some examples included scratch items, variety, or choices per day. Figure 6 displays results for the percentages of students, parents, and staff who indicated they wanted more scratch items on the school menu. Each year, staff were most likely to select that they wanted more scratch items on the menu compared to students or parents which may have been related to their higher level of awareness of the Scratch Cooking Initiative (see Figure 5). Forty-nine to 54 percent of staff indicated they wanted more scratch items over the last several years. Thirty-three to 38 percent of parents indicated they wanted more scratch items over the last several years, and from 26 to 29 percent of students indicated they wanted more scratch items, with a small increase in 2024-2025.

Figure 6: Stakeholders' Perceptions of Wanting More Scratch Items on the School Menu



Evaluation Plan and Recommendation

According to School Board Policy 6-26, an Evaluation Readiness Report will focus on the outcomes of the evaluation readiness process and "will be presented to the Superintendent and School Board with a recommendation regarding future evaluation plans for the program. If appropriate based on the evaluation readiness process, the program will be scheduled for a comprehensive evaluation." In accordance with this policy, a proposed plan of action for the evaluation of the Scratch Cooking Initiative is described below.

Scope and Rationale of Proposed Evaluation

The scope of the Scratch Cooking Initiative program evaluation will be a one-year comprehensive evaluation focused on implementation components as well as outcomes. Implementation components will include kitchen modernization, recipe development and local food sourcing, and staff development. Outcomes will include school meal service participation, learning healthy eating habits, and student participation in extracurricular activities related to the Scratch Cooking Initiative.

For the comprehensive evaluation, information will be provided for the following six areas:

1. **Alignment with the Strategic plan**
   Rationale: The alignment with the division's strategic plan, *Compass to 2030*, will be assessed to ensure the program aligns with the division's broader goals.

2. **Operational Components**
   Rationale: It is standard practice within an evaluation framework to examine issues related to implementation, including implementation goals, to assess program operation and the extent to which the program is being implemented as intended (i.e., implementation fidelity).

3. **Student Engagement Opportunities**
   Rationale: The purpose of including student engagement opportunities is to identify avenues students have to be engaged, and understand how they are engaging in the Scratch Cooking Initiative.

4. **Meeting Goals and Objectives**
   Rationale: Progress made toward meeting the outcome goals and objectives will be assessed to determine the extent to which the program is effective.

5. **Stakeholder Perceptions**
   Rationale: Assessing perceptions of the stakeholder groups (i.e., students, parents, and staff) will identify awareness, strengths, potential areas for improvement, and a general understanding of the role of the Scratch Cooking Initiative within the division.

6. **Revenue and Expenses**
   Rationale: Revenue and expenses for the Scratch Cooking Initiative will be gathered and assessed to identify scratch cooking-related expenses and the extent to which Office of Food Services revenues support the initiative.

Proposed Evaluation Method

In preparation for this Evaluation Readiness Report, the VBCPS Scratch Cooking Initiative Plan was reviewed, federal and state policy was reviewed, and research on Scratch Cooking initiatives was conducted. The documents provided a resource for planning the current evaluation.

The proposed evaluation will include mixed methodologies to address each of the evaluation questions, including the goals and objectives. Goals and objectives will be evaluated based on multiple measures when possible. Data collection will occur during 2025-2026 and will include both quantitative (e.g., kitchen modernization data, menu data, survey ratings, etc.) and qualitative data (e.g., open-ended survey questions, interview responses). The majority of quantitative data will be provided by the Office of Food Services (e.g., kitchen modernization information, menu spreadsheets, VDOE local food tracking tool). To gather perception data, surveys will be administered to key stakeholder groups including students, parents, and staff.

Evaluation Design and Questions

The proposed evaluation questions are listed below.

1. **What is scratch cooking and how does it align with the VBCPS strategic framework, *Compass to 2030*?**
2. **What are the implementation components of the Scratch Cooking Initiative and what progress has been made toward meeting the key implementation goals and objectives?**
    a. Implementation Goal #1: What kitchen equipment has been modernized in the schools to support the Scratch Cooking Initiative?
    b. Implementation Goal #2: What recipes have been developed to support the Scratch Cooking Initiative and how has locally sourced food been utilized?
    c. Implementation Goal #3: What staff are involved in the Scratch Cooking Initiative and what professional learning opportunities (e.g., culinary arts courses/VBCPS training) are provided?
3. **What opportunities are provided for students to be engaged in the Scratch Cooking Initiative?**
    a. What opportunities (e.g., clubs, gardens) are available for students to participate in scratch cooking-related activities?
4. **What progress has been made toward meeting the outcome goals and objectives of the Scratch Cooking Initiative?**
    a. Outcome Goal #1: To what extent do students participate in school meals and learn healthy eating habits as part of the Scratch Cooking Initiative?
    b. Outcome Goal #2: To what extent do students participate in curriculum connections such as related extracurricular activities as it relates to the Scratch Cooking Initiative?
5. **What were the stakeholders' perceptions of the Scratch Cooking Initiative (i.e., students, staff, parents)?**
6. **What is the cost of the Scratch Cooking Initiative to the school division and what funds are used to support the initiative?**

Table 3 outlines the process for collecting data to address implementation objectives, and Table 4 outlines the process for collecting data to address outcome objectives.

Table 3: Data Collection Process for Implementation Objectives

Program Objective	Data Used to Evaluate Progress Toward Meeting Objectives	Measure	Data Source
Goal 1 Objective 1	Data regarding kitchen equipment upgrades	Percentage of schools that upgraded kitchen equipment	Food Services kitchen improvement plans
Goal 2 Objective 1	Baker/cook employed at schools	Percentage of schools with a baker/cook	Crystal Reports
Goal 2 Objective 2	Staff participation in professional development/culinary arts training and perceptions of it preparing them to implement Scratch Cooking Initiative	Percentage of food services staff participating in professional development/culinary training Percentage of respondents agreeing	Professional development/ training calendars Participation records Survey
Goal 3 Objective 1	Data regarding scratch and speed scratch menu items and data regarding ready-made items	Percentage of scratch and speed scratch menu items and percentage of ready-made items by seasonal menu	Food Services seasonal menu spreadsheet
Goal 3 Objective 2	Data regarding new scratch recipes	Total number of scratch recipes developed each school year	Food Services recipe development documentation
Goal 3 Objective 3	Data regarding locally sourced food items	Percentage of food purchases spent on local food	VDOE Virginia Local Food Tracking Tool

Table 4: Data Collection Process for Outcome Objectives

Program Objective	Data Used to Evaluate Progress Toward Meeting Objectives	Measure	Data Source
Goal 1 Objective 1	Data regarding number of meals served and participation in school meals	Number of meals served, average participation in school meals by level, percentage of average daily participation in school meals by school level	Food Services meal participation data
Goal 1 Objective 2	Data regarding students' access to healthy food options	Percentage of students who report meals that offer healthy options such as protein, vegetable, fruit, whole grain, and dairy	Survey
Goal 2 Objective 1	Data regarding student participation in clubs or programs related to Scratch Cooking Initiative	Number of students participating in Culinary or Garden Clubs and an increase in the percentage of schools offering related clubs or opportunities each year	Culinary/Garden Club Participation Numbers School Club or Related Opportunities Participation Numbers Survey
Goal 2 Objective 2	Data regarding school gardens	Percentage of schools with school gardens	Food Services school garden data

Summary of the Evaluation Readiness Process

The Scratch Cooking Initiative Evaluation Readiness Committee and staff from the Office of Research and Evaluation met to discuss the evaluation readiness process and to identify measurable divisionwide goals and objectives. As a result, a total of 5 goals and 10 accompanying objectives for the Scratch Cooking Initiative were identified, including three goals for implementation and two goals for outcomes. The implementation goals focused on school kitchen modernization, staffing and training, recipe development, and locally sourcing food items. The student outcome goals focused on students participating in the Scratch Cooking Initiative through school meal service participation, learning healthy eating habits, and student participation in extracurricular activities related to the Scratch Cooking Initiative. Objectives for these goal areas include increasing student participation in VBCPS meal service, learning healthy eating habits, participating in extracurricular activities and school gardens, and active school gardens. As part of the evaluation readiness process, an evaluation plan was developed including evaluation questions that will be addressed, the design and methods of the evaluation, and data that will be collected and analyzed. The evaluation plan includes a one-year comprehensive evaluation focused on operational aspects of the initiative, outcomes, and program effectiveness.

Recommendation and Rationale

Recommendation #1: Conduct a comprehensive evaluation of the Scratch Cooking Initiative with a report provided to the School Board during fall 2026. *(Responsible Group: Office of Planning, Innovation, and Accountability)*

Rationale: It is proposed that a comprehensive evaluation of the Scratch Cooking Initiative Program be conducted during 2025-2026. The comprehensive evaluation will focus on all aspects of the initiative including its operation, outcomes, and program effectiveness. Having completed the evaluation readiness process, which resulted in the development and refinement of the program goals and measurable objectives and the development of an evaluation plan, a comprehensive evaluation is now recommended.

Endnotes

[1] The National School Lunch Program | GovFacts
[2] https://www.congress.gov/crs_external_products/R/PDF/R48515/R48515.1.pdf
[3] § 22.1-79.7:1. School meals; availability to students
[4] § 22.1-207.3. School breakfast programs
[5] Program Information Report (Keydata)
[6] School Lunch and Breakfast Participation: A Snapshot of Recent Trends
[7] The National School Lunch Program: Background, Trends, and Issues, 2024 Edition
[8] Chef Ann Foundation | Who We Are
[9] https://ers.usda.gov/sites/default/files/_laserfiche/publications/110126/EIB-279.pdf?v=55475
[10] COMPS-10332.pdf
[11] Scratch Cooking Initiative Plan, pps. 10-13
[12] Scratch Cooking Initiative Plan, page 1.
[13] R. Amato, personal communication, July 22, 2025.
[14] Scratch Cooking Initiative Plan, p. 1
[15] Scratch Cooking Initiative Plan, p. 13
[16] Scratch Cooking Initiative Plan, p. 10
[17] https://schoolboard.vbschools.com/policies/section-3/3-84
[18] Virginia Beach City Public Schools, Office of Food Services, Goal Statement.
[19] This includes total amount spent July 1, 2024-June 30, 2025.
[20] Stakeholders who had a SchoolCafé account may have had varying levels of participation in school meals. The total number of respondents for the survey each year were as follows: 2022-2023 student n=426, staff n=208, parent n=2,583; 2023-2024 student n=242, staff n=183, parent n=1,234; and 2024-2025 student n=597, staff n=265, parent n=2,744.

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Produced by the Office of Planning, Innovation, and Accountability
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