

# Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION REVIEW

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*Sponsored Supplement*  
**Choosing the Right Partners for School Food  
Reform**

By Kathleen O'Hare de Chadenès

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# Choosing the Right Partners for School Food Reform

“Work with the willing” is an important lesson that I learned the hard way.

✪ BY KATHLEEN O’HARE DE CHADENÈDES

I was surprised to see the message in my inbox. Mark (not his real name), one of the most recalcitrant food service directors in Santa Barbara County, had inquired about applying for a grant to replace some failing cooking equipment in his school kitchen.

Four months earlier, I had resigned myself to the idea that we had fatally damaged an already tenuous relationship. Here is what happened: Mark had agreed to host a School Food Initiative (SFI) Culinary Boot Camp at his school district. (The Boot Camp is a five-day session, taught by professional chefs, combining classroom learning along with hands-on kitchen practicums.) But then, as the date approached, he contended that he was too busy to attend. A Boot Camp instructor—one of our consultants—sensed the frustration of the newly inspired participants. Mark’s refusal to join them signaled his unwillingness to deviate from business as usual. Overstepping professional boundaries, the instructor urged Mark’s staff to demand that the school board replace him with a new director who fully embraced healthy scratch cooking.

When Mark got wind of this, he contacted me, angry and hurt. My embarrassment over our consultant’s actions paled in comparison to my exasperation at the fact that we had given Mark a plausible excuse for not engaging with SFI. I tempered my hopes of transforming a difficult partnership into a success story, but hoped for a second chance, which had now arrived via email.

I sent Mark the grant application. I applauded myself for following the first rule of partnerships: meet partners where they are. I succeeded in getting the grant approved and contacted Mark with the good news. After almost a year as SFI director, I felt confident



enough in my relationships with prospective grantees to include mutually agreed-on stipulations in the grant agreements. I sent a draft of the stipulations to Mark for his review. But instead of a respectful exchange of ideas, I received an indignant reply. He refused to accept any award with strings attached. Determined to make this work, I carefully crafted my response. Finally, he agreed to accept the funds and the stipulation to use the new equipment to add one more scratch-cooked entrée to the menu each week.

Victory was mine—until it wasn’t. In his interim progress report, Mark indicated that he could no longer serve one additional

scratch-cooked entrée per week because he lost student participation (i.e., revenue) every day he served a scratch-cooked entrée, while also incurring increased labor costs. Losing money, he said, could lead to the loss of his job. No one at the district disputed Mark’s claims, so I asked how we could help support him. He responded that what he really needed was nutrition education for the students so they would learn to accept the healthier lunch choices. I tried a new approach: shower Mark with programs and services as proof of our commitment to his district. That year, I recommended that Mark’s district receive two school gardens, complete

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Chef KATHLEEN O’HARE DE CHADENÈDES is director of the Orfalea Foundation School Food Initiative.

with a paid garden manager. I also assigned a dedicated SFI chef to provide assistance with menu development, recipe testing, and service logistics.

Still facing resistance, I met with the superintendent. To gauge his level of philosophical alignment with SFI, I asked how he felt about the practice of scheduling recess before lunch. I explained the benefits of recess before lunch: children were motivated to eat more of their lunch and drink more of their beverage; they wasted less food, and returned to their classrooms calmer and ready to learn. He responded enthusiastically, saying that he loved the sound of that commonsense approach and he also appreciated the fact that it would cost nothing to implement such a beneficial practice. He vowed to take the idea to his leadership team the following week for their endorsement.

Well, Mark sat on the leadership team. And when I called to follow up on the issue, the superintendent said that he had met with major opposition from the team. When I learned this, I felt used and naïve. I pictured an unflattering image of myself chasing potential partners down the street waving a \$50,000 check, begging them to accept not only our money but also all the support programs we offered.

But then a new image emerged. I realized that Mark had given me a gift: the inspiration to adopt a new strategy. I vowed, from that point forward, to work only with the willing. While I still acknowledged the value of “meeting potential partners where they are,” I also saw that achieving systemic change would require different rules of engagement.

Contrast the Mark story with the development of SFI’s relationship with food service director Sandra (not her real name either). We got off to a rocky start too, but we each achieved our goals by following other essential rules of partnership: aligning our values, earning trust, and sharing risks.

At an early Culinary Boot Camp, Sandra had folded her arms across her chest, declaring that she would never cook raw poultry in her district’s central kitchen. (Her practice at the time had been to assemble processed menu items at a central kitchen and distribute meals to the schools.) The district had built most of its schools during the heyday of the heat-and-serve approach to school meals. The satellite kitchens lacked the appropriate infrastructure and equipment to

## Orfalea Foundation School Food Initiative

Years of programming	<b>7</b>
Total dollars invested	<b>\$12,495,000</b>
Hours of onsite chef assistance	<b>9,720</b>
Food service workers trained	<b>350</b>
Students benefiting annually	<b>50,561</b>
Cost per child per year	<b>\$35</b>

comply with the local Environmental Health jurisdiction’s requirements for serving bulk-packed, scratch-cooked entrées or salad bars. The financial cost of remodeling presented a seemingly insurmountable obstacle.

Unionized food service staff loomed large as another hurdle. Used to the daily rhythms of assemble, heat, and serve, union members might object to processing fresh produce for salad bars and cooking entrees from scratch. The change could mean more work for the same money and more risk of on-the-job injuries. After Culinary Boot Camp, however, Sandra and her staff exhibited a shift in perspective. At Boot Camp, participants had gotten excited about producing healthier, fresher food—and instructors had supported their excitement by teaching them how to do it safely and effectively, and by offering the possibility of procuring equipment so they could do it efficiently. The barriers appeared less daunting.

Before Boot Camp, Sandra had resigned herself to running a school food service operation that fell short of her ideals, but now she began to believe in the possibility of change. More important, her values and those of her staff aligned with SFI’s aspirations. That essential pillar of effective partnerships opened the door to progress.

SFI’s full-time chef advisor conducted a Boot Camp follow-up session. She also provided on-site assistance—acting as a safety net to help participants leave their comfort zones and achieve the goals they had set in Boot Camp. For example, she convinced Sandra to try a scratch cooking pilot at two elementary schools. SFI would fund the project and offer the chef advisor’s support. (The high schools and junior highs in the district offered some healthier menu choices at the time, but the elementary schools still received individually packaged, highly processed entrees.) Sandra possessed the courage to change; her

staff exhibited inspiration and dedication to serving healthier school food; and pending the pilot’s success, SFI also offered to cover the cost of a district-wide transformation.

The pilot had two goals: proving that producing and serving healthy food would cost no more than the current program, and showing that students would accept the new food, resulting in the same or better participation (and therefore revenue).

We worked together on the pilot, from kitchen design to menu creation, food preparation workflow, and meal service logistics.

As we negotiated the grant stipulations, Sandra hesitated before agreeing to the terms. She acknowledged that the stipulations might cause some dissension among her staff. She also noted that revenue could plummet if students missed favorite menu items and declined to participate. We countered her concerns by listing all the ways we would help this pilot succeed, and Sandra regained her resolve. Our discussions illustrated another essential rule of partnership: by talking through concerns and solutions openly, we were earning each other’s trust.

The pilot succeeded. Students selected the scratch-cooked entrée twice as often as the more familiar prepackaged lunch. Best of all for Sandra, the new program did not increase costs. Sandra took this success to the school board and received support for bringing healthy scratch cooking and salad bars to the entire district.

To make this happen, Sandra teamed up with the heads of facilities and her boss and made a plan to roll out the new food program to the entire district. Working with estimated costs, we identified the financial commitments of both partners, with the district shouldering almost 50 percent of the cost of renovating the central kitchen and remodeling of satellite kitchens, thereby complying with a third essential rule of partnerships: sharing risks.

An additional boon to the transformation of school food service arrived in the form of a new superintendent and assistant superintendent. Both believed that healthy school meals play a role in greater academic achievement, as well as social and emotional development. For the first time since Sandra arrived at the district she felt supported by the administration.

The assistant superintendent invited

Sandra to speak at monthly principal meetings where she could explain the transformation of food service and ask for principals' support as allies and advocates for better school food. She did, and they stepped up. Additionally, after the assistant superintendent reached out to the community to support the district's students, Sandra saw a marked increase in attendance at the Wellness Committee meetings she had been doggedly hosting for parents and other interested district residents for several years. The committee, in turn, began to engage a diverse group of school community representatives such as teachers, administrators, coaches, parents, and school employee union leaders to seriously address ways to comply with federal regulations while mak-

ing the healthy choice the easy choice for students and staff. The network of partnerships forming within the school district and the community was wonderful to see.

We experienced similarly positive outcomes in other districts in Santa Barbara County. We had begun by supporting food service, the most powerless faction in the school community. And elevating the professionalism and capabilities of food service did produce better school food in many districts. But working with a broad network of partners seeded deep-rooted systemic change, helping schools and districts see themselves as centers of health and wellness, bolstering their efforts to improve student learning and lifetime health.

Our experience with Mark taught us

to work with the willing, and working with Sandra reinforced for us some essential tenets of partnership. Progress had nothing to do with money or power or authority—top-down pressure works only as long as pressure can be maintained; it is the antithesis of sustainability. Rather, progress was achieved through the day-to-day work of building relationships that transcend the roles of grantee and grantor, listening to our partners' concerns, and developing alternative solutions.

Developing a partnership based on aligned values, earned trust, and shared risk made it possible to change the food on the plate and the culture of the school district and community, supporting students' lifetime health and learning. ☺

## A Changing Landscape for School Food

☺ BY JESSICA DONZE BLACK

**F**lash back to 1946: World War II is over and the United States is making plans for a brighter future. Among our country's top priorities is raising healthy children to support and defend our nation in the years ahead. Enter the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act, a bold commitment to ensure that all young people have at least one nutritious meal each day.

Today, nearly 70 years later, the national lunch program remains a critical contributor to the health of school-age children, reaching 95 percent of public schools and more than 30 million kids a day. About 15 million children also participate in the national school breakfast program. The importance of these meals cannot be overstated, yet recently they became a topic of some controversy.

For decades, school meal programs focused on serving children enough food to prevent hunger. But as the childhood obesity epidemic grew, and related diseases such as Type 2 diabetes increased, public health groups and nutrition scientists recommended that meals provide students with the nutrients for healthy development while avoiding excess calories, fat, and sodium.

When the US Congress last reauthorized school meal programs in 2010, it heeded this advice and directed the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) to update nutrition standards to reflect current scientific knowledge. Congress also told the USDA to update nutrition standards for all foods sold at schools (in vending machines, à la carte lines, and school stores). The USDA issued updated regulations for lunch, breakfast, snack foods, and drinks that increased the emphasis on fruits, vegetables, and whole grains, and set reasonable limits on fat, sodium, and portion sizes.

Schools have been implementing these updates since 2012, and the ease of the transition has varied considerably from district to district. Many schools were ahead of the curve and had

already met or exceeded the updated standards. But some were less prepared and have faced hurdles such as declining student participation rates, increased training and equipment needs, and limited availability of healthier products.

There is tremendous opportunity to overcome these challenges and move forward productively. According to a recent poll by The Pew Charitable Trusts, nearly three in four parents support the healthier school nutrition standards. Moreover, thousands of districts are implementing them successfully, and the USDA has launched an initiative to match struggling food service directors with peer mentors from districts that are thriving under the healthier standards. The Alliance for a Healthier Generation, the National School Food Service Management Institute, and other nonprofits are offering robust technical assistance and training to schools in need, and Congress has appropriated additional funds to upgrade school kitchen equipment. Groups representing fresh produce growers have worked with business and nonprofit partners to supply thousands of free salad bars to school cafeterias. The food industry has developed countless products that will help schools meet the healthier standards.

And here's the great news: These initiatives are working. As of 2015, 95 percent of districts are certified as meeting the updated nutrition standards, and students are adapting to the changes. Research indicates that in districts that have implemented healthier nutrition standards, students are eating more fruits and vegetables, and the amount of food left on plates has stayed level or even decreased. Although a few federal, state, and local policy makers have proposed rolling back the current nutrition standards, the overwhelming evidence shows that schools can successfully serve healthier foods for a reasonable cost, and fulfill the goal of the school meal program: to ensure that all children have access to healthy food every day. ☺

JESSICA DONZE BLACK is a child nutrition expert and director of the Kids' Safe and Healthful Foods Project at The Pew Charitable Trusts.