

MARCH

SCRATCH-MADE SUCCESS

Learn how Chef and School Foodservice Director Mariah Popeleski-Tilley, RDN, successfully transitioned her district to majority scratch-cooking and how to make it work for your program—even if you're starting completely from scratch.

BY MARI BRAND



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everyone working in school nutrition shares a similar goal: feeding kids meals that are healthy and nutritionally balanced—and that taste good enough that they'll look forward to visiting the cafeteria every day for breakfast

or lunch.

And for many people, both those directly in the school nutrition field and other outside stakeholders, making more food from scratch rather than relying solely on ready-made or heat-and-serve products goes hand in hand with that goal.



With the current focus on “clean” eating, reducing artificial dyes and flavors and relying more on “whole” foods/ingredients over processed ones, the call for more scratch-cooking in school foodservice programs is getting even stronger, but for many the goal of a scratch-cooking focused program seems too far out of reach. It’s an idea we can all get behind theoretically and ideally, but in reality, it can be a bigger undertaking than it might sound like to someone without first-hand experience running a school foodservice program.

There are several real and maybe formidable obstacles you might face along the way, but if scratch-made meals are a part of your ideal program vision board, there are steps you can follow to gradually move in that direction without getting bogged down and overwhelmed by everything all at once. Maybe most importantly, there are others in the school nutrition community who have successfully made the move to a scratch-cooking focused program, and they can be a great resource to look to for insight on what success looks like, what challenges you might face and what steps you should take, even if you’re starting with the most basic ingredients.

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– Maraiah Popeleski-Tilley

STEP ONE

Maraiah Popeleski-Tilley, RDN, food-service director at Mansfield Public Schools in Connecticut, is one of them. After starting at Mansfield Public Schools in 2022, Popeleski-Tilley began the process of transitioning their school

nutrition program to scratch cooking straight away. It was a gradual shift, but now she estimates that 50-80% of their food is made from scratch, depending on how strict your definition of speed-scratch versus fully scratch-made is.

“My top piece of advice would be to take it bite by bite,” she said (pun intended). “Make a long-term



plan, and then look at how you can introduce those things year by year.” Her plan began with developing a cycle menu, mapping out her goals and everything she eventually wanted to make and breaking it down from there. “I wrote down all the meals, I figured out where I was going to put my vegetable subgroups, and then I looked at it and I said ‘okay, we’re going to start by doing all the sauces and dressings from scratch... then we’re going to do all the potato products.” Next up was the macaroni and cheese, then more raw proteins, scratch-made pizza and so on, all over the course of a few years to get to where they are today.

She also acknowledged that having a supportive district went a long way. As a chef and registered dietitian with a wide range of culinary and nutrition experience, from working in restaurants and a buffet-style kitchen at a health food store to developing a cookbook and hosting cooking classes at a community food bank, Popeleski-Tilley went into her new role as Mansfield Public Schools’ Foodservice Director with an impressive resume. Plus, she was backed by a superintendent who was already supportive of a scratch-cooking initiative from the get-go.

“You have to have a supportive district. My superintendent, our administration and even our town are super supportive, and I’ve seen other examples [at other districts] where that was not

the case, and that becomes a struggle for people when they don’t have the backing of their leadership,” she explained.

If your district isn’t already supportive like Popeleski-Tilley’s was, getting leadership to see all the benefits of scratch-cooking is the real first step. The good news is that most people are theoretically on board—it allows for more flexibility and creativity, creates incredible professional development opportunities for kitchen staff and can be healthier. It’s all the steps it takes to get there that might give people pause, but having your long-term plan, understanding what new resources you’ll need, how staff training will go and how you’re prepared to handle the transition overall will make those conversations go more smoothly.

Still, a supportive district and community didn’t mean the transition was quick or without some hiccups along the way for Popeleski-Tilley either, and having a menu that’s over 50% scratch-made now doesn’t mean they’re finished. “We still have a lot of things that I want to glow up as far as the menu goes... and I’m just doing it bit by bit, and it seems to be working.”

STEP TWO

With her plan and cycle menu ready to go and a supportive district backing her up, the next step on Popeleski-Tilley’s agenda was staff training. “Professional development for staff is probably the cornerstone of a scratch-cook program,” she explained. “If folks don’t know the skills that they need to, they just aren’t going to be able to do it.”

Ensuring everyone knew how to properly read a recipe was one aspect, particularly when it came to understanding the difference between weight and volume measurements. Knife skills—knowing how to hold a knife correctly and how to cut things more efficiently and evenly—is another big one. Luckily, in Popeleski-Tilley’s experience that’s a skill most people pick up pretty quickly and are excited to learn because it’s easily transferable to cooking at home too. They’ve also done classes on building flavor; learning when in a recipe to add spices versus fresh herbs, how to enhance flavor without adding salt and more creative uses for spices. Knowing how to set up your workstation efficiently and

in line with food safety standards is vital too, especially if you're starting to cook with more raw proteins. Popeleski-Tilley teaches the concept of *mise en place*, a French culinary term that refers to gathering and measuring all of your ingredients and organizing your workspace before you actually start the cooking process. Not only will that help everything run more smoothly, it also prevents easy mishaps like realizing you're out of a vital ingredient in the middle of a recipe—a relatively minor mistake if you're cooking at home, but one that can instantly throw off an entire lunch service for hundreds of kids when cooking in a school meal program.

In addition to doing some staff training herself, Popeleski-Tilley has also utilized resources like training sessions from the Institute of Child Nutrition, which can be requested for free as long as you meet a few basic requirements (theicn.org/training-2), and Brigaid, an organization founded by chef Dan Giusti that offers culinary training from professional chefs for school foodservice programs (chefs-brigaid.com/staff-training). Through both programs, Popeleski-Tilley has been able to host trainings on everything from knife skills, to flavor building, to a focus on



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specific global cuisines and the recipes and ingredients that go along with it.

As a sidebar to staff training, and going back to the concept of *mise en place*, Popeleski-Tilley also had to evaluate the equipment available in their kitchens, which was not up to par at first. Before getting into the real training, they needed to purchase better knives, cutting boards and other basic cooking tools like whisks and mixing bowls, plus all the things necessary for cooking the large volume of food school food-service programs require, like plenty of hotel pans and extra large stockpots.

STEP THREE

Next up is getting your students on board too, which can be challenging if they're already used to having certain foods prepared or served in specific ways. The traditional recommendation, and the process many programs go by, is holding student taste tests and sampling small amounts of a new recipe before adding it to the full menu. Popeleski-Tilley acknowledged that that can be a great method, and in the future she hopes to create a student advisory committee for sampling and providing feedback on new menu items, but most of the time she just goes straight to the full menu.

"I think this is one of the places where I'm sort of non-traditional... I kind of just added things to the menu, and there were definitely very specific times where things flopped really bad, but there were also times when kids were hesitant but eventually got on board," she explained. One example of that is their French toast bake. Initially, lots of kids were missing the heat-and-serve French toast sticks they were used to, but it didn't take too long for them to be won over by the scratch-made, baked version. Adding something straight to your menu can be a risk, but at the same time, cooking from scratch and relying more on fresh ingredients lessens the hit you might normally take if your students hate something new. Instead of having cases full of pre-made products you can't get them to eat, you have fresh, versatile ingredients that can most likely be repurposed and used for other, hopefully more successful recipes instead.

On top of the French toast bake, some of the other scratch-made meals on Mansfield Public Schools' menus include ramen, fried rice, chicken creole stew, BBQ chicken or tofu, turkey and white bean chili, teriyaki chicken, Moroccan style bowls, fajitas and chicken shawarma. At the same time, they still make sure to have some more typical kids-menu meals, like PB&J or turkey and cheese sandwiches and pizza, available too for younger kids or pickier eaters. They also provide multiple options each day for lunch—nine at the high school, four-five at the middle school and three at the elementary school.

Creating an environment that encourages kids to actually try new foods they might not be familiar with is also important. "Our motto is no sad lunches," Popeleski-Tilley explained. "If a kid takes something and they sit down and eat it and they're like, 'okay, this is not what I expected...' they can go back up and say 'I didn't like this, can I have something else?' and our staff is trained to say 'absolutely...' and [the kids] can choose something else from what we have."



WHY IT'S WORTH IT

Scratch-cooking definitely requires effort and skills that many districts don't have from the start or might feel unprepared to take on, but if you can embrace it, even if it's little by little, your efforts will probably pay off.

The hallmark of a successful school foodservice program is high participation, and Popeleski-Tilley has seen notable increases in participation as they have increased their scratch-cooking. "We serve more kids now than we did when we were 100% universally free during COVID," she noted. On top of that, their high school is open campus, something that often spells trouble for school meals—but not for Popeleski-Tilley's program. "The high school kids are right on the University of Connecticut campus, so there's all the usual restaurants like Moe's and Dunkin' Donuts and Starbucks... right across the street... and we've retained a lot of those kids," she said.

In her experience, the idea that scratch-cooking is more expensive, time-consuming or requires more labor is mostly a myth too. Although results might vary, after getting through the initial steps of purchasing basic cooking equipment and investing in staff training, Popeleski-Tilley has found that she's still able to run a majority scratch-made program with the same number of staff they had before. She also recommends you learn how to maximize the way you utilize USDA Foods and the USDA Department of Defense Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program (USDA DoD Fresh) for procuring most of your basic ingredients and fresh produce to stay more cost-efficient.

She explained that in her experience, "If you know how to be creative with the foods you absolutely can cut your food cost way down... and I don't think it costs me more labor either, because the more skills that folks have and as they learn to organize and do the prep efficiently and reduce waste, all of that stuff tightens right up."

And one of the biggest benefits in Popeleski-Tilley's book is the opportunity to expose kids to more real foods and diverse flavors. "People look at [our menu] and go, 'wow, this doesn't really remind me of a kids menu,' and that's intentional," she explained. "My philosophy is that I want kids to be exposed to a variety of real food and real flavors, because I feel that the cafeteria is also a classroom in a sense. Yes, I want kids to eat and get nutrition, but I also want them to appreciate real food. And I know that if you make things taste good, kids will eat it—even if it's not chicken nuggets. If it's really well-seasoned and flavorful, they're going to gobble it up just as much as they would a chicken nugget."

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