

Ten Feet from Tower to Tray

A Student-Led Model for Fresh, Lower-Waste School Food

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Executive Summary

Healthy Salad Meals is a student-led hydroponic school lunch program at Dos Pueblos High School. Twice a week, students harvest, wash, and portion lettuce grown ten feet from the cafeteria, working with Culinary Arts and cafeteria staff to safely serve free salads at 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. Students are trained, procedures are written down, and community funding has been secured so the program can continue after the founding student graduates (Healthy Salad Meals).

Policy ask: School meal grants should support student-led, campus-grown food pilots by funding the practical resources schools need: clear approval steps, food safety guidance, local partner directories, student training tools, sustainability tracking, and handoff plans that help programs continue after the first student leaders graduate.

Healthy Salad Meals works because the food is visible, the routine is manageable, and the program fits into systems the school already has. Students see the lettuce growing before class. By lunch, that same lettuce has moved ten feet into the cafeteria system.

The model also depends on local expertise. Pilgrim Terrace Urban Farm & Kitchen has supported Healthy Salad Meals by supplying seedlings and sharing hydroponic growing knowledge. Their work in Santa Barbara shows how urban agriculture can connect fresh food, education, nutrition, sustainability, and community access (Pilgrim Terrace Urban Farm & Kitchen).

Congress is already looking at how schools can serve fresher meals. The Scratch Cooked Meals for Students Act would create a USDA grant program to expand scratch cooking, defined as preparing meals with fresh, locally sourced ingredients instead of relying on pre-assembled or processed foods (Brownley). Healthy Salad Meals shows how that same idea can begin at the individual school level.

The larger lesson is simple: good student ideas need more than encouragement. For more projects to succeed, schools need practical tools, local partners, and shared resources.

The Problem

Fresh produce is one of the hardest foods for schools to serve well. A salad has to move through purchasing, transportation, cold storage, washing, prep, lunch timing, student preference, and waste before a student ever takes a bite.

California has made major investments in school food. The state became the first in the country to implement a statewide Universal Meals Program in the 2022-23 school year, giving all public school students access to free breakfast and lunch (California Department of Education). California has also invested in farm-to-school programs that support local food purchasing, school gardens, climate resilience, and student connection to food systems (California Department of Food and Agriculture).

Healthy Salad Meals builds on that work at a smaller scale. At Dos Pueblos, the towers changed how students responded to fresh food. Students walk past the lettuce on the way to class and lunch. Some ask when we are harvesting next. Others recognize the students carrying lettuce into the prep room. By the time the salads are served, the food feels like it was made by the school.

The question is simple: What changes when students can see and eat food grown right where they spend their day?

At A Glance



7,400+
free salads served



37,000
gallons of water saved



Nearly 600
single-use plastic
produce bags avoided

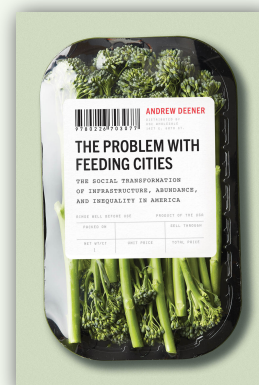


10 feet
from tower to tray



"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 Healthy Salad Meals Model

Healthy Salad Meals grows lettuce on campus using hydroponic towers. The program works through the Environmental Club, Culinary Arts students, cafeteria staff, school administrators, Pilgrim Terrace Urban Farm & Kitchen, Ca'Dario Restaurants, and Ocean Rainforest.

Students at Dos Pueblos High School harvest lettuce from campus hydroponic towers for Healthy Salad Meals, a student-led program that serves free, plastic-free salads during lunch.

The weekly routine is simple now. It took about eight months to build because school food is complex. Students had to learn how to work with approvals, food safety, preparation space, refrigeration, adult supervision, funding, supply schedules, and the normal rhythm of the cafeteria.

On Tuesdays and Thursdays, students harvest one 11-foot tower. Each tower has 44 planting sites and usually produces about 50 salads. Students harvest before lunch, carry the lettuce about ten feet into the Culinary Arts prep area, trim it, wash it, spin it dry, place it into compostable containers, add Parmesan donated by Ca'Dario Restaurants, and pair it with ranch dressing made by Culinary Arts students. Cafeteria staff help refrigerate and distribute the salads during lunch.

Each salad costs about \$1.60 to make, before counting donated toppings, student labor, and gifted supplies (Healthy Salad Meals).

The cafeteria partnership made the project real. The lettuce needed a clean prep area, safe washing procedures, refrigeration, and a way to reach students during lunch. Once Culinary Arts and cafeteria staff were part of the process, the project became part of the school's food system.

A shared resource database could help other schools move through this process more quickly. Students should not have to guess how to write approval forms, food safety checklists, harvest schedules, supply lists, or handoff plans. Those tools can be created, shared, and adapted.

“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

Why Local Partners Matter

Healthy Salad Meals depends on students, school staff, and local partners who know how to grow food reliably.

Pilgrim Terrace Urban Farm & Kitchen has served as more than a seedling supplier. Their team has helped Healthy Salad Meals understand the practical side of hydroponic growing: seedling supply, growing cycles, tower maintenance, troubleshooting, and how fresh food actually reaches people. Its urban farm work includes fresh produce, food access programs, nutrition education, student partnerships, and community growing in Santa Barbara (Pilgrim Terrace Urban Farm & Kitchen).

Pilgrim Terrace shows how urban agriculture can connect growing, education, and food access. Healthy Salad Meals applies that model in a public high school by moving campus-grown lettuce into the school lunch system.

A resource database could also help schools find partners like Pilgrim Terrace. Many student teams may have the idea, but they may not know which local farms, food access groups, restaurants, city programs, or businesses can help. A simple partner directory would make that first step easier.

“After reviewing the Healthy Salad Meals case study, **USDA Team Nutrition** described the program as “a thoughtful example of how schools can engage students, staff, and community partners in promoting access to fresh, healthy foods.” The response also noted the program's relevance to “nutrition education, student engagement, and innovative approaches to school meals.”

How It Works

Grow lettuce on campus



Harvest in the morning before school



Prepare in Culinary Arts



Refrigerate with cafeteria support



Serve free salads at lunch



What We Learned

1. Visibility builds trust.

Students are more likely to try fresh food when they see where it comes from. At Dos Pueblos, lettuce is visible before it becomes lunch. Students watch it grow. They see their classmates harvest it. They see it served through the same cafeteria system they already use.

2. The numbers are useful, with limits.

Healthy Salad Meals estimates:

- 7,400+ salads served
- 37,000 gallons of water saved compared with conventional lettuce production
- nearly 600 single-use plastic produce bags avoided
- 7,400+ compostable containers used
- about 240 transportation miles avoided per lettuce supply trip, using Salinas Valley to Goleta as a comparison point

These are program estimates. They help students and officials see the hidden parts of school food: water, packaging, transportation, waste, and distance.

3. The hardest part was never the lettuce.

Growing lettuce was the easiest part. Making the program work inside a public school took about eight months. We had to figure out school approval, district food-service guidance, food safety steps, prep space, refrigeration, adult supervision, student labor, steady seedlings, maintenance, funding, and who would take over next. A shared set of templates would have helped. Schools need examples they can adapt, especially for food safety, approvals, student roles, and maintenance routines.

4. Student-led programs need a plan for handoff.

Healthy Salad Meals began with a small group of students who knew the harvest schedule, the prep routine, and who to ask for help. That worked at first, but it would not be enough once those students graduated. The program is stronger now because the steps are written down. Younger students are being trained. Towers rotate on a schedule. Funding sources are identified. The next team has an operations manual, not a guessing game. A student can start the work. A clear handoff lets the work continue.

Policy Recommendations

1. Clear approval path for school-grown food.

Districts should give schools simple guidance on what students may grow, harvest, wash, prepare, refrigerate, and serve.

- A basic checklist should answer:
 - Who signs off on campus-grown food?
 - Where can produce be washed and prepared?
 - What adult supervision is required?
 - Where will food be refrigerated?
 - Can food be distributed through the cafeteria?
 - What food safety steps must students follow?

These approval tools should be included in a shared resource database so new projects do not have to build them from scratch.

2. Build food safety into the project from the start.

Student teams need written procedures for hand washing, gloves, produce washing, damaged-leaf removal, prep-space cleaning, refrigeration, and same-day serving. Healthy Salad Meals works because the lettuce is harvested, prepared, refrigerated, and served within a few hours. Other schools should be able to start with sample food safety checklists and adapt them with adult supervision.

3. Fund small campus-grown food pilots.

Districts, cities, foundations, and federal grant programs should support pilots that include:

- hydroponic towers
- seedlings, nutrients, and maintenance supplies
- washing, prep, and refrigeration equipment
- compostable serving materials
- student food safety training
- cafeteria or culinary arts coordination
- local food partners
- data tracking

Local partners such as Pilgrim Terrace can help schools move from interest to implementation by supporting seedlings, tower setup, growing schedules, maintenance, nutrition education, and troubleshooting.

4. Connect pilots to the cafeteria.

Campus-grown food should connect to the daily life of the school: cafeterias, culinary arts classes, environmental clubs, facilities teams, school gardens, and local food partners. A tower connected to food service becomes part of how a school feeds students.

5. Help students document the work so it can last.

Student-led programs often depend on one or two students who know every step. When those students graduate, the program can disappear with them. Schools can prevent that by pairing student teams with a teacher, cafeteria lead, club advisor, or community partner who helps turn the project into a repeatable system.

Students need practical tools: sample approval forms, food safety checklists, maintenance calendars, supply lists, training notes, troubleshooting guides, and handoff plans for younger students. AI can help draft and organize these materials from messy notes, but an adult advisor should review them before they are used.

Districts, grant programs, and partner organizations should build a shared resource database so students do not have to start from scratch. A database like this could include templates, sample budgets, local partner directories, grant examples, and training guides that schools can adapt to their own campus.

Healthy Salad Meals now uses written procedures for tower maintenance, pH checks, nutrient schedules, harvest steps, food prep, cafeteria coordination, supply inventory, troubleshooting, and succession planning. The larger lesson is simple: good student ideas need tools, not just encouragement.

Limits of the Model

Healthy Salad Meals is a pilot and depends on food-service coordination, reliable seedlings, prep space, refrigeration, trained students, and local partners. These needs are common for school food projects. Schools need small grants, clear approval steps, food safety guidance, partner directories, and proven templates so more student-led food programs can succeed.

How This Fits Current School Meal Legislation

The Scratch Cooked Meals for Students Act would create a USDA grant program to help schools expand scratch cooking. The legislation describes scratch cooking as preparing meals with fresh, locally sourced ingredients rather than relying on pre-assembled or processed meals (Brownley).

Healthy Salad Meals is a small campus-based version of that shift. Students grow lettuce on campus, harvest it before lunch, prepare it with Culinary Arts support, refrigerate it through school systems, and distribute it free during the school day.

Congressman Brian Fitzpatrick described school nutrition as “local health infrastructure” (Brownley). That phrase fits what we learned. A school meal depends on labor, storage, refrigeration, trust, local producers, community partners, and the systems that make fresh food possible during a normal school day.

The Scratch Cooked Meals for Students Act also emphasizes local partnerships with farmers and producers (Brownley). Healthy Salad Meals shows how this idea can include campus-grown food and local urban agriculture partners. Pilgrim Terrace Urban Farm & Kitchen has supported the model by providing seedlings and hydroponic growing knowledge, helping connect student leadership with food access, nutrition education, and sustainable agriculture.

The Plant Powered School Meals Pilot Act also fits this model because Healthy Salad Meals provides a fresh vegetarian option that students can see, trust, and take easily. That bill would create a grant program for school districts to increase plant-based meal offerings for students (Schiff).

Together, these bills create an opening for school meal programs that work at different scales: district kitchens, local farms, school gardens, and campus-grown pilots. A shared resource database would help turn those goals into practical steps that schools can actually use.

“Healthy Salad Meals began as a way to serve fresh salads. It became a test of what it takes to build a small food system inside a school. The lettuce travels only ten feet, but those ten feet require approvals, growers, washing, refrigeration, funding, student training, trust, and access. Fresh school food depends on time, space, people, rules, partners, and usable tools. A good idea should be able to move from one school to another without every team starting from scratch.”

Policy Takeaway

Student-led food pilots can work when schools fund the system around the idea. Healthy Salad Meals shows that campus-grown food can become part of a real school lunch program when students have the right support. To help more schools succeed, grants should fund:

- **Clear approval steps** So students know who signs off on campus-grown food.
- **Food safety procedures** So harvesting, washing, refrigeration, and serving are safe from the start.
- **Cafeteria coordination** So fresh food connects to the school lunch system instead of staying separate.
- **Local partner directories** So schools can find farms, restaurants, food access groups, and technical support.
- **Student training tools** So new students can learn the work without guessing.
- **Maintenance and supply plans** So towers, seedlings, nutrients, containers, and equipment are accounted for.
- **Handoff plans** So the program continues after the founding students graduate.
- **Shared templates and resource databases** So each school can adapt the model without rebuilding the process from scratch.

Final Policy Ask

School meal grant programs should fund student-led, campus-grown food pilots as part of scratch cooking, farm-to-school, plant-forward meal, sustainability, and school meal innovation efforts. Students can lead these projects, but school lunch is complex, and no single model will work for every campus. Schools need support from teachers, cafeteria staff, administrators, local farms, businesses, city partners, and state and federal programs. They also need a shared resource database with sample approval forms, food safety checklists, maintenance calendars, student training guides, grant examples, local partner directories, and AI-supported templates that help teams adapt the model to their own campus. Good ideas should not disappear because students do not know where to start. Schools need practical tools so that more student-led food projects have a fair chance.

Recommended Grant Language

“Campus-grown food pilot programs should qualify for school meal innovation, scratch cooking, farm-to-school, plant-forward meal, and sustainability funding when they include food safety procedures, adult supervision, cafeteria or culinary arts coordination, local food partners, student training, sustainability tracking, and a plan for the program to continue after the first student leaders graduate.

Grant programs should also support shared resource databases with sample approval forms, food safety checklists, maintenance calendars, local partner directories, student training guides, grant examples, and adaptable templates for schools.

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