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K-12 FOODSERVICE

A RECIPE FOR BUILDING CULINARY COMPETENCIES

A holistic approach to culinary skills training is critical in setting a high bar for successful scratch-based school meals.

BY PATRICIA L. FITZGERALD



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If there is one trend that has dominated school nutrition in the 21st century, it's the resurgence of scratch-based preparation. It's a critical element in the success of many other innovative elements driving positive change in this foodservice segment, from using more locally sourced foods (especially fresh produce items) to responding to increased consumer interest in global cuisines to meeting federal nutrition standards aimed at changing the health journey of the next generation. And while the profession has witnessed sustained change around scratch and speed-scratch menus over the last 15 years, school districts continue to face multiple challenges in increasing the amount of scratch-prepped meal components served across a menu cycle. These include insufficient kitchen space and equipment, ongoing position vacancies and a deficit in culinary skills acumen among staff.

Districts are taking greater advantage of opportunities to provide their cafeteria staff teams with culinary skills training. Whether it's a commitment to use inhouse expertise for periodic inservice sessions or multi-day summer programs offered through the state agency or grant-funded opportunities, many school nutrition directors are working to help their teams up their culinary game.

But *providing* such training is only a single step, and it doesn't always ensure success. Many of us have taken a class or a training—whether it's for work or

pleasure—gotten really excited about the new skills, processes or tips that we learned and then “real life” intrudes. In managing our day-to-day priorities and crises, we wind up forgetting much of what we learned, failing to put it into regular practice. Sometimes, even when we are prepared to make our own commitment, we aren't provided with opportunities to apply our new skills.

At SNA's 2024 Annual National Conference (ANC) in Boston in July, researchers Gerard O'Shea and Megan Lopes from Applied Curiosity Research, presented their third-party independent evaluator findings



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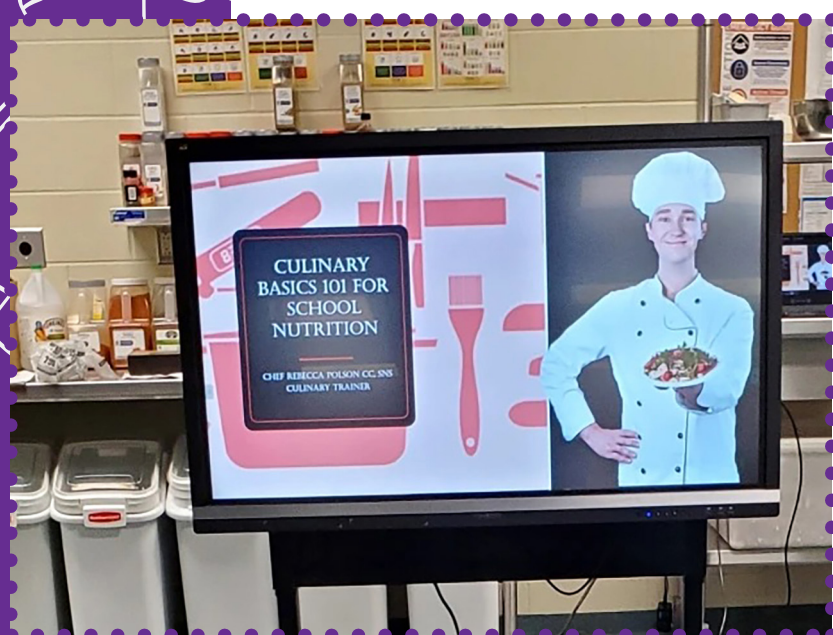
*To ensure that culinary skills training “sticks” with your school nutrition team, it’s important to look holistically at the training, from the decisions you make as a director or supervisor **before** it’s offered, to the reinforcement tricks suggested **during** the event and what happens **after** it’s over.*

about Project PA’s 2019 Team Nutrition Training Grant, which included a state-developed training program that featured six two-day culinary-focused workshops. (Sub-grants also funded a number of local culinary training events.) The primary hands-on, demo-based training reached 137 attendees, teaching knife skills, batch cooking techniques and more, preparing 30 recipes as teams. Pre- and post-training surveys demonstrated statistically significant

increases in their confidence in using 6 of 12 culinary skills.

But when it came to implementation back home, participants reported that the menu items they were charged with preparing didn’t lend themselves to application of their newly learned skills. For example, many fruits and vegetables had been procured in pre-cut forms. Attendees also lacked some basic equipment, such as sharp knives. In short, for these participants, their school nutrition administration had no clear plan for integrating the training into meal preparation while the education was still top of mind.

To ensure that culinary skills training “sticks” with your school nutrition team, it’s important to look holistically at the training, from the decisions you make as a director or supervisor **before** it’s offered, to the reinforcement tricks suggested during the event and what happens **after** it’s over. *SN* reached out to a number of professional chef trainers, school nutrition directors and those who wear both hats to collect and share their strategies, best practices and advice.



REBECCA POLSON

BEFORE

Know Your Goals

Chefs Rachel Petraglia and Rebecca Polson, CC, SNS, have both transitioned from working directly for district school nutrition departments to sharing their expertise with a wider audience: Petraglia as a culinary specialist with the Georgia Department of Education's School Nutrition Division and Polson as an independent consultant/trainer. Both are well-versed in a wide range of culinary skills training, from knife skills to cooking methods, production efficiencies, recipe modifications and flavor development, bringing perspectives and insights that represent their experiences on both sides of the training fence.

"As a consultant/trainer, I try to encourage directors, department chefs and menu planners to take the training, as well," says Polson. "While most trainings are designed to introduce and build skills with front-line employees, I think it's important for department leaders to work alongside their staff. They will probably learn something new, too!" When employees have little say in what's being added to the menu, it's helpful to have the decision-makers in the same room, she notes. It can validate menu changes for the employees, while also spotlighting potential implementation challenges to the leadership.



RACHEL PETRAGLIA



CHYNA SIERNALE

Petraglia agrees. "Involvement by leadership from the central office ensures that *everyone* is speaking the same language when discussing culinary culture," she notes.

While school nutrition directors may look to consultants to apply their expertise in designing training and setting goals, Polson is quick to remind them that she is also there to *listen* to their needs and make sure the training reflects their unique situations. "It's really important they know that not every training is one-size-fits-all," she notes.

"As a department in the education business, we have a responsibility to train our staff," says Karen Luna, Nutrition Services Director, Santa Clara (Calif.) Unified School District, acknowledging that, in the past, professional training was often sacrificed for other budgetary demands. "We must keep training our staff and focus on continuous improvements to the program." Luna and her 85-member team, which includes three chefs, serve 14,500 students at 30 sites. California provides all school meals for free. Secondary school

menus feature 50% or more scratch-prepared items, while elementary sites have a more limited scratch and speed-scratch menu. The program operates an 11-acre organic farm and is a partner in the Brigaid initiative to apply chef expertise in school meal settings.

After receiving California Kitchen and Infrastructure (KIT) funds, Luna partnered with a neighboring system, Cupertino Union High School District, to offer two sessions of a five-day course on culinary techniques specifically for school nutrition professionals. "It was a transformative course for our staff. The inspiration and motivation that came from that training is not measurable," reports Luna. "We had staff tell us, 'I never knew vegetables could taste so good,' and 'I bought sweet potatoes on the way home and cooked them for my family; they loved them.'"



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CHYNA SILVERNALE

Today, KIT funds supplement three days of annual professional development, during which a staff chef will focus on building up specific skills and techniques needed for current recipes. Luna also sends team members to the Culinary Institute of America at Copia for training, and this fall they will offer training from the Institute of Child Nutrition (ICN).

Chef Cyndie Story, PhD, RDN, SNS, K-12 Culinary Team Leader for Culinary Solution Centers, has been providing culinary—and other—skills training for years, taking advantage of every format: in-person hands-on, demonstration-style and virtual. She and her colleagues focus on training that is very technical (such as understanding weights versus measures and different cooking methods for quantity food production), as well as teaching kitchen hacks, work simplification techniques and how to manage work schedules (“No one likes doing them, but they will save your sanity!” she says).

When working with district directors to set goals for the training, Story encourages

them to focus on the cycle menu first and then on prospective new recipes. “Let’s cook what you’re going to serve the students, and then the items you’ll taste test for future menus,” she says. The cycle menu should reflect the skills that have been taught. Producing these menu items over and over will help build confidence and efficiency, Story notes. She’s also a proponent of planning for a multi-day training event. “One day is not enough,” she insists.

Back in 2016, Catharine Powers, MS, RDN, LD, Culinary Nutrition Associates, developed a five-day “Culinary Skills for School Meals” training program for the Indiana Department of Education, School and Community Nutrition, where it is taught several times each summer. This is the same course Santa Clara Unified and Cupertino Union used in 2023, and it is now being offered to school districts in Maine and other systems around the country. “I’ve conducted this training 51 times since 2016—and I love it!” Powers says. She’s also given the Culinary Institute of America permission to run a version of the program, conducted around the country by Polson and other chefs.

Indeed, Polson echoes Story’s stance on the value of multi-day workshops for teaching culinary competencies. “The most transformative is the five-day training. Watching employees build their skills and grow in confidence from day 1 to day 5 is almost life-changing,” she says.

When Jeanne Reilly, NDTR, SNS, School Nutrition Director, RSU #14, Windham Raymond (Maine) Schools, works with consultants or with Ryan Roderick, district



chef and School Nutrition & Wellness Coordinator, they develop culinary training goals based on several criteria: the existing skills of the team; the competency needs of the team to keep menus in regulatory compliance, while keeping customers excited and engaged; changing government requirements; and available equipment.

“Knife skills are so essential, we incorporate that into our onboarding process,” she reveals. Beyond that, culinary skills training is an annual back-to-school priority. “One year, we might do a training on seasonings, and another year, it might be on working with whole grains.”

Reilly also takes advantage of other opportunities to build culinary competencies among her staff. Among these is a five-year USDA School Food Transformation Challenge Grant that invites school districts across Maine to send at least three employees per year to attend one of three sessions of the five-day summer training workshop developed by Powers. “They start with knife skills and culinary basics, moving on to vegetable preparation techniques, cooking

with whole grains and then building creative sandwiches and beautiful salads," Reilly says, noting that a quarter of her 28-member staff have completed this program so far.

The Windham Raymond district serves 3,200 students at six schools with roughly 55% participating in breakfast and 75% eating lunch; Maine provides free school meals for all. The program is a recognized leader for its innovative scratch-based meals and use of fresh produce.

At Urbandale Community (Iowa) Schools, Director of Nutrition Services Jessy Sadler, MS SNS, would love to send her staff to a free multi-day training session during the summer downtime, but many of her 38-member team use that time for travel. Most training—beyond culinary skills—takes place during a mandatory inservice scheduled the week before school starts. That said, her team has been working on changes to the onboarding process to address more site-specific training needs, and Sadler has contracted with Polson to provide knife skills training to all staff toward their professional development hours requirement. (Polson



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also taught recipe standardization as part of a Healthy Meals Incentive grant the district received from USDA.) Urbandale school nutrition managers also have the option to attend free programs conducted by the state, says Sadler.

While it's important to establish goals with your trainers, it's also critical to develop those goals with your team. "My No. 1 advice is to collaborate with your staff on the short- and long-term goals and create a road map on how to achieve those," says Powers. "Everyone needs to be on the same page, and there are many places to start, depending on the particular needs of the school and district, but the direction should be clear."

This point is echoed by Megan Gower, Director of School Nutrition for Buford City (Ga.) Schools, a five-school district that enrolls some 5,800 students. "Collaboration is key. You have to have buy-in from your employees to make this successful. Don't be so rigid in your goals that there is no flexibility. Listen to the team, use their ideas, build off what they are already doing, encourage and support them," she notes. "Even if you've reached just one person, let that person be your leader."

Gower looks to provide as much culinary skills training as possible through-

out the school year. (Weekly inservice training, on a wide range of topics, is required for the team to meet professional development requirements.) Once, a chef from a local community college taught knife skills, and manufacturers' representatives visited to provide training on taking best advantage of their products. "Recently, we've been using training from the Georgia Department of Education's School Nutrition Division," she says, citing webinars, online resources and in-person workshops offered by the state agency. "We take general culinary techniques from all these sources and encourage managers to apply them with our recipes."

In general, Gower finds her staff are more responsive to advice and tips from those *outside* of the department and "when we train regularly throughout the year, our staff can use and reinforce those skills." She cites a technical support pilot program offered by the state agency in which Petraglia visited one of her sites in special need of culinary support: "The site manager, nutrition assistants and our nutrition coordinator spent time with Rachel, reviewing simple techniques that would enhance the appearance and flavor of several menu items, plus worked on improving quality control with certain menu items that had proved troublesome. It was an amazing opportunity that then spread to *all* our schools."

Who To Include?

Site managers are the top candidates to receive culinary skills training, whether



train the team members who are the most excited and engaged, she adds. "Let them generate excitement among the rest of the staff."

Ultimately, take full advantage of culinary skills training opportunities by sending as many people as you can, as dictated by your budget or the restrictions of a free program. In the feedback reported by O'Shea and Lopes at ANC, some decision-makers lamented not making the most of the grant-funded opportunity.

"We are *always* training—during the summer and throughout the year—because we prepare new recipes every month," says Chynna Silvernale, Director of School Nutrition, Brooks County (Ga.) School District. Ongoing training is also essential, because kitchen staff at each site regularly rotate responsibilities. "One week, they might be responsible for fresh fruit preparation, and the next week, they could be in charge of hot entrées," she explains.

The rural farming district, right on the Florida border, is composed of six schools with a total enrollment of 2,200. Meals are provided by a team of 34 employees for free at all sites through CEP. On average, 87% of students participate in school breakfast, while 92% eat school lunch. The school shutdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic reinforced the school nutrition team's pledge to scratch-prepare more meals. "Delivering directly to neighborhoods and witnessing the living conditions of many students was eye-opening, making us realize how much nutritious food they were missing," recalls Silvernale. "This ignited

you're sending them offsite or the opportunity is offered inhouse. But there are advantages for providing culinary training to staff in other positions. "Our goal is for all school nutrition staff to eventually go through some variety of culinary training," says Reilly. Directors should consider who participates in the preparation of meals at any time, even if just filling in. Petraglia agrees: "Prioritize those whose roles have the greatest impact on meal quality, safety and efficiency."

But directors should also look to include those who may want to advance in the school nutrition profession, perhaps cashiers who are looking for opportunities to grow, Reilly adds. Also consider those who demonstrate a natural love for learning and a willingness to train others, says Petraglia, advancing the value of an informal train-the-trainer opportunity.

"Offering culinary skills training to *all* staff builds layers of competency within your team, giving them value-added skills they can use to excel within your organization and within the profession," Reilly notes. If you can't train everyone at one time, first



REBECCA POLSON

Set Your Space

Directors or chefs organizing a culinary skills training should be prepared to properly “set the table,” as it were. “Clean the kitchen, remove the clutter and buy the small equipment you need to conduct a successful class, from cutting boards and digital thermometers to knives and sharpeners,” Story advises.

Reilly concurs: “When we hold training onsite, we make sure that our team has the necessary supplies—knives, peelers, bench scrapers, cutting boards—even when that means gathering equipment from other sites across the district. Also, ensure you have the proper space to allow for hands-on work!” If working with a consultant, make sure the trainer knows the cooking equipment that is available to participants in their kitchens, so that training can be fine-tuned appropriately. “This can help them feel comfortable and competent after the training.”

our team’s commitment to preparing fresh, high-quality meals *every day*.”

Silvernale sends all the district’s managers, as well as top-performing food assistants to any culinary training sponsored by the Georgia Department of Education’s School Nutrition Division, and they participate in the state agency’s monthly “Culinary Connections” webinars. But as both Silvernale and Area Manager Paul Brown have culinary expertise, they can provide much of the training themselves.



JEANNE REILLY

DURING



Connect the Dots

Explain the “why,” urges Petraglia. First, be clear about the focus of the training and the expected goal, she says. “Then, it’s important to not only teach the ‘how,’ but also the ‘why’ behind each specific technique. When participants understand the reasoning for certain methods—say, why roasting at a high temperature creates a different flavor and texture compared to low-and-slow methods—they are more likely to buy into the lesson and retain the information,” she explains.

“Anything that improves efficiency in the kitchen, making the workload lighter—anything that creates an ‘ah-ha!’ moment—is bound to ‘stick,’” asserts Reilly. Her examples include using a peeler in two directions (up and down) to add speed when preparing

vegetables or learning to shred pork roast or chicken in a mixer, rather than by hand. Showcasing the versatility of ingredients and how they can be cross-utilized to streamline inventory is also valuable. For example, after covering the fundamentals of making rice, Petraglia and her colleagues will demonstrate how to vary the base recipe with different liquids, spice and herbs to create unique dishes while maintaining consistency.

Engagement Is Everything

According to Story, the best way to help training to “stick,” is to: “Demonstrate first, then let attendees practice. If time permits, encourage participants to teach another person right away.” This not only reinforces what they’ve learned, but preps them to train other employees, substitutes and new hires.”

Trainers also need to pay attention to their students, assessing current skill levels and gaps as they go through the program, says Petraglia. Engage their real-time feedback and incorporate that into the lesson. “This approach creates a more effective and enriching learning experience,” she reports.

Know your audience, adds Polson. Don’t use jargon they don’t know (yet), whether it’s “mise en place,” “al dente” or “julienne.” If the technique can be described in simpler way, do so. “Speak their language. Keep it plain and simple,” she says.

Reilly also advises scheduling a concluding opportunity for a group debrief: “Let participants share and discuss the day. They often have their own tips and tricks that can add to everyone’s learning.”



At the Culinary Skills for A+ School Meals training held in Maine this past summer, each participant was given a chef knife, knife sharpener and bench scraper to take back to their district.” They also received a whopping *300-page* book featuring more than 100 recipes and a multitude of tips, tricks and how-tos to use as a future reference. This resource is a standard part of Powers’ five-day training workshop. “I carry it with me everywhere and call it my bible,” says Polson.

Takeaway Tools

Providing participants with simple handouts they can take back to their kitchens and reference is another valuable tip. These should have minimal text, but include photos and illustrations of each step in a process or a particular technique. The old adage rings true here: A picture is worth a thousand words!

Take-home resources also promote a measure of accountability and set clear expectations, says Petraglia. “They can be invaluable for keeping the team aligned, ensuring consistency in execution and meeting the standards and goals established by the district.”

When producing new scratch menu items, standardized recipes with every detail





noted—from portion sizes to garnishes—is the key to quality and consistency. Silvernale typically meets with kitchen managers to review the standardized recipe and discuss expectations for plate presentation. She and Brown visit school sites to assist in the first preparation of a new dish, and

they encourage manager feedback as to whether recipes are best suited for their particular kitchen and serving line specifics. Reilly agrees that it's helpful to allow participants to sample and evaluate the particular recipes they have learned, discussing what works—and what could be improved.

AFTER

Refreshers and Reminders

Ideally, you should establish an implementation plan based on the goals of the training and the lessons learned, advise O'Shea and Lopes. This should include how the new skills relate to preparation of the current menu as well as items expected to be introduced to students for sampling and/or testing. The plan should also establish a process for peer-to-peer knowledge sharing, so that attendees reinforce their skills while teaching others on their team. Depending on the type of training, the plan should include the purchase of any smallwares—knives, cutting boards, pans, etc.—that are important for follow-through.

"It's easy to forget new training amidst the hustle of daily tasks," Silvernale affirms. "It's crucial to keep the knowledge fresh." She sends regular reminders to staff and asks managers to share photos for social



media. This gives her and Brown insight into how the dish looks at a particular school—and the resulting positive feedback from the community (and across the nation) is a great motivator for the team to continue to stay engaged with training and produce high-quality results.



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REBECCA POLSON

Sadler agrees that it's not uncommon to see staff default to "old ways" of doing certain tasks. She created a self-monitoring form for site managers and the district's operation specialist to ensure certain processes are followed as taught and expected. Gower similarly emphasizes the value of monitoring. She and her nutrition coordinator make it a mission to get to the schools daily at the beginning the school year, and then periodically throughout the year. "We check that recipe directions are followed, and the presentation is appealing. We taste items, check pass-thrus to see what is being held for the next classes and ask staff questions about preparation. We'll also ask staff to send us pictures of new items if we can't make it there in person," says Gower.

Take advantage of internal experts—a school chef, an area coordinator, an outstanding manager—to make frequent visits to schools, offering technical assistance and reminders, says Reilly. Also look into online opportunities made available through the Institute of Child Nutrition, SNA and other organizations. "These can be great refreshers and also help staff meet professional development training hours," she advises.

Manage Expectations

But you *don't* have to implement everything at once—and if that means that some knowledge will be lost (until a refresher course), that's okay. Focus on improving every day—but just by 1%, advises Petraglia. "Start slow to gain acceptance and build confidence in each new technique. Once a skill is mastered, it will become second nature."

A little reassurance helps. "I always remind my staff that something may be 'new' now, but it will become the norm soon," Sadler says, noting that veteran team members, those who have been with the program for five years or more, tend to be the ones who struggle most with change. "This is a slow process that takes years,"

agrees Gower. "Processes are continually being transformed. As long as we reach the same end goal, I try not to micromanage every step."

Practice Makes Perfect

Empower staff to use their new skills. "Give them room to use what they've learned. Trust in the training," says Luna. "Our elementary site staff can't cook many products from raw, but they do have combi ovens and can use them to roast vegetables."

While aligning training with daily job duties and integrating new skills into the menu are valuable strategies, Petraglia's final advice is to provide hands-on culinary-focused training throughout the year as professional



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development. “Work to develop their knowledge of flavor, of different cooking methods, of assessing ingredient quality and understanding the impact of time and temperature,” she says. “This is key to developing confident kitchen teams that demonstrate a high level of culinary skill and expertise.”

Mission Accomplished

When all the best practices come together around using culinary techniques to offer scratch-made school meals, the results range from merely inspiring to downright gob smacking! For example, at press time, the Brooks County school nutrition team had just served up Japanese-inspired Beef Ramen. “Over the course of three days, we crafted a rich beef bone broth, marinated Georgia-grown beef, sliced Georgia-grown shiitake mushrooms, made fresh veggie stir fry and prepared a cucumber salad,” the team announced on its Facebook page. “This year, we’re focusing on introducing diverse cultures to our rural area. Our aim is to offer students new experiences, while making breakfast and lunch fun and educational.”

Reilly agrees with this philosophy. “Ultimately, the success in building a competent culinary team comes from ongoing training, frequent technical assistance, online trainings/tutorials and mentoring,” she summarizes, adding that subsequent promotion of your team’s culinary skills is a great way to “shine a light on just how awesome, creative and well-trained school nutrition professionals are.” **SN+**

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