

Healthy Salad Meals

A Student-Led Case Study in Fresh, Lower-Waste School Food

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7,400+
free salads served



37,000
gallons of water saved



Nearly 600
single-use plastic
produce bags avoided



10 feet
from tower to tray

Connection to Current School Meal Policy

The Scratch Cooked Meals for Students Act would create a USDA grant program to help schools expand scratch cooking with fresh, locally sourced ingredients rather than relying on pre-assembled or processed meals. Healthy Salad Meals is a small campus-based example of the same shift.

The program does not replace district-wide scratch cooking, farm-to-school purchasing, or larger cafeteria reform. It shows what those goals look like at the level of one school: students harvesting fresh food, cafeteria staff making room for it, local partners supporting the growing process, and students eating something grown on their own campus. Healthy Salad Meals also aligns with plant-forward school meal efforts because it gives students an easy, fresh vegetarian option that they can see, trust, and choose.

Academic Framing

“Pushing against the modern food system’s endless, impersonal aisles of mass consumption requires us to figure out new, smaller-scale models. That is why rethinking school food is so critical. Schools are much more than just places of learning. They are vital points of social infrastructure that can connect young people to healthier options while providing an important foundation for building stronger communities.”

— Andrew Deener, Professor of Sociology at UC Santa Barbara and author of *The Problem with Feeding Cities: The Social Transformation of Infrastructure, Abundance, and Inequality in America*

The Model

Healthy Salad Meals is a student-led school lunch program at Dos Pueblos High School that grows lettuce on campus and serves it free during lunch. Twice a week, students harvest lettuce from an 11-foot hydroponic tower located about ten feet from the cafeteria. The lettuce is carried into the Culinary Arts prep area, washed, dried, portioned into compostable containers, refrigerated with cafeteria support, and served to students during lunch.

Since launching in 2024, Healthy Salad Meals has served more than 7,400 free salads, saved an estimated 37,000 gallons of water, and avoided nearly 600 single-use plastic produce bags. Each tower has 44 planting sites and usually produces about 50 salads per harvest. The program works because it is built into the school’s existing systems. Environmental Club students harvest. Culinary Arts students help prepare the dressing. Cafeteria staff support refrigeration and lunch distribution. Pilgrim Terrace Urban Farm & Kitchen provides seedlings and hydroponic growing knowledge. Ca’Dario Restaurants supports the program through the Peace Salad, donating \$10 from every salad ordered. Ocean Rainforest has supported growing trials connected to kelp-based biostimulants.

Why It Matters

Fresh produce is difficult for schools to serve consistently. It requires purchasing, cold storage, washing, preparation space, food safety routines, lunch timing, student trust, and waste management. Healthy Salad Meals shows how a small campus-grown food pilot can move through those barriers when students, school staff, and local partners each carry part of the work. The project also changes how students see food. Fresh food becomes visible, local, and connected to people they know.

It tastes different when you’ve watched it grow.

— Anh Ving, junior at Dos Pueblos High School

School-Level Validation

“The lettuce towers represent an innovative approach to improving student access to fresh, healthy food on campus while also creating meaningful learning opportunities for students. The partnership between the student-led program and the DPHS cafeteria has shown how schools can integrate fresh produce directly into student meals in a practical and sustainable way. It’s an exciting model that demonstrates how schools can promote healthier eating habits while building programs that can be replicated and expanded at other campuses.”

— Principal William Woodard, Dos Pueblos High School

What Schools Need

- Clear approval steps for campus-grown food
- Food safety procedures for harvesting, washing, refrigeration, and serving
- Cafeteria + Culinary Arts coordination
- Local partner directories for farms, restaurants, food access groups, and technical support
- Student training tools
- Maintenance calendars + supply plans
- Data tracking for water, waste, packaging, cost, and participation
- Handoff plans so programs continue after founding students graduate
- Shared templates and resource databases that schools can adapt

Case Study Takeaway

Healthy Salad Meals began as a way to serve students fresh salads. It became a test of what it takes to build a small food system inside a public school. The lettuce travels only ten feet, but those ten feet include the real questions behind school food reform: who approves it, who grows it, who washes it, who stores it, who pays for it, who trains the next students, who trusts the food, and who gets access to something fresh during the school day. **Policy takeaway:** School meal grant programs should support student-led, campus-grown food pilots as part of scratch cooking, farm-to-school, plant-forward meal, sustainability, and school meal innovation efforts. Good student ideas need more than encouragement. They need tools, partners, and a clear path into the cafeteria.