



Values-Aligned Universal School Meals

The COVID-19 pandemic has radically shifted the ways that child nutrition programs operate, with school nutrition professionals working tirelessly to keep feeding kids under emergency conditions and with limited resources. One clear takeaway for school nutrition professionals is the need for universal school meals that let them focus on nourishing kids, not doing paperwork. It also has highlighted the urgency of moving towards a more resilient local food supply that builds racial and social equity. **Universal meals embedded with the core values of farm to school have the potential to radically transform our food system for the better.** That's why National Farm to School Network has been exploring a movement toward *values-aligned* universal meals focused on equity for the most impacted stakeholders across the food system.

Six key values, put into action, get us closer to a just, equitable food system that promotes the health of all school children and benefits producers, workers, educators, and their communities. Each of these values must be realized and evaluated through a lens of racial equity in all policies and standards. To do that, the most impacted stakeholders must have a core role in this process.

- **Economic justice:** Farm to school and ECE isn't just about food miles, it's about the livelihoods of the people who grew, harvested, processed, and prepared this food. We have the chance to build relationships between producers, workers, and consumers in ways that enrich communities and address economic racial injustices.
- **Environmental justice:** Education and the purchasing power of meal programs can shift our food system away from practices that contribute to climate change and pollute communities of color, and towards a **more equitable, sustainable** use of our soil and water.
- **Health impact:** Farm to school and ECE activities go beyond getting kids the calories they need, but also give them the tools for **childhood nourishment and lifelong health**. In addition to key nutrients provided by school meals, kids should be empowered with the knowledge and skills to build healthy habits later in life and increase their sovereignty in our food system. School nutrition professionals should receive the equipment, training, and operational support to increase whole-ingredient, scratch cooking of healthier and tasty meals.
- **Prioritizing racial equity:** Progress towards a just food system requires us to address the historic and ongoing structural racism embedded in our food system and to actively **promote food sovereignty and racial equity** in farm to school and ECE activities.
- **Respecting workers and educators:** **School nutrition professionals** play essential roles in promoting fresh, healthy foods for our kids. The **workers** who harvest, process, transport, prepare and serve the vast majority of our nation's food supply deserve -- but don't currently have -- the same legal protections as workers in other industries in our country. Policies and practices should respect their rights and value their work appropriately.
- **Animal welfare:** Humane treatment of animals in food production is a key part of a respectful, relational – not extractive – food system. Inhumane conditions in meat and poultry production are intertwined with the corporate consolidation of our food system, and the prioritization of cheaply produced meat at the expense of animal welfare, worker safety, farmer livelihoods, and community health.

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