Marin County School Food Systems Assessment Report

Marin County Office of Education

Food, Agriculture, and Resilient Ecosystems (FARE)

Conscious Kitchen

2025

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Executive Summary

As part of a collaborative effort between the Marin County Office of Education (MCOE) and Conscious Kitchen, with support from a FARE grant from the Marin County Parks' Measure A funds, an assessment of school food systems across Marin County was conducted to evaluate the current challenges and opportunities in school meal programming. This report analyzes meal program models, local and organic food sourcing, and key barriers to collaboration, providing insights to improve school meal programming.

Opportunity to Address Child Nutrition

Childhood nutrition is an essential component of ensuring students are supported to learn and grow each day. Unfortunately, food insecurity is a growing concern for children in Marin County public schools. California Department of Education (CDE) data from 2024-25 shows 35.2% or 9,551 of Marin's public school students qualified for the Free & Reduced Meals Program (FRMP).[1] This is an increase of 7.4 percentage points since the 2018-19 school year. Safety net programs designed to help meet the needs of these families like CalFresh and CalWORKS reflect signs that many children aren't being reached. The CalFresh Data Dashboard reflects that only 4,854 children 18 and under in Marin were enrolled in CalFresh in 2024, despite the fact that household income (HHI) qualifications for FRMP are nearly identical to those for CalFresh.[2] Additionally, proposed policy changes from the federal government may further erode or deter access to CalFresh and other safety net programs, especially for households with no or mixed immigration status. Given the high cost of living in Marin County, many whose HHI exceeds FRMP and CalFresh qualifications are also food insecure. Taken together, this data illustrates growing food insecurity among Marin's students at a time when safety net programs are retracting.

School nutrition programs represent a vital opportunity to improve food security for youth in Marin. California's commitment to universal access to breakfast and lunch, with supper for students involved in some afterschool programs represents a chance to provide essential nutrition to students throughout the school year. Yet, CDE data from the 2022-23 school year shows participation rates in Marin school breakfasts at 44.56% and 42.66% for lunches.[3] The self-reported data from districts included in this report shows some districts in Marin with participation rates significantly lower than the FRMP qualified rate. Additionally, anecdotal evidence from Food Service Directors suggests that participation by students sometimes means consuming only a small portion of a meal and discarding the rest.

[1] https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1zlcSXhSK-1apXxNvh_6oW0JyBB7nHm9YloA6m1XeiCM/edit?gid=1694642225#gid=1694642225

[2] https://public.tableau.com/app/profile/california.department.of.social.services/viz/CFdashboard-PUBLIC/Home

[3] https://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/sh/sn/#annual:~:text=School%20Nutrition%20Programs%20(SNP)

Given the current commitments from the federal government and the State of California to fund school meals, improving participation in school nutrition programs in Marin could significantly reduce food insecurity among local children.

Key Findings: Opportunities & Barriers

This report finds that the greatest opportunity to improve participation rates is by investing in efforts to improve the quality of meal programs. In Marin districts where students and parents have been engaged as partners, targeted investments in infrastructure to enable scratch and speed-scratch cooking, and the prioritization of local and organic produce where possible, student participation rates have risen to around 80%. Faculty, staff, and administrators at Sausalito Marin City School District and Lagunitas School District report significant improvements in student behavior, time on task, and campus culture following changes to the school nutrition programs.

The report also finds significant barriers to these kinds of program improvements. Many districts lack kitchen facilities or have facilities that are inadequate for scratch and speed scratch cooking. Recruiting and retaining qualified staff is challenging given the cost of living in Marin County. There is a lack of established procurement opportunities for local and organic foods that align with current Marin County district budgets. Districts contracted with third party meal vendors that meet nutrition and reporting requirements and are aligned with reimbursement rates report low participation rates between 9% and 29%, suggesting these are meals students are choosing not to eat.

Given the cost and strain of delivering existing school nutrition programs, districts require significant additional capacity to overcome these barriers. County of Marin Measure A Funds coupled with limited state and federal grants represent some opportunities for added capacity. However, many districts note these are insufficient to support program improvements akin to those with 80% participation rates. At 2024-25 school year breakfast and lunch participation rates, Marin County districts received $14.4M in federal and state reimbursements. Increasing participation rates across the county to 80% – akin to what Sausalito Marin City and Lagunitas School Districts have accomplished – would have resulted in $25.5M additional reimbursements to support childhood nutrition in Marin County.[4]

Essential Questions for Strategy

This report presents stakeholders with the following essential questions:

- What is a reasonable goal for school nutrition program participation rates?

[4] https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1K_nQSDbTn27Qdwb5RoJNcjdByiMqt2tiJwDi7AZO0NE/edit?usp=sharing

- In addition to school districts interested in this issue, what other agencies concerned with childhood nutrition could be contributors to this process?
- What is the best approach to a strategic planning process for willing partners to work toward alignment on vision and actions?
- What additional resources and capacities are needed for planning and implementation?

Introduction

The Marin County Office of Education (MCOE) and Conscious Kitchen, with support from a FARE grant from the Marin County Parks' Measure A funds, are conducting a comprehensive evaluation of school food systems across Marin County. Recognizing that Child Nutrition Programs (CNPs) serve as a primary, and in some cases the only, source of nutritious meals for many students, this assessment examines meal service models, finances, and procurement practices to identify opportunities for systemic improvements that can more effectively deliver healthy, high-quality meals that fuel learning, support whole-child well-being, and strengthen long-term program sustainability.

The opportunity that this project is attempting to bring forward is both increasing nutrition for student health and to tap into additional federal funding: if Marin County schools achieve an average lunch participation rate of 80%, districts could collectively unlock an estimated $10 million in additional annual lunch reimbursement (additionally, if schools can achieve 80% participation in breakfasts, that's another $10 million). This report therefore, focuses on the systems-level changes needed to build parent and community trust, improve meal appeal and nutrition, and ensure food service operations are financially and operationally sustainable for the future. It also explores what it would take to replicate successful models already present within the county and adapt them across diverse district contexts.

Through surveys, stakeholder engagement, and data analysis, this report establishes a baseline understanding of meal service models, finances, procurement practices, local and organic purchasing trends, school garden programming, and student participation patterns. It further identifies what infrastructure, partnerships, and policy alignment could be adopted that would ensure every district can consistently serve nutritious, appealing meals to all students in the longer term.

Project Goals

- Assessing School Food Programs: Review current meal service models across Marin and work with key stakeholders to identify opportunities and barriers to improving nutrition, meal quality, and participation rates. Nourished students are ready to learn.
- Ensuring Sustainable Nutrition Programs: Identify the operational, financial, and infrastructural strategies needed to build long-term, resilient meal programs that can sustain high participation and high-quality nutrition.

- Developing Sustainable Food Service Strategies: Creating new opportunities and strategies for food service improvements, ensuring long-term viability by addressing logistical and financial constraints.
- Enhancing Regional Collaboration: Facilitating partnerships among schools, nonprofits, and community leaders to optimize procurement, improve meal production efficiency, and expand access to nutritious foods.

Findings will inform potential regional strategies such as centralized procurement and shared production models that promote cost efficiency, streamline operations, and enhance meal quality. By leveraging collective purchasing power and standardized systems, districts can improve access to fresh ingredients, strengthen operational consistency, and reduce waste. Collaborations with community stakeholders can further help districts overcome logistical, financial, and staffing barriers to serving nutritious meals at scale.

Ultimately, this evaluation aims to identify the systems, investments, and partnerships required to ensure every student in Marin County has reliable access to healthy, appealing school meals—and to help districts fully capture the federal resources available to support this essential component of child well-being.

Survey Respondents

- Total Responses: 14 of 17 public districts across Marin County responded to the survey, as well as one private district
- Student Population Represented: 27,035 students represented by the survey respondents, or 89% of all public school students in Marin County. (Marin public school student population is 30,306)
- Purchased vs. Prepared Meals: 7 districts employ purchased meal-providers for their school meal programs, while 7 school districts prepare meals in-house. (We believe the 3 districts that did not respond use purchased-meal providers)
- We estimate that two-thirds of all students in Marin are currently at a school that prepares meals for students.

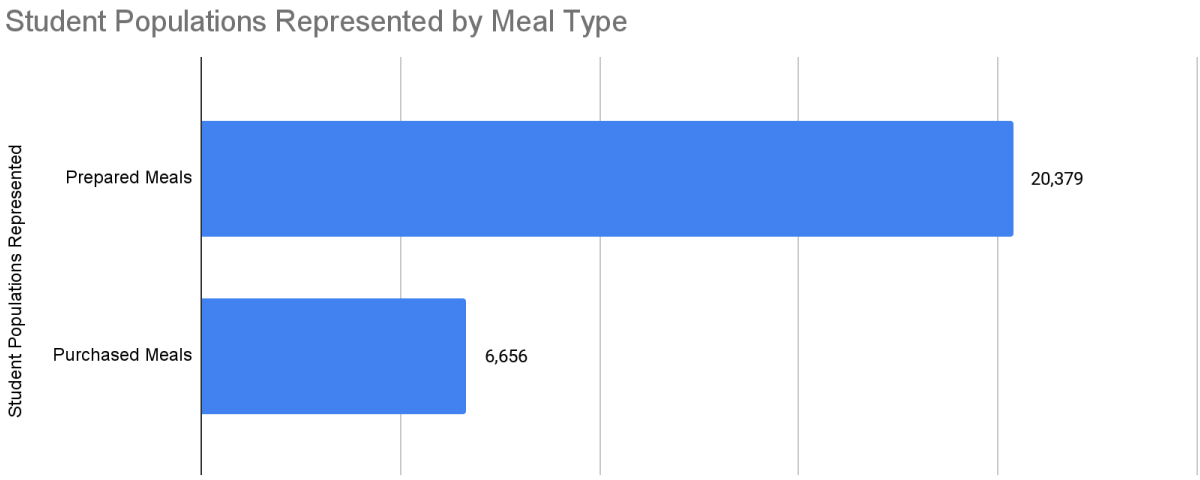


Figure 1: Student Populations Represented by Meal Type (This graph illustrates that 75% of students in Marin County have prepared meal programs, and 25% of students have purchased meal programs.)

- Districts Represented with survey data (with CBEDS 2024 October student count):
    - Purchased Meal Districts (6,656 students, 24.6% of population with surveys)
        - Mill Valley Elementary (2,250)
        - Miller Creek Elementary (1,755)
        - Larkspur-Corte Madera (1,169)
        - Reed Union Elementary (1,044)
        - Ross Elementary (340)
        - Marin County Office of Education (64)
        - Nicasio (34) - Shoreline is their provider
    - Prepared Meal Districts (20,979 students, 75.4% of population with surveys)
        - Novato Unified (7,400)
        - San Rafael Elementary and High School Districts (7,219)
        - Tamalpais Union High (4,730)
        - Shoreline Unified (469)
        - Sausalito Marin City (283)
        - Lagunitas Elementary (161)
        - Bolinas-Stinson Union (117)
- Roles of Respondents: Surveys were completed by a mix of roles. Responses came from Chief Business Operators (CBOs), Superintendents, Nutrition Services Directors, and Nutrition Services Coordinators.
- Four of the public school districts have a Director of Nutrition Services or Food Services who replied to our survey.

- West Marin has recently embarked on a joint Food Service Director role to help the sites work together to achieve efficiencies and stronger collaboration. This model is an example of ways that districts are working differently on their food programming.

Meal Program Leadership	# Students	% of Marin Students	# Meals Served	% of Marin Meals Served	Lunch Participation Rate
Food Service Director - Prepared Meals	19,632	64.8%	2,487,338	83.9%	42.8%
Shared Food Service Director - Prepared Meals	781	2.6%	173,192	5.8%	70.4%
Purchased Meals	6,656	21.9%	305,723	10.3%	17.3%
No Response	3,237	10.7%			
Totals	30,306	100.0%	2,966,253	100.0%	

Table 2: Meal Program Leadership & Participation Rates (This table presents a breakdown of student enrollment, meal service volumes, and lunch participation rates across Marin County schools, categorized by leadership structure.)

Key Findings

Meal Program Models

Schools in Marin County operate either prepared meal programs (where meals are cooked in-house) or purchased meal programs (which rely on external vendors). Prepared meal districts tend to have higher participation rates, greater use of local and organic ingredients, and more capacity for scratch cooking. In contrast, vendor-based programs face limited customization, higher packaging waste, and lower meal participation rates. This report includes an in-depth analysis of the data collected through the evaluation project to further explore these differences. Below are summary statistics about the school districts surveyed.

	Prepared Meal Districts (In-House Meal Preparation)	Purchased/Vended Meal Districts (External Vendors)
1	Bolinas-Stinson Union	Larkspur-Corte Madera
2	Lagunitas Elementary	Marin County Office of Education
3	Novato Unified	Miller Creek Elementary
4	San Rafael Elementary and High	Mill Valley Elementary

5	Sausalito Marin City	Nicasio (served by Shoreline)
6	Shoreline Unified	Reed Union Elementary
7	Tamalpais Union High	Ross Elementary
Total Students	20,379	6,656

Table 1: Prepared Meal Program Districts vs. Purchased Meal Districts. This table presents a breakdown of schools serving prepared meals or purchased meals. On the left column, we have schools representing 20,379 students who are being served prepared meals vs. 6,656 students who are being served purchased meals in their school meal programs.

Each year, Marin County schools collectively invest an estimated $30 million in food service programs. Meal participation is a key variable that directly shapes school meal budgets. In addition to ensuring children's nutritional needs are met, increasing participation can unlock additional reimbursements, ensuring that no funding is left on the table. Higher participation allows districts to benefit from economies of scale, which can offset staffing and facility costs and free up more resources for procurement, including fresh, local, and organic ingredients.

Collaboration and Growth

The survey uncovered a wide range of promising strategies and innovative models already being piloted or envisioned by school food leaders across Marin. For example, several districts are expanding scratch cooking, integrating school gardens, and investing in local and organic procurement. Others are building regional alliances, such as the shared food service director model in West Marin, to increase efficiency and buying power.

Significant state and federal investments, such as Kitchen Infrastructure and Training (KIT) funds, Local Food for Schools, and Supply Chain Assistance, have catalyzed improvements in equipment, training, and local procurement. These efforts offer a foundation upon which to build more collaborative, equitable, and sustainable meal programs.

While challenges such as staffing shortages, infrastructure gaps, and insufficient reimbursement rates persist, they also represent opportunities for countywide solutions. By coordinating across districts, leveraging funding streams, and engaging with local farmers, Marin has the potential to evolve our school food systems to nourish more students to improve learning outcomes, support local agriculture, and model climate-smart, community-driven food service strategies.

Free and Reduced Meal Programs

School meal programming has changed over the years, with more California schools removing their central or site kitchens and going to a vended program. Starting in 2022-23, California adopted a universal meals programming plan that allows all students to receive free meals at school, regardless of their family income status. Prior to this, schools offered meals to other

students, but received far less or no funding for those meals. Schools adopted varying forms of payment options to allow all students to access meals as desired. With the California Universal Meals programming, schools receive base-level USDA reimbursement for meals that meet the federal income thresholds and additional funding through the state programming (California Department of Education - CDE) to offset additional participation levels[5].

In most cases, across Marin County, meal participation rates under the Universal Meals Program often exceed the percentage of students eligible for free and reduced-price meals. The table below illustrates the relationship between meal participation rates and eligibility, highlighting where participation surpasses the baseline set by free meal qualifications.

School District	Enrollment (Oct 2024)	FRMP Qualified[6]	FRMP Qualified %	Meal Participation Count	Meal Participation %
Purchased Meal Program					
Mill Valley Elementary	2,250	133	5.9%	563	25%
Miller Creek Elementary	1,813	363	20%	160	9.1%
Larkspur-Corte Madera	1,178	105	9%	342	29%
Reed Union Elementary	1,048	48	5%	222	21.2%
Ross Elementary	354	2	1%	62	17.5%
Marin County Office of Education	64	23	35.6%	38	60%
Nicasio	36	18	50%	26	71%
Prepared Meal Program					
Novato Unified	7,475	2,511	34%	4139	55.4%
San Rafael City	7,219	4,443	62%	2807	38.9%
Tamalpais Union High	4,730	501	11%	1267	26.8%
Shoreline Unified	476	228	48%	368	77.3%
Sausalito Marin City	283	144	51%	195	68.9%
Lagunitas Elementary	162	32	20%	71	43.8%
Bolinas-Stinson Union	106	40	38%	87	82.1%

[5] The state fills in the funding gap so that every student receives meals at no charge, even those who fall under the "paid" category.
[6] Free or reduced meal price (FRMP) refers to the students who are eligible for free or reduced-price meals in the school district.

Table 3: Meal Program Participation by District & Free Meals Data - CBEDS 2024 October totals (This table presents purchased and prepared meal program data, including school district enrollment, as well as free meal and participation counts and percentages.)

Purchased & Prepared Meal Programs

Districts that prepare their own food represent 50% of survey respondents, accounting for 67.2% of Marin's total student population. These districts oversee meal preparation in-house, utilizing a range of approaches, including scratch cooking, speed-scratch methods, and heat-and-serve models, depending on kitchen infrastructure and staffing availability.

Meal participation rates across these districts have either increased or remained consistent compared to the prior year, reflecting reported engagement trends in school meal programs.

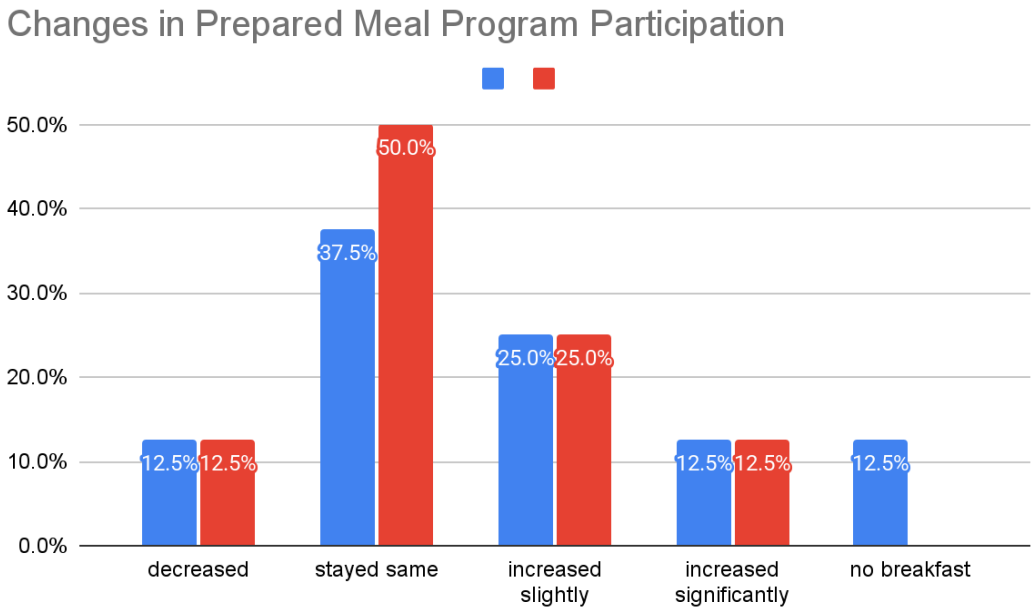


Figure 2: Changes in Prepared Meal Program Participation. This graph shows the changes in breakfast and lunch participation rates among schools that prepare their own meals. The survey indicated that while 12.5% of the schools indicated a decrease in breakfast participation, 37.5% of the schools indicated that breakfast and lunch participation increased for them.

The districts that procure meals from outside sources represent 50% of survey respondents, accounting for 22% of Marin's total student population. Because all non-respondent districts are understood to operate vended meal programs, the total percentage of students receiving vended meals is likely closer to 32.7%. These meals are prepared off-site with limited customization at the district level.

The Lunch Master is the main outside vendor providing service to the region. Based in San Carlos, it is a family-owned company serving about 25,000 students daily across the Bay Area and Central Valley. They provide freshly prepared, dietitian-designed meals that meet federal nutrition standards, offering convenience, variety, and nutrition to support student health. Five of the seven vended meal districts receive meals from The Lunch Master, either directly or through a partner district (Reed/Ross Elementary). Vended meal participation rates vary, but are relatively low for The Lunch Masters programming.

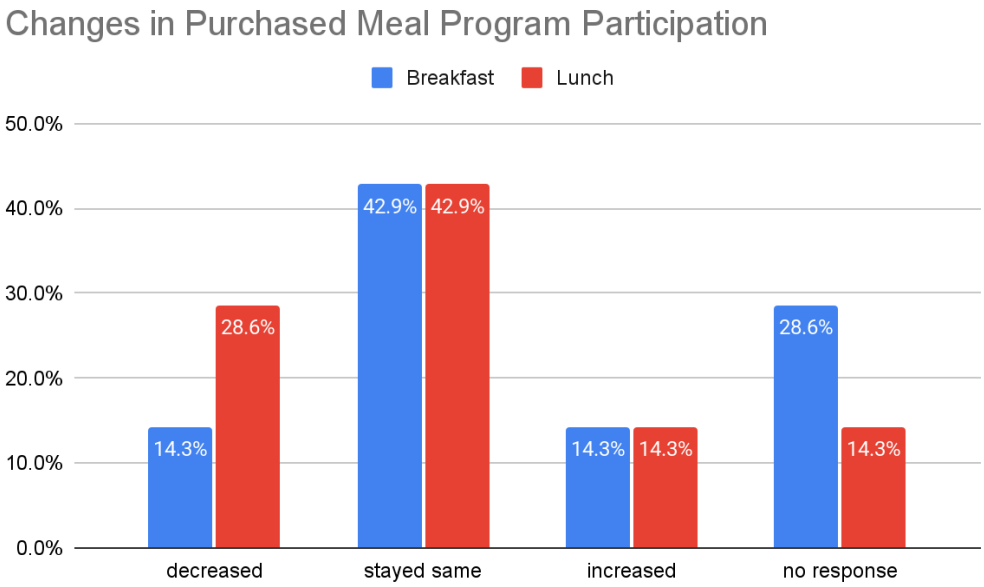


Figure 3: Changes in Purchased Meal Program Participation. This graph shows the changes (decrease, stayed the same, and increase) in breakfast and lunch participation rates among schools that contract with external vendors. The survey indicated that while 14.3% and 28.6% of the schools indicated a decrease in breakfast and lunch participation, 14.3% of the schools reported that their participation the increased from the previous school year. 42.9% of the schools reported no change.

Dee's Organics, a production kitchen in San Rafael contracts with a set of Marin County school districts.

The remaining district, Nicasio in West Marin, sources its meals from Shoreline Unified's West Marin Elementary campus, with daily meal deliveries ensuring timely access for students.

Meal Program Financials

Districts face ongoing challenges in fully supporting their meal programs, often stretching limited resources to cover food and labor costs. While reimbursements provide a foundation, many districts also rely on general funds to sustain operations. A significant variable in the financial reality for districts is the participation rate. Higher participation may distribute the staffing and overhead costs, leaving a higher percentage of funds for procurement. These are

some of the complex dynamics shaping the form, function, and outcomes of district food service programs.

	Prepared Meals	Purchased Meals
Budget Supplemented by General Fund	4	3
Budgeted Solely with Reimbursements	2	2
No response	2	2

Table 4: Districts' Approach to Funding School Meal Programs (This table shows how many Marin County school districts finance their meal programs. 4 school districts having prepared meal programs and 3 having purchased meal programs rely on rely on contributions from the general fund and 2 school districts having prepared meal programs and 2 having purchased meal programs operate solely with reimbursements.)

It is important to note that the largest districts are the ones that are able to self-fund. Novato and San Rafael are the two that are able to self-fund for the programs that prepare meals. Miller Creek and Reed were the two purchased meal programs that responded that they were able to fund their food service programs solely with reimbursements. In other purchased funding cases, at least one district indicated that they funded the food costs with the reimbursements but had to supplement to have staff available to support the meal program.

Prepared Meals

Prepared meal programs operate in most cases using a central kitchen model, although Novato prepares food at each of its 14 sites. The number of sites in the following chart is the total sites that the district serves. Green sites are those that cook or centrally receive food, and orange sites are those that receive food from the central preparation sites within the district.

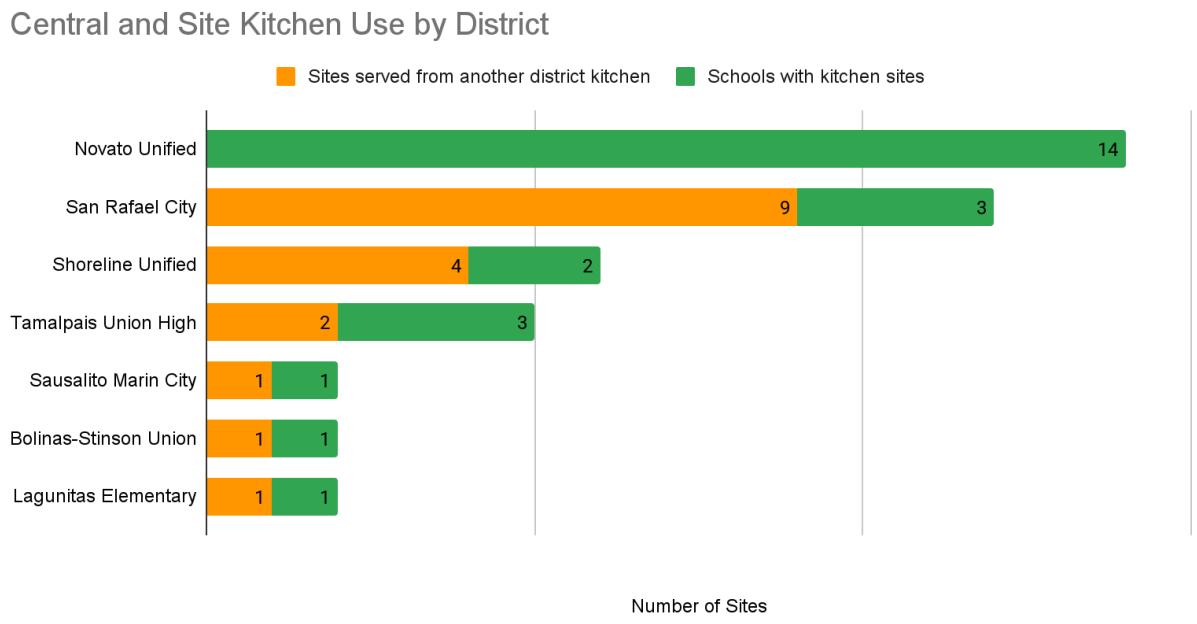


Figure 4: Central and Site Kitchen Use by District (This graph shows that Novato Unified has all schools with kitchens, followed by San Rafael City with 3 schools with kitchens and 9 sites served from another district kitchen, followed by Shoreline Unified with 2 sites with kitchens and 4 sites being served from another district kitchen, followed by Tamalpais Union High with 3 sties with kitchens and 2 sies being served by another district kitchen, followed by Sausalito Marin City, Bolisnas-Stinson, and Lagunitas Elementary have 1 site with a kitchen and 1 more site being served from another district kitchen.)

The reported meal program budgets for the sites that responded are as follows. Knowing that some sites provided total budgets and some split based on labor and food/supplies, this is used as a very high level assessment of expenditures to schools for their meal programming.

	Budgets	Meal Counts (for sites that provided a budget)	Average cost per Meal (Breakfast and Lunch both included)
Purchased Meals	$1,949,739	314,413	$6.20
Prepared Meals	$21,068,874	2,651,840	$7.95
Total	$23,018,613	2,966,253	$7.76

Table 5: Expenditures, Meal Count, and Average Cost per Meal for Purchased vs. Prepared Meal Programs (This table compares the average cost per meal for purchased meal programs at $6.20 and prepared meal programs at $7.95, with the total average cost of meals being $7.95)

Districts reported a range in the percentage of their total expenditures allocated to labor versus food and supplies. Larger districts consistently allocated between 59% and 61% of their budgets to labor, while smaller districts showed more variation, with labor costs ranging from 44% to 58%.

Among purchased meal programs, one district reported that 75% of its budget was allocated to food, which is expected, given that vended meal programs require less on-site labor for meal preparation. However, labor is still necessary for meal distribution and service.

Prepared meal programs often serve both breakfast and lunch. Across all sites, the volume of breakfast meals is equivalent to 59% of the volume of lunch meals. In contrast, purchased meal programs deliver breakfast at only 27% of their lunch volumes, whereas prepared meal programs deliver breakfast at 65% of their lunch volumes.

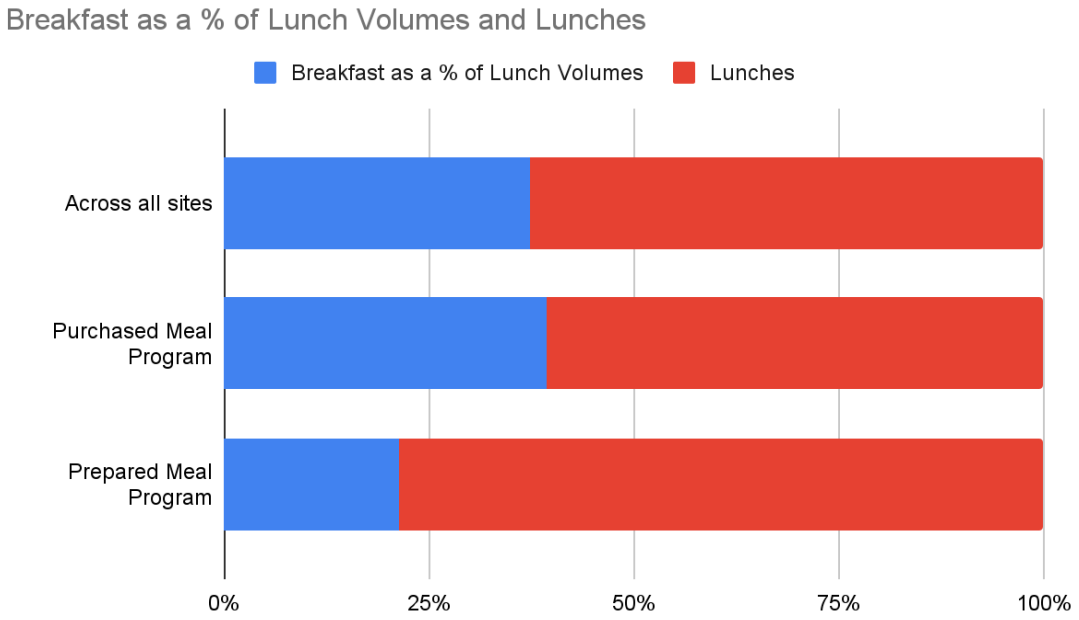


Figure 5: Breakfast as a % of Lunch Volumes served in school sites. (This graph illustrates that the volume of lunches served across school sites is more than breakfasts with lunches in Prepared Meal sites with more than 75% of the total volume and Purchased Meal sites with 60% of the total volume.)

Meal reimbursement rates have varied by free, reduced, and paid status, though in California recent policy changes have flattened these differences by covering the gap so that all meals are reimbursed at the free rate. Using actual meal participation data reported across Marin County school districts, we estimate the true cost of providing a meal at $7.76 per meal. This figure reflects weighted averages based on districts with higher meal service volumes, rather than a simple average across schools. Importantly, the cost to operate meal programs in many districts still exceeds the reimbursement amounts, which is why several rely on general funds to subsidize food and labor expenses.

Breakfast:	Free	Reduced	"Paid"
Federal	$2.37	$2.07	$0.39
State	$0.97	$1.27	$2.95

Total	$3.34	$3.34	$3.34
Lunch:	Free	Reduced	"Paid"
Federal	$4.43	$4.03	$0.42
State	$0.97	$1.37	$4.98
Total	$5.40	$5.40	$5.40

Table 6: Breakfast and Lunch Funding Breakdown (This table outlines the federal and state reimbursement rates for school meals, distinguishing between free, reduced-price, and paid meal categories. It highlights the total funding allocated per meal type, providing insight into how financial support varies across different student eligibility groups.)

Additional Funding Sources

California has instituted several programs since the pandemic that are aimed at helping increase the amount of fresh and locally prepared meals in schools. These programs have included the School Food Best Practices Funding, Local Food for Schools Funding, and Kitchen Equipment and Training (KIT) Funds. Schools across the county have leveraged these opportunities to expand their purchase of local and, in some cases, organic food from nearby vendors, strengthening both student nutrition and the local food economy. However, the sustainability of these efforts remains a concern: both the School Food Best Practices and Local Food for Schools funds are not continuing this year, leaving only the KIT funds renewed. See Political Considerations for more information

The total reported funding from these programs for school sites has added up to $5.76M for the 2022 - 2024 program years. These investments have helped increase local training, purchase new site kitchen equipment, and procure food from local farms and providers. Example investments include:

- Maintaining and repairing existing equipment
- Training cafeteria workers
- Purchasing new equipment
- Deliver trucks
- Purchase of more California / Local products
- Added serving stations
- Generator
- Added labor to support meal changes
- Organic purchases

In addition to equipment, training, and supply programs, the state provided Supply Chain Assistance (SCA) funds to help offset higher food costs that arose during the pandemic. These funds were distributed to school districts through state agencies, specifically designated for purchasing domestic, unprocessed, or minimally processed food items. While SCA funds supported meal program sustainability during supply chain disruptions, they could not be used for labor, administrative costs, or non-food expenses.

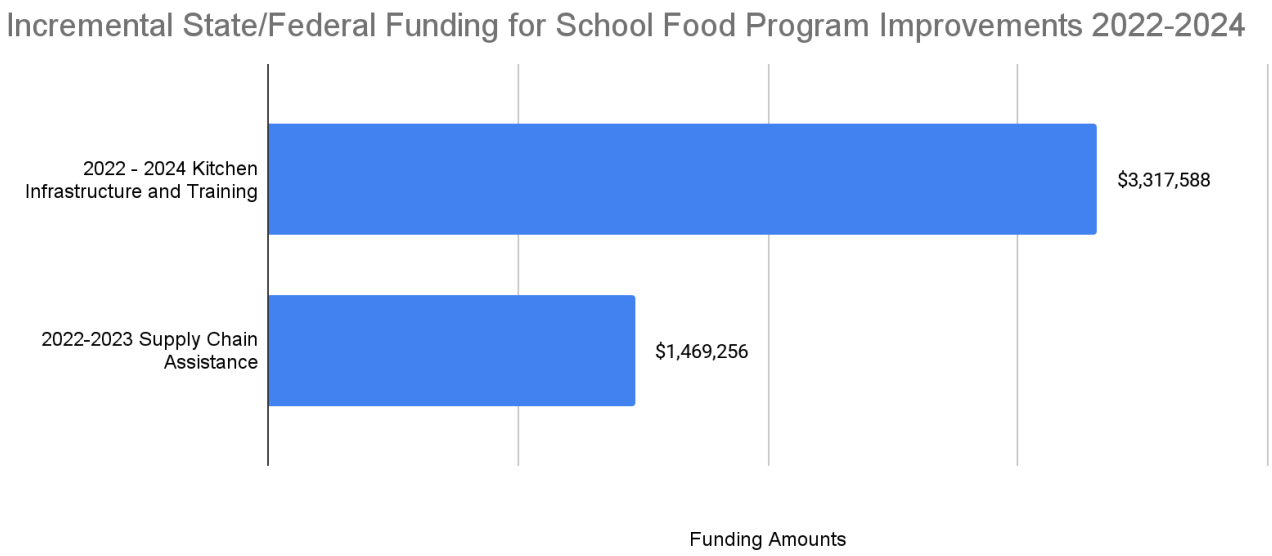


Figure 6: Incremental State and Federal Funding for School Food Program Improvements (2022–2024) (This graph shows the total 2022-2024 Kitchen Infrastructure and Training funds totalling $3,317,588 and the total 2022-2023 Supply Chain Assistance funds totalling $1,469,256.)

Based on our survey (though data is incomplete), the budget across food service programs is approximately $30.7M each year. Given these added support programs operated over at least 2 years, the incremental funding that was provided to KIT funding was 10.8% and SCA funding was 4.8%.

Annual Marin Budgets	
Total Reported Spend (2 school years)	$46,037,226
Total Spend without KIT and SCA funds	$41,250,382

Table 7: Annual Marin Budgets (This table shows the total reported school food budget with and without the one time KIT and SCA funds.)

Meal Preparation Details

Many districts have made concerted efforts in recent years to increase the amount of local produce they procure for their programs and/or the amount of organic products.

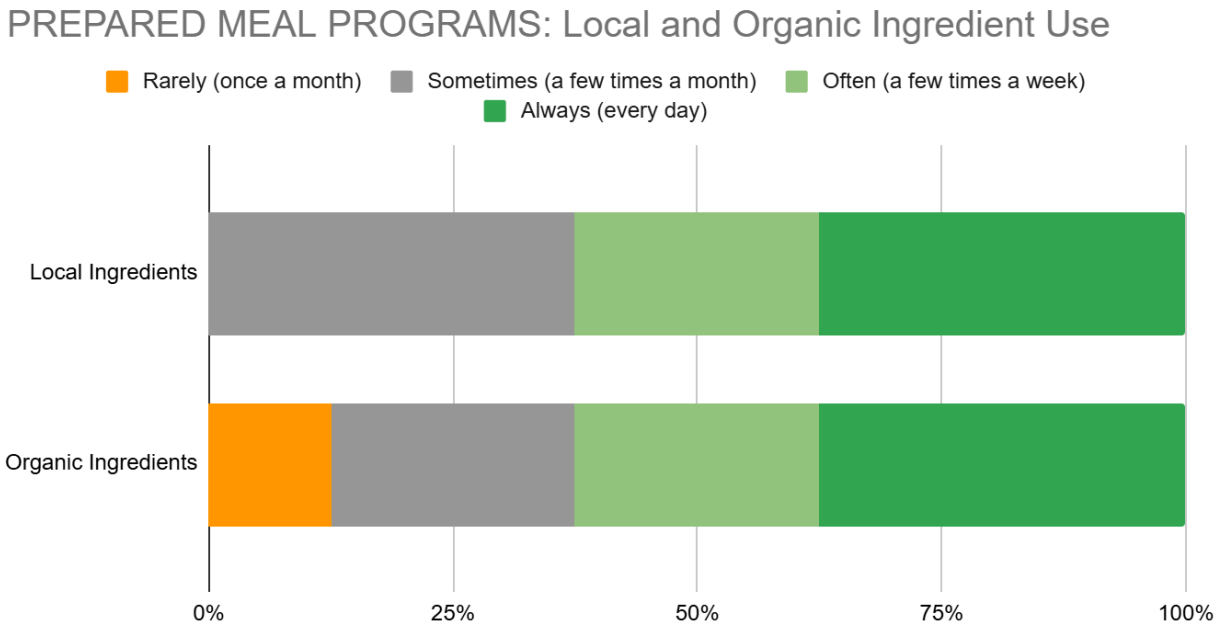


Figure 7: Frequency of Local and Organic Ingredient Use in Prepared Meal Programs (This graph illustrates the frequency of locally sourced and organic ingredients used in prepared meal programs across Marin County school districts.)

School District	% Local	% Organic
Prepared Meal Program		
Bolinas-Stinson Union	10%	51-100%
Lagunitas Elementary	51-100%	51-100%
Novato Unified	6-15%	6-15%
San Rafael City	26-50%	6-15%
Shoreline Unified	6-15%	6-15%
Sausalito Marin City	51-100%	51-100%
Tamalpais Union High	0-5%	0-5%

Table 8: Local and Organic Ingredient Use by School District (This table presents the percentage of frequency of locally sourced and organic ingredients used in prepared meal programs across Marin County school districts.)

Districts that prepare their own meals use a variety of menu items that can range from fully scratch cooked items where the staff prepare all components of the menu items to serve to students, speed scratched which is a mostly prepared items that includes some elements that come prepared to speed the process such as par cooked grains or protein, packed chopped vegetables to add to a dish, or other combinations that allow for a mostly scratch cooked item to be served while minimizing staff labor. Heat and serve items are fully packed and just need

to be heated before serving.

School District	% Scratch Cooked	% Speed Scratch	% Heat & Serve
Prepared Meal Program			
Bolinas-Stinson Union	90%	10%	0%
Lagunitas Elementary	95%	5%	0%
Novato Unified	25%	65%	10%
San Rafael City	55%	0%	45%
Shoreline Unified	20%	70%	10%
Sausalito Marin City	100%	0%	0%
Tamalpais Union High	40%	0%	60%

Table 9: School District Meal Preparation Methods (This table presents the percentage breakdown of meal preparation methods across Marin County school districts, distinguishing between scratch-cooked meals, speed-scratch approaches, and heat-and-serve options.)

District labor varies by site but ranges from small districts with 1.5 staff up to 33 employees in San Rafael and 43 employees in Novato. The average number of meals provided to students per FTE ranges from a low of 6,285 to a high of 29,757 with an average of 24,361.

What aspect(s) of your school food program are you most proud of?

- *"New scratch recipes, increased dietary accommodations, more accessible menus, faster speed of service"*
- *"Full time employees, scratch cooking, producing farm at one of my schools, participation continuing to climb"*
- *"Students are happy with the new food and they are eating everyday"*
- *"My hard working staff"*

What are your challenges related to your school food program?

- *"Budget and Union workers"*
- *"Meal reimbursements do not cover labor. Staff recruitment is difficult and time consuming."*
- *"Cost of Labor & Benefits, Cost of local foods, end of grant monies"*
- *"Finding reasonably priced organic food"*
- *"State and Federal meal reimbursements do not cover the cost of a organic, scratch cooking cafeteria program"*
- *"Staff out on long term leave, staff hesitant for change, staffing costs"*

Vended Meals

Purchased meal programs still require some staff to serve and support the programs but often those come from existing employees who perform these services as part of their regular contract. At the second largest purchased meal program, staff levels are set up to provide roughly 49,800 meals per FTE so about half the labor required to prepare the meals.

Frequency of organic ingredients in meals

- Do not know: 4
- Rarely (once a month): 1
- Sometimes (a few times a month): 1
- Often (a few times each week): 1

What is your dream for your school food program?

- *"Serving healthy organic meals that are prepared on site daily and students enjoy. Support sustainability and waste reduction."*
- *"Incorporate more foods produced locally into our meals"*
- *"No waste"*
- *"Scratch (or at least semi-scratch) cooking operations."*
- *"Compliant meals that the students love."*

Major Challenges

- *"The current contract with Lunchmaster creates a significant amount of waste and the student participation continues to decline."*
- *"As a small school with limited resources the demands of the universal meals program are overwhelming."*
- *"Staffing"*
- *"Poor quality of Vended Meals, food waste, plastic packaging, and lack of organic options."*
- *"Facilities, low reimbursement (as compared to vendor rates), student interest."*

Actionable Steps and Long-Term Goals

In May 2025, school food leaders from across Marin County gathered at Cavallo Point for a collaborative stakeholder meeting to discuss the future of school food systems in Marin County. Representatives from 14 districts came together to share ideas, identify shared priorities, and co-create a vision for nourishing, resilient, and community-driven meal programs. The following section outlines actionable opportunities—both immediate and long-term—that emerged from this conversation and the broader findings of this assessment. While several of these approaches are already being implemented by some districts, the recommendations highlight ways to further build capacity, foster collaboration, and advance equity and sustainability in school meals.

Later on in September 19, 2025, Chief Business Officers (CBOs) from school districts across Marin County convened at Lagunitas School District to review the district's newly transformed school meal program. Following the hiring of a new Food Service Director and a full redesign

of the breakfast and lunch menus, guided by student taste tests and feedback, the group toured Lagunitas' cafeteria and kitchen to see the changes firsthand.

CBOs from six districts heard directly from the new director about the strategies that made this transformation both possible and successful. They also reviewed the program's financial turnaround: total revenue increased from $78,000 to $146,000, while the district's general fund contribution dropped from $179,000 to just $10,000.

Much of the discussion centered on how other districts might replicate these gains, boosting participation, strengthening operations, and investing in long-term improvements. The most important shared takeaway was clear: while many changes require up-front investment before yielding financial returns, the core purpose of the Child Nutrition Program is student nutrition. As several CBOs noted, if a district is going to operate "in the red," it should be doing so in service of providing the healthiest, most nutritious meals possible to students.

Short-term Actionable Opportunities:

Program Pilots & Immediate Enhancements

- Test new menu items in summer programs.
- Consider implementing a vegetable-based salad bar.
- Introduce a "no thank you table" to reduce food waste and encourage peer support.
- Add a pizza oven in the garden to support hands-on food education.

Community & Partner Engagement

- Collaborate with business officials and parents to explore food service changes.
- Bridge relationships between local farmers and school programs through regional networking events.
- Conduct an offsite meeting with the lunch distribution team to address food waste, student engagement, and service excitement.

Procurement & Funding Innovations

- Leverage DOD distribution channels to expand access to organic, locally sourced produce, utilizing co-op memberships and CHIPS entitlements.
- Conduct research on countywide bond opportunities.

Long-term Opportunities:

Infrastructure & Capacity Building

- Establish a central kitchen in Marin to support food programs in smaller school districts.
- Retrofit older kitchens to enable local meal prep (note: five or more item changes qualify as a remodel).

- Develop career pathway programs (e.g., CTE) to foster long-term sustainability in food service staffing.

Program Expansion

- Strengthen ties with community gardens and hire chefs aligned with garden-to-table approaches.

Cultural Integration & Community Engagement

- Create systems for teachers to dine with students, promoting cross-generational connection and shared meals.
- Deepen countywide buy-in through visible, community-driven initiatives.

Sustainability & Equity

- Collaborate across districts to transition toward food programs that more closely align with our values.
- Strategize a balance between compostable and washable dishware to enhance environmental and operational sustainability.
- Uplift land-based initiatives like Sanzuma (on-site kitchen gardens) and explore the use of county-owned land for food education and production.

Case Studies: Marin County

This section highlights case studies and existing successes from within Marin County.

Lagunitas School District



Chef Meggan standing ready to serve organic focaccia pizza, fresh organic strawberries, and a seasonal veggie salad to students during lunch.

At Lagunitas School District in West Marin, a collaboration with Conscious Kitchen transformed school meals with the launch of Cafe Lagunitas. Recognizing the opportunity to create a sustainable and student-centered meal experience, the district invited Conscious Kitchen to partner in reimagining their approach to school food.

Within weeks of the launch, meal participation rates soared from under 20% to over 70%, ensuring that more students are now enjoying nutritious, organic meals every day. Parents, students, and community members shared enthusiastic

feedback, celebrating the shift to healthier, organic meals and the inclusive approach that involved students in the transformation.

The success of Café Lagunitas highlights the power of collaboration and a shared commitment to better food, better health, and a stronger sense of community. By prioritizing nutrition, sustainability, and student engagement, we've created a program that not only nourishes students but also fosters a deeper connection to their food and its origins.

The Joint Food Service Director Model in West Marin

To further enhance the quality and sustainability of school meals across Marin County, a new Regional School Food Service Director (RFSD) position has been established to support collaborative efforts between multiple districts. Salvadore Espinosa has been appointed to this role, serving Shoreline Unified, Nicasio, Lagunitas, and Bolinas-Stinson school districts. His leadership centers on making reporting more efficient and reshaping procurement to prioritize fresh, organic, and locally sourced ingredients.

Under Espinosa's guidance, these districts will transition towards more seasonal and scratch-cooked meals with organic ingredients. This involves a conscious shift away from conventional ingredients towards direct farm purchases and partnerships with vendors specializing in organic and regionally sourced products.

Recognizing the invaluable role of food service staff, Espinosa is committed to providing hands-on training in scratch-cooking techniques and maximizing the potential of new kitchen equipment. Beyond the kitchen, he will work closely with food service teams to foster direct farm purchasing initiatives—leveraging collective buying power to secure better pricing, strengthen relationships with local growers, and reinforce the long-term sustainability of Marin County's small farms.

North Bay Co-op: A Community-Driven Procurement Collaboration

The North Bay Co-op is a collaborative purchasing group comprised of several school districts, including Novato Unified School District, San Rafael City Schools, Mount Tamalpais School, Santa Rosa County School District, Sonoma Valley Unified, Calistoga Joint Unified, and more. Mount Tamalpais School serves as the lead agency, managing the coordination of bids and vendor contracts on behalf of all members. Together, the co-op consolidates purchasing power to source competitive pricing from major vendors.

This shared procurement model significantly reduces administrative burdens for individual districts. By pooling resources and working jointly on bid preparation, the co-op streamlines

complex procurement processes while enabling districts to focus on selecting the highest quality products for students. Although individual districts retain autonomy to purchase locally or outside the bid when beneficial, the co-op's collaborative approach offers both cost savings and operational efficiency.

The North Bay Co-op exemplifies community-driven solutions in school food procurement. By fostering collaboration between neighboring districts, a supportive network is created for sharing best practices, exploring local sourcing opportunities, and enhancing access to high-quality products.

School districts in Marin County that currently go out for formal bids independently should consider joining the North Bay Co-op. Membership can lower administrative costs, simplify procurement, and increase purchasing efficiency while maintaining flexibility for local and organic sourcing initiatives.

Case Studies: Beyond Marin County

Forward Contracting for Farm to School

Forward contracting in farm-to-school programs, is a strategy where school districts commit in advance to purchasing specific produce item(s) from local farmers throughout the year. The school outlines its produce needs, and the farmer agrees to grow and deliver those items on a set schedule. Contracts also include pricing terms (fixed or seasonal) and contingency plans in case of crop failure or delivery issues.

This model offers security for farmers and streamlines procurement for schools, once the order is placed, districts don't need to reorder weekly.

In Humboldt County, the CDFA Farm to Folk team collected availability lists from local farmers and shared them with schools early in the year. Once interest was confirmed, schools and farmers worked together to finalize the contract, deciding what to grow, how much, and when to deliver.

In Mendocino County, a food hub took the lead. It curated a list of trusted farmers based on past performance and handled all negotiations and logistics with school districts. This centralized approach simplified coordination and ensured reliable delivery.

Both models show how forward contracting can boost local food sourcing by providing consistency, reducing administrative load, and strengthening farmer-school relationships.

Political Considerations

At the time of this report's writing, school food programs and farm-to-school initiatives are navigating a period of significant uncertainty, with multiple state and federal funding streams in flux. Several key programs that previously supported local procurement and farm-to-school infrastructure have been reduced or discontinued, creating challenges for long-term planning. Despite these shifting dynamics, the State of California has continued to demonstrate strong leadership and commitment to advancing farm-to-school efforts.

Universal Meals: California's Universal Meals program continues, with implementation by the CDE. The state is motivated and has allocated a budget accordingly to continue the Universal Meal Program.

Kitchen Infrastructure & Training Funds: The Governor's budget proposal includes $145 million for Kitchen Infrastructure and Training (KIT).

Office of Farm to Fork (Farm to School): $20 million (down from $52.8 million in 2024) is allocated in the Governor's budget to continue supporting California's Farm to School program, led by CDFA's Office of Farm to Fork, which helps build farm capacity and connects producers to schools.

School Food Best Practices: Cancelled

On the federal front,

Local Food for Schools (LFS) Cancelled: The USDA ended the LFS program, removing a major funding stream for purchasing from local farmers and impacting early childhood nutrition programs.

Recommendations

Based on the findings from survey responses, stakeholder interviews, and countywide data analysis, the following recommendations aim to support school districts in building more resilient, collaborative, and values-driven food systems. These strategies are designed to address current barriers while unlocking new opportunities across meal preparation models, procurement practices, staffing, and community engagement.

Purchased Meals

- Joint Purchasing Agreements: Combine purchasing contracts across districts to leverage economies of scale. By coordinating purchase agreements, districts can negotiate more competitive pricing and secure higher-quality ingredients from vendors.
- Regional Vendor Engagement: Identify and establish partnerships with vendors capable of serving the local region. Prioritizing vendors who understand and can cater to the unique needs of Marin County will ensure meals not only meet federal nutrition standards but also reflect community values for local and sustainable food.

Prepared Meals

- Cross-District Collaboration: Foster partnerships among smaller districts to align menus and share best practices in meal planning. This cooperation can facilitate resource sharing and coordinated training on scratch-cooking techniques.
- Shared Culinary Training Programs: Develop region-wide initiatives that offer hands-on training in scratch cooking and the use of new kitchen equipment. By pooling resources, districts can support their food service staff with regular workshops and skill-building sessions that enhance the quality and creativity of prepared meals.

Procurement

- Forward Contracting for Fresh Produce: Establish a forward contracting program with local farmers to secure a consistent and sustainable supply of fresh fruits and vegetables. This proactive approach not only stabilizes pricing but also strengthens the bonds between schools and Marin's agricultural systems.
- Enhanced Data-Driven Sourcing: Utilize detailed, local procurement data to guide purchasing decisions and adjust contracts as needed. Regular review of sourcing patterns ensures that menus can adapt to seasonal changes while meeting nutritional standards and community expectations.

Staffing

- Workforce Development Partnerships: Leverage Career Technical Education (CTE) programs and local funding opportunities to build a strong network for food service professionals. By integrating these workforce initiatives, districts can offer internships,

apprenticeships, and ongoing training opportunities that enhance staff recruitment and retention.

- Comprehensive Training and Support: Invest in continuous professional development for food service staff through innovative training programs that emphasize both scratch-cooking techniques and effective use of modern kitchen equipment. This investment not only builds confidence among staff but also translates into more appealing and nutritious meal options for students.

Community Engagement & Policy Advocacy

- Strengthen Community Partnerships: Build stronger relationships with local advocacy groups, parents, and community organizations to elevate the conversation around school food quality. Engaging community stakeholders in nutrition initiatives creates broader support for improved funding and policy reforms.
- Transparent Communication Channels: Create formal feedback loops between schools, food service staff, and community members to continuously assess program effectiveness. This ongoing dialogue not only fosters trust but also reinforces the collective commitment to evolving and improving Marin County's school food systems.

Appendix: Figures & Tables

Figures

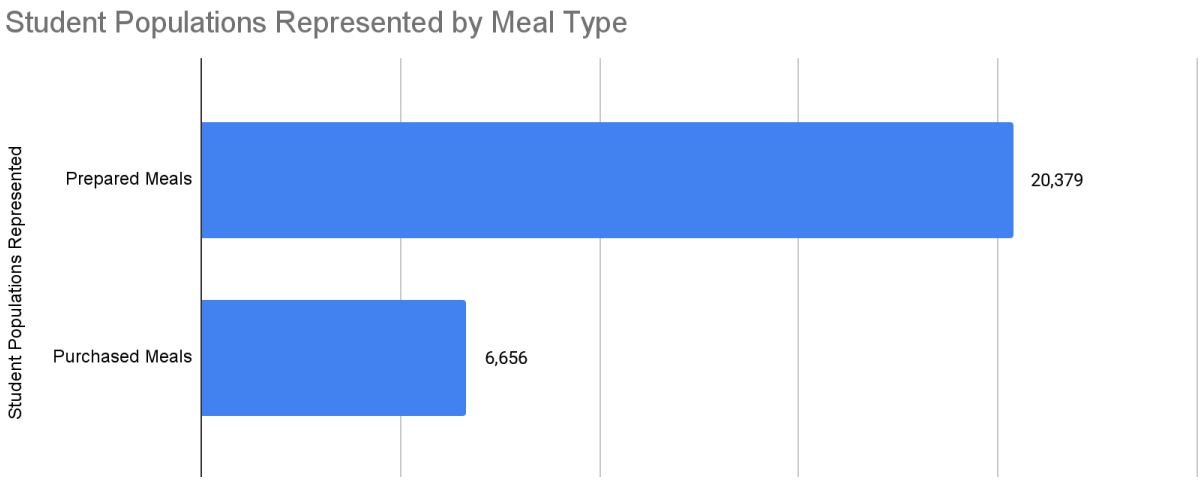


Figure 1: Student Populations Represented by Meal Type (This graph illustrates that 75% of students in Marin County have prepared meal programs, and 25% of students have purchased meal programs.)

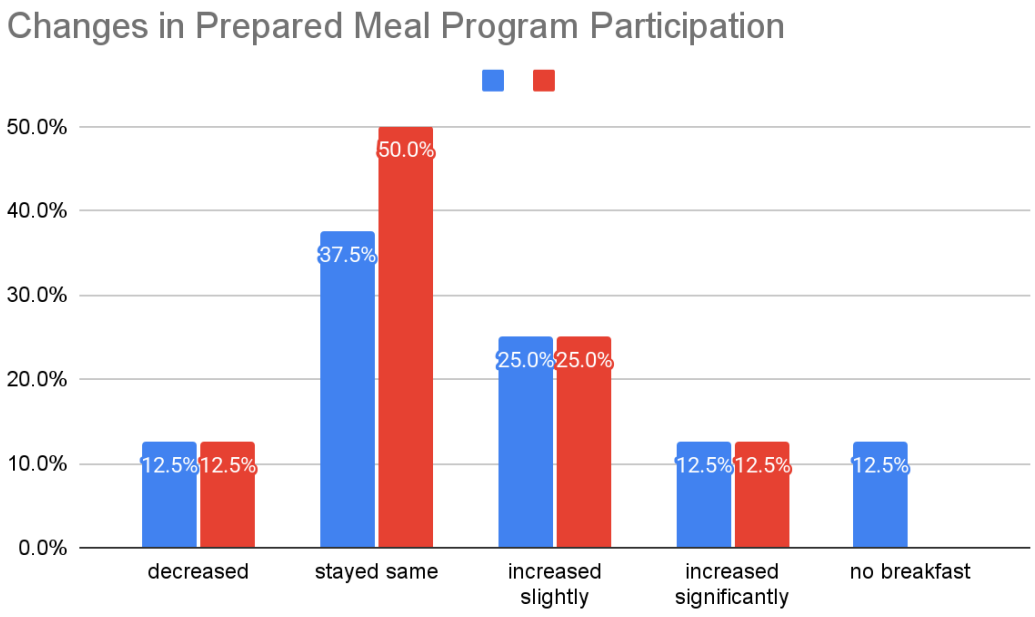


Figure 2: Changes in Prepared Meal Program Participation. This graph shows the changes in breakfast and lunch participation rates among schools that prepare their own meals. The survey indicated that

while 12.5% of the schools indicated a decrease in breakfast participation, 37.5% of the schools indicated that breakfast and lunch participation increased for them.

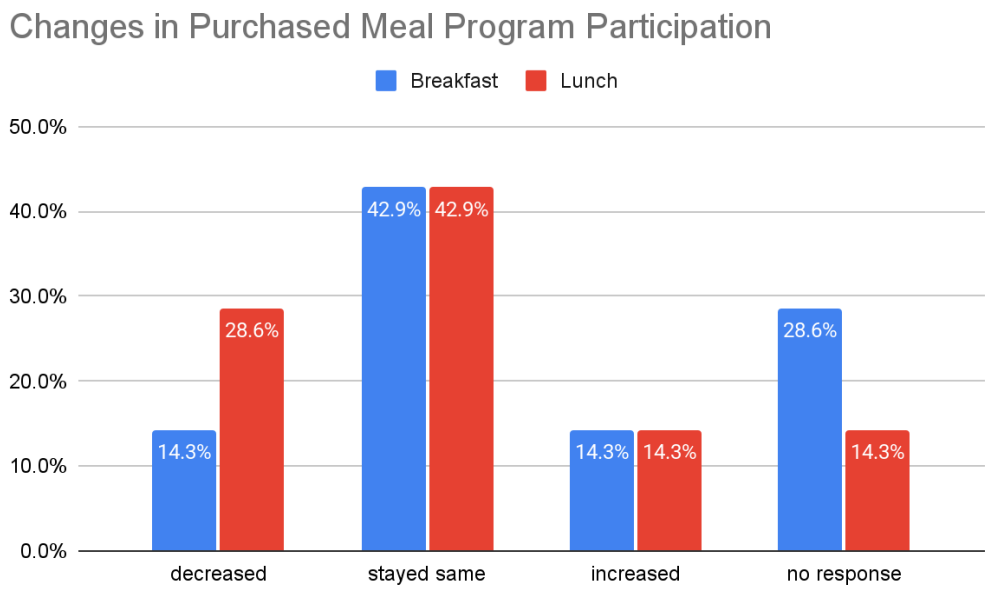


Figure 3: Changes in Purchased Meal Program Participation. This graph shows the changes (decrease, stayed the same, and increase) in breakfast and lunch participation rates among schools that contract with external vendors. The survey indicated that while 14.3% and 28.6% of the schools indicated a decrease in breakfast and lunch participation, 14.3% of the schools reported that their participation the increased from the previous school year. 42.9% of the schools reported no change.

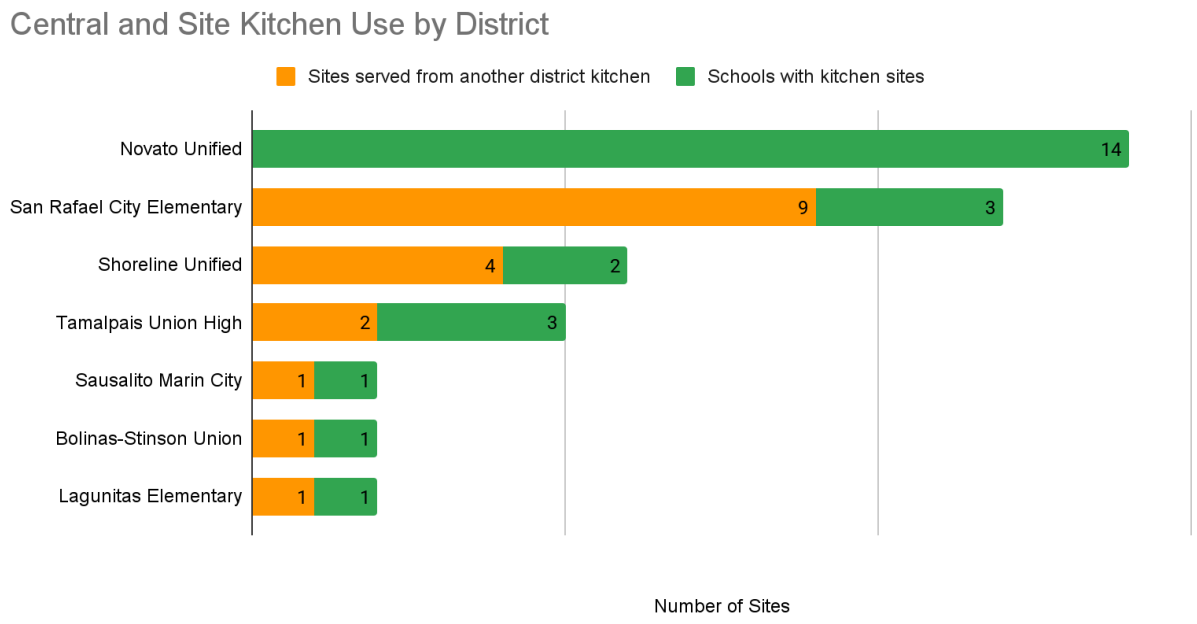


Figure 4: Central and Site Kitchen Use by District (This graph shows that Novato Unified has all schools with kitchens, followed by San Rafael City with 3 schools with kitchens and 9 sites served from another district kitchen, followed by Shoreline Unified with 2 sites with kitchens and 4 sites being served from another district kitchen, followed by Tamalpais Union High with 3 sties with kitchens and 2 sies being served by another district kitchen, followed by Sausalito Marin City, Bolisnas-Stinson, and Lagunitas Elementary have 1 site with a kitchen and 1 more site being served from another district kitchen.)

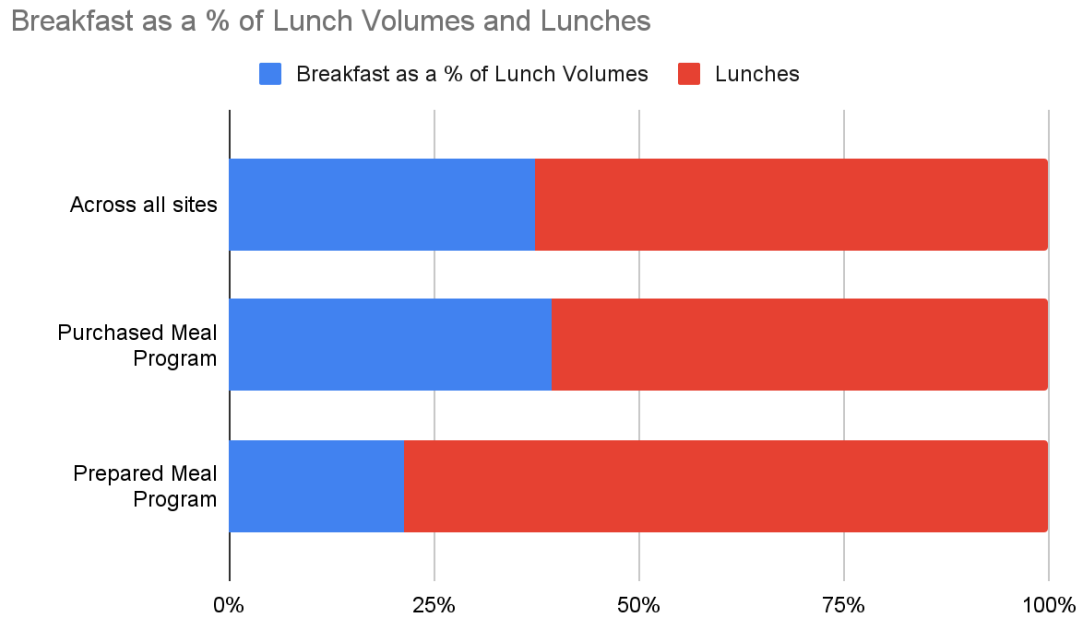


Figure 5: Breakfast as a % of Lunch Volumes served in school sites. (This graph illustrates that the volume of lunches served across school sites is more than breakfasts with lunches in Prepared Meal sites with more than 75% of the total volume and Purchased Meal sites with 60% of the total volume.)

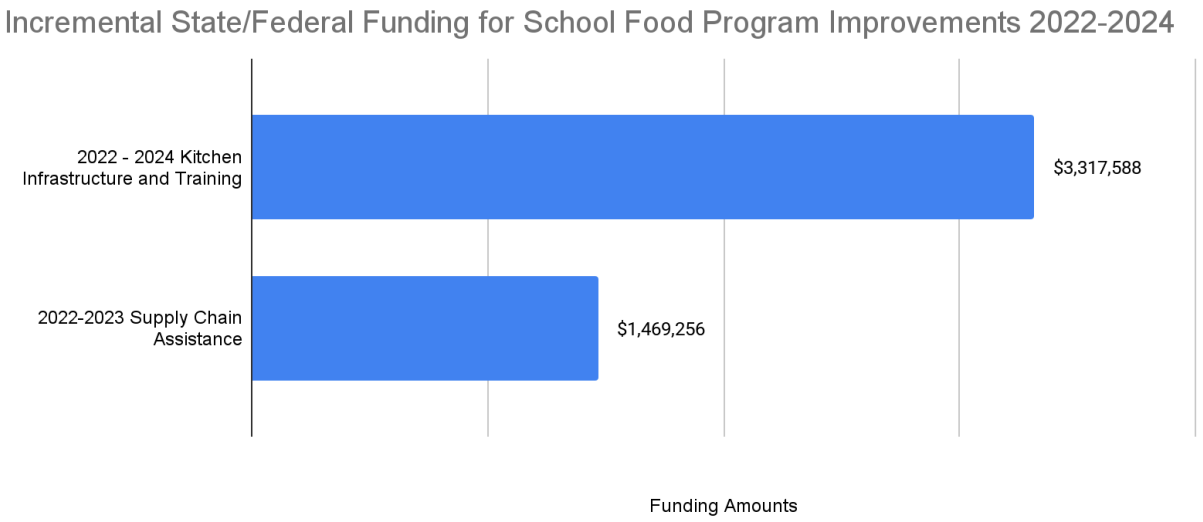


Figure 6: Incremental State and Federal Funding for School Food Program Improvements (2022–2024) (This graph shows the total 2022-2024 Kitchen Infrastructure and Training funds totalling $3,317,588 and the total 2022-2023 Supply Chain Assistance funds totalling $1,469,256.)

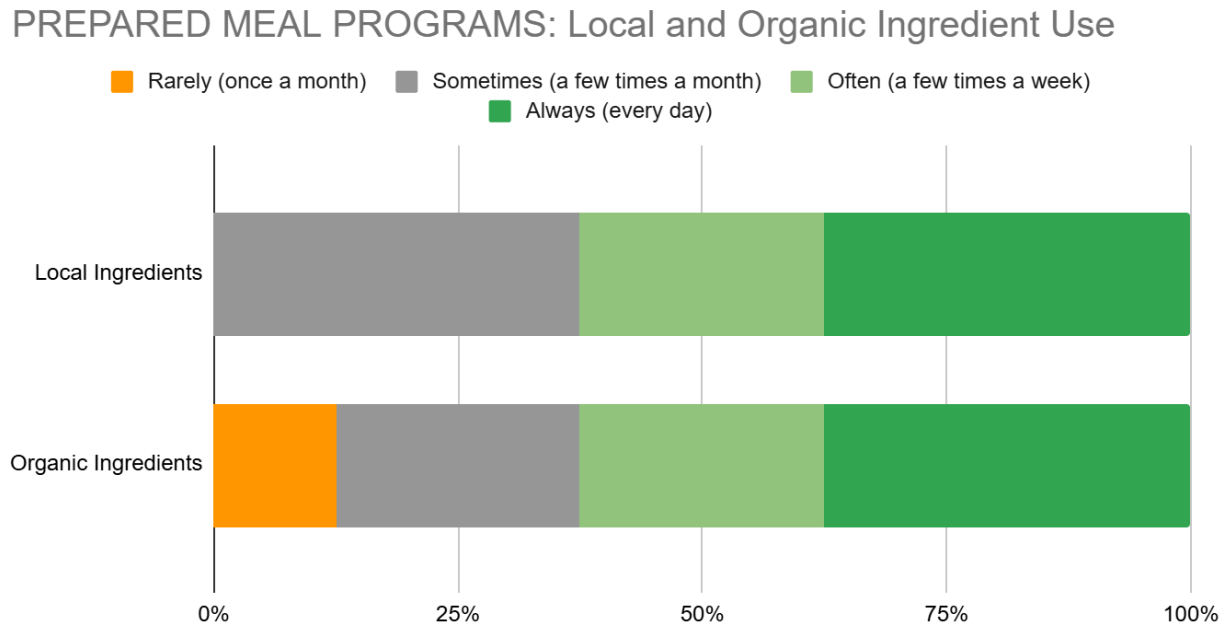


Figure 7: Frequency of Local and Organic Ingredient Use in Prepared Meal Programs (This graph illustrates the frequency of locally sourced and organic ingredients used in prepared meal programs across Marin County school districts.)

Tables

	Prepared Meal Districts (In-House Meal Preparation)	Purchased/Vended Meal Districts (External Vendors)
1	Bolinas-Stinson Union	Larkspur-Corte Madera
2	Lagunitas Elementary	Marin County Office of Education
3	Novato Unified	Miller Creek Elementary
4	San Rafael Elementary and High	Mill Valley Elementary
5	Sausalito Marin City	Nicasio (served by Shoreline)
6	Shoreline Unified	Reed Union Elementary
7	Tamalpais Union High	Ross Elementary
Total Students	20,379	6,656

Table 1: Prepared Meal Program Districts vs. Purchased Meal Districts. This table presents a breakdown of schools serving prepared meals or purchased meals. On the left column, we have schools representing 20,379 students who are being served prepared meals vs. 6,656 students who are being served purchased meals in their school meal programs.

Meal Program Leadership	# Students	% of Marin Students	# Meals Served	% of Marin Meals Served	Lunch Participation Rate
Food Service Director - Prepared Meals	19,632	64.8%	2,487,338	83.9%	42.8%
Shared Food Service Director - Prepared Meals	781	2.6%	173,192	5.8%	70.4%
No Food Service Director - Purchased Meals	4,308	14.2%	305,723	10.3%	17.3%
No Response	5,585	18.4%			
Meal Program Totals	30,306	100.0%	2,966,253	100.0%	

Table 2: Meal Program Leadership & Participation Rates (This table presents a breakdown of student enrollment, meal service volumes, and lunch participation rates across Marin County schools, categorized by leadership structure.)

School District	Enrollment (Oct 2024)	Free Meals	Free Meals %	Meal Participation Count	Meal Participation %
Purchased Meal Program					
Miller Creek Elementary	1,813	363	20%	160	9.1
Larkspur-Corte Madera	1,178	105	9%	342	29
Reed Union Elementary	1,048	48	5%	222	21.2
Ross Elementary	354	2	1%	62	17.5
Nicasio	36	18	50%	26	71
Marin County Office of Education	500	178	36%	38	
Mill Valley Elementary	2,282	135	6%	563	25
Prepared Meal Program					
Novato Unified	7,475	2,511	34%	4139	55.4
San Rafael City	7,219	4,443	62%	2807	38.9
Tamalpais Union High	4,730	501	11%	1267	26.8
Shoreline Unified	476	228	48%	368	77.3
Sausalito Marin City	283	144	51%	195	68.9

Table 3: Meal Program Participation by District & Free Meals Data - CBEDS 2024 October totals (This table presents purchased and prepared meal program data, including school district enrollment, as well as free meal and participation counts and percentages.)

	Prepared Meals	Purchased Meals
Budget Supplemented by General Fund	4	3
Budgeted Solely with Reimbursements	2	2
No response	2	2

Table 4: Districts' Approach to Funding School Meal Programs (This table shows how many Marin County school districts finance their meal programs. 4 school districts having prepared meal programs and 3 having purchased meal programs rely on rely on contributions from the general fund and 2 school

districts having prepared meal programs and 2 having purchased meal programs operate solely with reimbursements.)

	Budgets	Meal Counts (for sites that provided a budget)	Average cost per Meal (Breakfast and Lunch both included)
Purchased Meals	$1,949,739	314,413	$6.20
Prepared Meals	$21,068,874	2,651,840	$7.95
Total	$23,018,613	2,966,253	$7.76

Table 5: Expenditures, Meal Count, and Average Cost per Meal for Purchased vs. Prepared Meal Programs (This table compares the average cost per meal for purchased meal programs at $6.20 and prepared meal programs at $7.95, with the total average cost of meals being $7.95)

Breakfast:	Free	Reduced	"Paid"
Federal	$2.37	$2.07	$0.39
State	$0.97	$1.27	$2.95
Total	$3.34	$3.34	$3.34
Lunch:	Free	Reduced	"Paid"
Federal	$4.43	$4.03	$0.42
State	$0.97	$1.37	$4.98
Total	$5.40	$5.40	$5.40

Table 4: Breakfast and Lunch Funding Breakdown (This table outlines the federal and state reimbursement rates for school meals, distinguishing between free, reduced-price, and paid meal categories. It highlights the total funding allocated per meal type, providing insight into how financial support varies across different student eligibility groups.)

Annual Marin Budgets	
Total Reported Spend (2 school years)	$46,037,226
Total Spend without KIT and SCA funds	$41,250,382

Table 7: Annual Marin Budgets (This table shows the total reported school food budget with and without the one time KIT and SCA funds.)

School District	% Local	% Organic
Prepared Meal Program		
Bolinas-Stinson Union	10%	51-100%
Lagunitas Elementary	51-100%	51-100%
Novato Unified	6-15%	6-15%
San Rafael City	26-50%	6-15%
Shoreline Unified	6-15%	6-15%
Sausalito Marin City	51-100%	51-100%
Tamalpais Union High	0-5%	0-5%

Table 8: Local and Organic Ingredient Use by School District (This table presents the percentage of locally sourced and organic ingredients used in prepared meal programs across Marin County school districts.)

School District	% Scratch Cooked	% Speed Scratch	% Heat & Serve
Prepared Meal Program			
Bolinas-Stinson Union	90%	10%	0%
Lagunitas Elementary	95%	5%	0%
Novato Unified	25%	65%	10%
San Rafael City	55%	0%	45%
Shoreline Unified	20%	70%	10%
Sausalito Marin City	100%	0%	0%
Tamalpais Union High	40%	0%	60%

Table 9: School District Meal Preparation Methods (This table presents the percentage breakdown of meal preparation methods across Marin County school districts, distinguishing between scratch-cooked meals, speed-scratch approaches, and heat-and-serve options.)