

# A 2020 VISION

FOR PUBLIC EDUCATION in ULSTER COUNTY

## **Food services:**

**The potential for sharing among  
Ulster County school districts**

August 2015



**The Center for Research, Regional Education and Outreach, SUNY New Paltz  
Ulster County School Boards Association**

# Food services: The potential for sharing among Ulster County school districts

Meals for kids in Ulster County schools cost just shy of \$10 million last year. About half of this (\$4.9 million) was paid for by taxpayers in the form of federal and state reimbursements. In the overall picture of school budgets, food service is not a big ticket. It is just 2% of the total spent in the county on education in 2013-14 (\$519,155,596) and less than the amount raised from local taxes (\$309,631,685).

The percentage may be small, but every nickel counts. Costs of education keep rising and the lid on local revenues will be even tighter next year. Collaboration and efficiency may help us save some of this money. And savings made here then do not need to be made elsewhere, perhaps creating a margin to protect the job of a teacher or another school employee.

Collaboration and efficiency can also help us focus our resources and energies on the issues that matter most. Because in reality, it is for reasons in addition to the bottom line - in fact, more important than the bottom line - that food in school is a critical concern for all who care about children's health, education, and

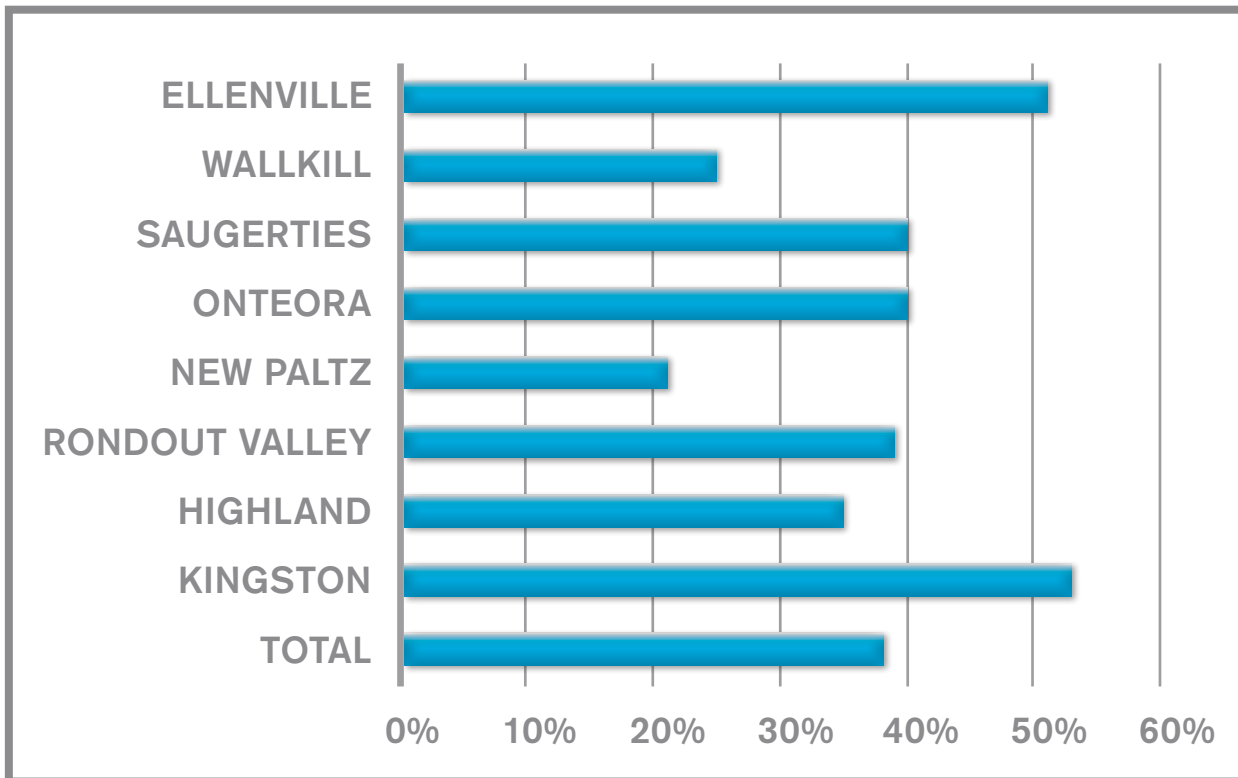
the character of our communities. Nutrition matters for kids. It is essential for their healthy growth, development, and learning. And for many children, meals served in school are a primary source of nourishment (Guthrie, 2013).

According to the New York State Health Department six of the ten leading causes of death are linked to poor nutrition.<sup>1</sup> Hungry students or students with insufficient nutrition to sustain proper development are not good learners. In 2010 almost 19% of Ulster County youth (6,940 children) experienced food insecurity - defined as living within a family that was unable to secure sufficient food at any time in a given year (Books, 2012, pp. 7). Almost four in ten (38%) children in Ulster County schools in 2013-2014 were eligible for free or reduced price meals (see figure 1). For many Ulster County youngsters, then, school breakfasts and lunches are essential; eating regularly and well at home at mealtime is not always an option. Obesity among youth is another nutritional challenge that is palpably present in our communities; 37% of Ulster County students (grades 1, 3, 5, and 7) were overweight or obese in 2010 (Waltermaurer & Tobin, 2011).



...food in school is a critical concern for all who care about children’s health, education, and the character of our communities.

Figure 1: Percentage of students receiving free and reduced price meals, Ulster County, 2013-14



Because education is mandated for youth between the ages of 6 and 16, and because most of our Ulster County children go to public schools, that’s where kids may be reached to do something about these two compelling dietary realities.

Those who do the eating care a lot about what they are given to eat in school. Regardless of our best intentions and efforts, kids in school won’t eat what they don’t like. Parents care too about what their children are given to eat in school. So do the federal and state governments; they contribute significantly to the food bill and so make rules about what must be served how the resources they

provide may be used. There are also the local taxpayers, who bear much of the cost.

Looking at the big picture, at least three things count when considering food in school: nutrition, cost and participation. The “trilemma” is making these work together (Ralston, 2008). We often do this well in Ulster County. This essay explores some ways we may be able to do it even better; it is the work of the School and School District Structure study group, a subcommittee of *A 2020 Vision for Public Education in Ulster County*.

## I. National School Lunch Program and Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010

The federal government first began providing food for schools in 1936. It was a way of getting good use out of surplus farm production; providing meals for students was an ancillary benefit. Now the Department of Agriculture distributes grants and approved foods and issues reimbursements for free and reduced price meals to states and eligible school districts through the National School Lunch Program (NSLP). By 2014 the National School Lunch (NSLP) program had become the second largest nutrition program in the country (after Food Stamps). Total federal expenditures on school meals, including lunch, breakfast, milk, and snack programs, exceeded \$11 billion (N.A., 2014, April 24). Students from families with incomes at or below 130 percent of the poverty level are eligible for free meals, while those from families at between 130 and 185 percent of the poverty level are eligible for

reduced price lunch. Meals purchased by students who do not qualify for free or reduced price lunch receive a slight subsidy. Reimbursement rates to school districts for free and reduced price meals vary based on the proportion of these meals served in the school district.

In New York, the Education Department's Child Nutrition Program provides fiscal and programmatic oversight, compliance monitoring, and reimbursements to the School Food Authorities that administer NSLP at the local (usually school district) level. States are involved because to get federal money they must provide matching funds equal to 30 percent of the federal funds *received in 1980*. Because this matching funds standard is frozen at a level that is more than a third of a century old, state-required contributions to free and reduced price meals are often very small. They are reduced even more for some states by the percentage points that their per capita income is below the national per capita income (NA, 2014, p. 1). (The state contribution in New York is \$.06 on a meal that gets a total reimbursement of just over \$3.00.<sup>2</sup>) The largest proportion of the subsidies for school meals therefore comes from the federal government.



In addition to receiving financial reimbursement, schools also receive commodity foods, known as “entitlement” foods. “Bonus” commodities become available to schools in instances where there are surplus agricultural stocks (Ralston, 2008, pp. 2).

NSLP is highly regulated, although the regulatory specifications have shifted through the decades. Some may recall the incredulous national conversation in 1981 about the designation of such condiments as relish and ketchup as vegetables for school lunches. In 2010 the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 (HHFKA) set national nutrition standards that apply to all food served during the school day (including a la carte, vending machine, and snack bar options). The standards limit the amount of calories, sodium, fat, and sugar that can be in each food item, specify acceptable grains, and require that a fruit or vegetable be served with each lunch – regardless of the purchaser’s intent to eat the item (USDA Food and Nutrition Services, 2015). For districts that have a high free and reduced lunch populations, there are new federal grant programs that focus on organic foods, farm-to-school initiatives, nutrition education and obesity prevention.

Under HHFKA, revised administrative procedures simplify the provision of free and reduced price meals to students by allowing for community (universal) eligibility for qualifying schools and school districts and also access to New York State’s Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Medicare databases. This reduces reliance on paper forms. Federal law also requires training for school district food service personnel on regulations and nutritional standards, and encourages wellness policies featuring goals for nutrition and physical activity (National Education Association, 2010; White House, 2010).

The 2010 federal law has the admirable goal of increasing access to healthful food and the reduction of childhood obesity rates. But remember the trilemma. Cost and participation also must be considered. “Even if more nutritious foods are provided, that does not guarantee that students will eat them. Both participation and program costs can be affected by administrative policies and procedures” (Ralston, 2008, p. iv).

## II. Regulations, Student Participation and Cost

The trilemma of food services refers to the balance among regulations, participation, and cost; regulations that affect the composition of meals may, in turn, diminish student participation and also result in wasting food (known as “plate waste”) which may impact the fiscal viability of school food programs as a whole. Some argue that the 2010 nutrition regulations lower participation rates, increase plate waste and further threaten the viability of school meal programs by increasing the cost per meal without an equivalent increase in reimbursement (School Nutrition Association, 2014; Just & Price, 2013; Smith & Cunningham-Sabo, 2013). Others respond that the regulations do not decrease participation or increase plate waste but, on the contrary, actually increase the consumption of fruits and vegetables (Schwartz et al., 2015).

Most of the Ulster County school food service managers with whom we spoke thought that the Federal HHFKA makes solving the trilemma more difficult. All have revised recipes and – in some instances – reduced portions in response to the guidelines. Some say that this has led to reduced participation in their meal programs; students reject new foods or do not see value for their money in a smaller serving size. There is frustration with the plate waste that results from having to serve a fruit or vegetable with each meal. Several lamented too that they can no longer rely on traditionally big-selling a la carte items, such as a breakfast sandwiches, extra French fries, soft pretzels or sweet snacks to subsidize the school meal program, since these must now also conform to HHFKA nutrition guidelines; one food service director reported that in the past, “the a la carte business account[ed] for about 40% of his school’s total food service revenue” (Books, 2012, p. 15). Sourcing food within the new standards has also become more difficult. For example, hamburger patties for cheeseburgers must be smaller than in the past, to avoid having the meat/cheese combination exceed the protein level regulations. Almost all of the FSDs in the county are concerned about their bottom line; with diminishing

participation, increased cost of healthful food, and increased plate waste, they are concerned about their programs' viability.

Some school food service professionals in the county think that these tensions will resolve over time, as student tastes acclimate to new foods and as the food industry adjusts products to meet the new standards. Nationally, there is some evidence that school districts that introduced new foods slowly saw participation rates creep back up over time (Sifferlin, 2012). Still, it will take trial and error – and time – to determine student preferences within the new guidelines. In the meantime school districts, in Ulster County and across the country, experiment with recipes, meals, and price points in an effort to bring the three prongs of the trilemma into balance.



## HISTORY

The federal government's foray into school meals began in 1936 with the Commodity Donation Program, which was designed to boost the economy by funneling surplus crops to school districts; provision of meals for students was an added benefit. Inspired in part by the Department of Defense and its interest in securing healthy recruits, the National School Lunch Act was passed just after the end of WWII to aid districts in supplying and funding school meals (Confessore, 2014). This and the Child Nutrition Act, passed in 1966, provided statutory authority for the subsidy of school meals for eligible students in participating school districts. Over the years other federal initiatives, such as the healthy Meals for Americans Act of 1994 and the 2004 Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act, have also shaped the provision of food to children in school.

## III. Food services in Ulster County

Some school districts have addressed the prongs of the trilemma through the organization and delivery of food services. In Ulster County, school districts use one of two common delivery models; self-operated (independently run by each district) or contracted out (hiring a company to manage food service delivery). Below we detail how food service programs are operated, generally, in Ulster County. We then explore alternative models of organization that have been employed to address dimensions of the trilemma.

### Self-operated

Six of eight Ulster County school districts directly manage their own food service delivery operation. (One Ulster County school district shares a Food Service Director with Ulster BOCES who is in charge of these programs for both entities.) In the self-operated configuration, food services works like a separate business within the district. Keeping the food services budget separate from a school district's main budget allows for easier accounting for the flow of funds in (reimbursements for subsidized lunches, purchases of lunches and a la carte items) and out (for the purchase of commodities and labor).

Generally, staffing consists of: a Food Service Director (manages all local food services operations, plans meals, ensure state and federal guidelines are met, etc.); several Cook Managers (manage school-based staff, financial accounting, and clerical support to the Food Service Director); Cooks (prepare food); and Food Service Workers (serve food, manage the register, cleaning, etc.). All are employees of the school district. Food Service Directors estimate that labor comprises 45-65% of the food service budget.

Food is obtained through a bidding process and also through a government entitlement program. Under the entitlement program the government offers food– cheese, for example – to school districts. A district may choose to “brown box” this food, that is have it delivered directly. Or the district may have it “processed”; for example, sent to a preferred pizza supplier who then uses it to make that district's pizza, thus lowering the price for that item. Several FSDs told us that they try to obtain as

much of their main course foods as possible through this program, as it is a cheaper way to source the most expensive part – the protein – of the meal.

Other foods and grocery products are obtained through a bidding process. Ulster County school districts jointly bid for food and commodities through BOCES. There are separate bids for different commodities: large grocery (spices, oils, etc.), mini-bid (deli, some meats, cheese), milk, bread, snack, ice cream, pizza, beverage, and cafeteria paper. Each FSD provides BOCES with a list of desired products. (However, perishable items, such as produce, are not part of the collaborative bid; these are bid and purchased directly by the FSD at the district-level on an on-going basis.) BOCES then compiles these, and their quantities, onto a bid list, advertises the bids, collects the bid offers on the opening date, enters all information into a spreadsheet, analyses the information, and then meets with FSDs to determine where to award the bids. According to an Ulster County Food Service Director who works with BOCES in this way, ‘BOCES’ bidding service is extremely valuable and saves them quite a lot of time.’

Collaborative bidding does not necessarily mean joint purchasing. All districts join to purchase some of the same items, cafeteria paper, for example. But other items, such as milk, are purchased separately, which means that prices vary for all districts. Sometimes the decision about whether to purchase jointly is influenced by geography; some companies will not deliver to the outer reaches of our county. But mostly, the decision to not purchase together is about local preference.

Each school district’s menu is locally-determined. One Ulster County school district will not purchase products with high fructose corn syrup. Another takes pride in its homemade meatballs. Yet another does not serve pork; the children in that district will not eat it. Sometimes these district-specific offerings are an important expression of local culture and preference. But sometimes there is no discernable reason for independent purchases. One example is a bid spec that shows five different types of mayonnaise. Another is that most Ulster County districts buy milk from the same local dairy; it is unclear why this food

is not jointly purchased. In these instances, districts are not taking advantage of potential economies of scale – by joining together to purchase the same foods – as completely as they could.

Ulster County FSDs meet often to discuss regulations, new food items, and exchange recipes. They readily collaborate and share information about, and recipes for, foods that are popular among students. In addition, Ulster County FSDs are part of the Hudson Valley Food Service Directors’ Coalition, a regional group comprised of FSDs from 35 Hudson Valley school districts. This group meets monthly to discuss changes in regulations and to exchange recipes and ideas.

Finally, most Ulster County school districts try to source as much as they can from local farms and production centers. Several local food hubs, such as Red Barn and Ginsberg’s, help with the purchase of local produce. Apples are the obvious local fruit. Several FSDs expressed a desire for other local produce – lettuce, peaches, or cherries – and wished that it could be more readily available and affordable. Several also expressed interest in receiving additional foods, such as meats or bread, from local farmers or suppliers. Currently, however, local sources for these items are too expensive to be purchased locally for school district use on a consistent basis.

### **Contract with external company**

Two districts in Ulster County contract with an external company to provide most elements of food service delivery. In this model, the contracted company manages all food sourcing, delivery of meals, and labor (all food service staff are employees of the management company). The company works with the school district to determine food preferences and other local concerns and then uses this information to develop a menu and program that suits that district. However, management companies do not process free and reduced price lunch applications, nor do they do audits or compliance reporting. The local school district remains responsible for this reporting.

The biggest barrier to self-sustaining programs by far, according to the Ulster County food service directors with whom we spoke, is compliance with the new regulatory framework. Most claimed to have suffered a decline in participation in recent years and an

accompanying increase in the cost of food. Moreover, other school-related factors influence the meal program in unexpected ways. One district can no longer offer a popular item – make your own taco – to the elementary schools because the extra minutes in the lunch line to assemble a taco leaves students with little time to eat. Another does not have time to cut orange slices, even though their FSD believes that this would reduce plate waste.

To address issues of cost, some school districts in New York State are experimenting with different ways of organizing food programs. One alternative is to join together, often through BOCES, to share aspects of food service delivery, including menus, labor, marketing plans, and software that assists with accounting, inventory and auditing. (Eggers et al., 2005). Shared menus allow districts to take advantage of larger scale in the bidding and purchasing process; shared staff reduces labor costs; shared marketing increases participation in the meal program, and thus revenue; and shared software can make inventory tracking, auditing, and compliance monitoring more efficient and effective (Johnson et al., 2009).

#### **IV. Other models: addressing the trilemma through organization and program**

##### **Greater Southern Tier BOCES: reduced cost through sharing and efficiency**

The Greater Southern Tier (GST) BOCES manages food services for most of its component school districts. This long-standing program began in 1991 when two school districts with financially imperiled food service programs turned to BOCES for help. Since that time, the program has developed to serve nineteen of the twenty-one school districts – over 25,700 students – within the GST BOCES area. School districts now share the full range of food service program functions – including a menu. Services include cooperative bidding, policy analysis, hiring and training of managers and staff, menu planning, recipe tracking, nutrition analysis, processing of free



and reduced price meal applications, financial record keeping and reporting, and budgeting.

GST BOCES has twenty-one component districts that are spread across five counties in the southern tier of New York. These districts vary in size and type; some serve a small number of students spread over a large geographic region, while others enroll thousands of students in densely populated urban areas. Free and reduced price eligibility ranges from 22% in the district with the lowest percentage of qualifying students to 61% in the district with the highest percentage.<sup>3</sup> Many school districts were committed to their own food services program with their own individualized menus. Thus, sharing food services was not embraced quickly – or easily – by all component districts. Rather, the shared food services arrangement was grown and developed over time. In most cases, school districts opted to join the program when their Food Service Director retired, or when financial challenges required a change.

The administrative team, employed through BOCES, consists of one food service director, who manages the food service program for all participating school districts, along with an area supervisor and food service specialist. Central staff works with local districts on: budgeting, bidding, quality assurance, policy setting, establishing and maintaining a master menu, nutritional analysis, overseeing the audits, and the training of employees. Cook managers are responsible for managing one large district or multiple smaller districts and a district-level food service manager works at the school district, supervising staff, conducting inventory, issuing payroll, invoices, and reports, and



processing free and reduced lunch applications. The school level cook manager, or cafeteria manager, is employed by the school district. Hiring for any of these positions is done by a team, using a checklist of questions based upon professional standards specific to the position. By ensuring that all of their employees are prepared and trained for their positions, BOCES and the component districts are both ensuring quality of service and hedging against the high turnover rates of the food service industry.

Participating schools work from the same master menu, which means that they all serve the same foods. There are some accommodations for difference based on situational necessity (i.e., ingredients on hand) and district preference, but these are minimal. Any extra costs resulting from local choice are borne by the district. Districts join in a cooperative bidding process through GST BOCES. This is common across the state; the difference here is a commitment to purchase all of the same products. Because of this, the districts have enough buying power to induce vendors to produce certain food items so that they not only meet government nutritional standards but also respond to the desires of students as well. If a district makes money through its food service program, it gains the flexibility to alter menu items to further meet the tastes of its students.

*Program highlight:  
auditing, compliance system*

GST BOCES manages all compliance and regulatory processes including handling budgeting and the financial recordkeeping for the districts, and keeping abreast of local, state, and federal guidelines for school meals. It also manages the auditing process; it has developed a five star procedure that can be used in every participating building to prepare the buildings and managers for state and health department audits. This process ensures that food quality, safety, and sanitation policies are being followed. Twice a year the director and his team conduct their own audit of each kitchen in order to determine where improvement is necessary, find any existing problems, and ensure paperwork is completed and up to date. Because of this organization and preparation, state audits are a much simpler and easier process for both the districts and the

state and a high quality of service is maintained. This liberates local school districts from an arduous and time consuming process and also ensures quality.

Additionally, the Greater Southern Tier BOCES computer services department has developed its own point of sale (POS) software which is used by all participating school districts. The use of such a system is not unique; most school districts use a POS service to track student meal transactions, allow families to make deposits into their child's account, and help with compliance monitoring and the issuing of financial reports. Some POS systems can assist with inventory and reallocation of surplus food as well as the processing of free and reduced-price applications, if a district chooses to purchase these additional services. GST's POS provides these services to all participating school districts. However, because it is a centralized function, GST BOCES is able to track meals, reimbursements and productivity for all participating districts; compare spending, product usage, meal counts, and money intake among districts and make adjustments where necessary; and forecast food service revenues and payroll to ensure districts are meeting current and future budgets. The POS system, along with the extensive spreadsheets created by the Food Service Management Team for the purpose of recording and monitoring financial stability, helps to ensure participating districts are generally on good footing. Finally, the GST POS program simplifies the process of producing reports that are required by the New York State Education Department.

**Rock on Café: Broome-Tioga BOCES:  
increased participation through marketing**

The Rock on Café, an award winning school meal program operated by the Broome-Tioga BOCES, began in 1999 as a shared-services endeavor between this BOCES and the Binghamton City School District. Since its inception, the Café has expanded to include fourteen Broome-Tioga component school districts. It provides all services related to school meal programs to participating districts, including bid management, menu development, marketing, staff training and management, compliance monitoring, and audit services.



## 2020

*A 2020 Vision for Public Education in Ulster County* got its start at a symposium convened in November 2013 under the sponsorship of the Ulster County School Boards Association and the Center for Research, Regional Engagement and Outreach (CRREO) at SUNY New Paltz. The goal was to begin the process of proactively shaping a vision for public education in our county's communities. Stakeholders from eight Ulster County school districts gathered to use a regional lens to engage questions of teaching and learning, accountability, and school and school district structure. The School and School District Structure study group, with participation from stakeholders with diverse perspectives and from multiple Ulster County school districts, continued this work through monthly meetings. The 2020 Initiative met again in December, 2014 and decided to explore possibilities for countywide transportation. The study groups continued to meet and this year identified food services as an area of investigation.

The Rock on Café has staff at the central – BOCES – level, and also at the local – district – level. Central staff includes a senior director, a dietician, and two regional directors, all of whom are BOCES employees. The senior director and dietician organize and arrange the bidding, purchasing, menus, budgeting, and all other services. The two regional directors are in the field daily, visiting districts and working directly with managers. Food service managers, stationed in each school district, are in charge of daily operations, including food production and staffing and supervising of kitchen employees. These staff are

school district employees; they are hired by the school district and are members of their respective unions but are supervised by the regional directors.

Participating school districts share a universal, student tested and approved menu that adheres to federal requirements. This shared menu allows school districts to use their joint purchasing power to ensure better pricing on food and grocery items. Each month's menu is a collaborative decision, based on conversations among representatives from each district, community members, and health sponsors. Creating a single menu for fourteen school districts that vary in size, location, and demographics has not been an easy process; Broome-Tioga BOCES serves almost 35,000 students across Broome and Tioga counties and, like many BOCES, encompasses a diverse geographic and student population, from urban centers like Binghamton to more rural places, such as Windsor. The free and reduced price eligibility range is 19% in one suburban school district to 67% in an urban school district.<sup>4</sup>

To ensure that meals will be eaten and enjoyed, Rock on Café involves students in all aspects of menu development, from filling out taste surveys to sampling recipes and participating in taste testing. If the taste tested menu items meet nutritional standards and are fiscally feasible for districts, students are asked to field test meals, giving each a thumbs up or down. Only the meals that pass the thumb test are included in future menus.

Because of savings accrued through sharing, some districts may now offer a second hot lunch option, various salads, a la carte items, or even deli and pizza bars. Thus school districts are able to bring back a bit of their individuality, once the health and budgetary requirements are met.

### *Program highlight: marketing*

A comprehensive marketing plan has helped this universal menu gain acceptance in local school districts. Through these efforts, the Rock on Café has become part of the Broome-Tioga landscape. In an effort to make Rock on Café appeal to all students, the program has developed two distinct sets of logos,

one for elementary and middle school students, and another for high school students. These logos, along with mascots Rex and Roxy, are featured on participating schools' menus and in each cafeteria. Rock on Café tee shirts, stickers, aprons, and posters are available. Television commercials and spots that feature students reading the daily menu are broadcast on local television stations. Beyond generating student participation in meals, this marketing effort has facilitated more widespread acceptance and has led to greater community collaboration around food services for schools.

Rock on Café has the support of the local hospital, which hosts TV spots and commercials and provided costumes for the Rock on Café mascots. In addition, other local health organizations, milk and produce suppliers, and sports teams have participated in the branding of Rock on Café by including the program's logo on their advertisements. In return, Rock on Café offers themed meals that support local sports teams. This has created an enduring connection between the schools and the surrounding community.

Finally, Rock on Café is a core team member of the Broome County Hunger Task Force, partnering with the NYS Department of Health and the Food Bank of the Southern Tier to find ways to combat hunger in the region. The task force has started a backpack program that provides meals for students on weekends or over holidays and vacations.

## V. Possibilities for Ulster County

There are multiple possibilities for collaboration in the provision of food services, at varying levels of intensity and commitment. Districts could choose to centralize certain processes, such as record keeping and auditing, in order to alleviate some of the workload at the local level. School districts in Ulster County currently choose their own Point of Sale (POS) programs, and utilize this service to help with everything from inventory to tracking sales, to reporting and compliance. If the same POS system was used across the county and coordinated by a central entity, auditing and reporting processes might become

more efficient, as in Broome-Tioga County, and work load would be reduced for local FSDs, enabling them to focus on other tasks.

A shared menu would allow school districts to take additional advantage of scale in purchasing. This would require some intensive work and compromise, as it would mean negotiating food items that would sell in all districts. It would surely take time. Personnel from the Rock on Café told us that it took time, as well as countless meetings with local food service personnel and students, to establish their collaborative approach. But both Rock on Café and GST BOCES personnel assured us the results were worth the compromise. Once district food programs became solvent, they had the opportunity to add specialized foods back into their menu.

A savvy, comprehensive marketing campaign could engage students – and the community – in the meal program, as it did for the Rock on Café. Also student involvement in the development of the menu could help to generate excitement for, and create student ownership in, the meal program. This involvement also served to institutionalize the Rock on Café and ground it firmly in the community; the participation of local hospitals and sports teams and regular TV spots contribute to the long-term sustainability of the program.

Finally, several Ulster County food service directors mentioned that they would like to see more local food hubs – or the expansion of hubs that already exist. One local company preserves local, fresh produce and then sells it throughout the winter. Several FSDs indicated an interest in this company but stated that the products are too expensive. Expansion of such efforts may make those foods more affordable for our districts while also promoting our local economy.

## Conclusion and Next Steps

Provision of school meals within the current regulatory framework is a complicated endeavor. Research suggests regionalizing some food service functions may provide efficiencies that ease the financial burden that many Ulster County school districts are facing while also allowing us to deliver more healthful food to students. School districts in Ulster County are already devising ways to tackle pieces of the trilemma; one district is focusing on nutrition through multiple initiatives in farm-to-table and agriculture education. Another district aims to increase participation by establishing a breakfast cart near the school entrance; students can purchase items on the way to class instead of making the trip down to the cafeteria – which they often do not do. But none of the ideas that we learned of involve sharing or collaboration among Ulster County school districts. We believe that the potential exists for bringing the elements of the trilemma – nutrition, cost, and participation – into better balance through shared endeavors. Given the importance of good nutrition for our youth, and the current economic climate, further research and action into regionalizing some aspects of food service delivery in Ulster County is warranted.

The School and School District Structure study group anticipates that the issue of regional collaboration in food service delivery will be a central subject for thoughtful, measured deliberation at the reconvening of A 2020 Vision for Public Education in Ulster County in winter of 2015/16.



---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.health.ny.gov/prevention/nutrition/>

<sup>2</sup> 2014-2015 reimbursement rates, NYSED. [http://portal.nysed.gov/portal/page/portal/CNKC/Reimbursement\\_pp/2014-2015%20Rates.pdf](http://portal.nysed.gov/portal/page/portal/CNKC/Reimbursement_pp/2014-2015%20Rates.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> New York State Department of Education, school report cards, 2013-14. <https://reportcards.nysed.gov/>

<sup>4</sup> New York State Department of Education, school report cards, 2013-14. <https://reportcards.nysed.gov>

## Author Bios

**Ruth Quinn**, former Vice President of the New Paltz Central School District and trustee from 2012-2015 has three elementary aged children in the the New Paltz school district. As a trustee she has received the Board Achievement Award and the Board Excellence award from New York State School Boards Association. She is an active member of the Ulster County School Boards Association Legislative Action Committee where she worked on several committees for the A 2020 Vision for Ulster County Schools initiative. Professionally, she is certified advocate in special education and mental health and has worked with the System of Care committee of Ulster County, school districts, and with parents to help connect services. She has a Master Degree in Anthropology and has worked as a professional archaeologist, an executive director of a nature center, and as a professional grantwriter for municipalities. She is currently working as a QA analyst and technical writer for SAMsix, a local company that makes computer applications for utilities and municipalities to aid in emergency situations.

**Robin Jacobowitz**, Ph.D., is the director of education projects at the Center for Research, Regional Education and Outreach (CRREO) at SUNY New Paltz. Previously, Robin worked with Janice Hirota and Associates on an evaluation of school reform initiatives in New Orleans, Washington DC, New York City, and Dallas. She also worked at New York University's Institute for Education and Social Policy, where her research centered on the growth and development of charter schools in New York State, the organizational structures that facilitate teaching and learning in New York City small high schools, and leadership transitions in new schools in New York City. She worked with the University of Chicago's Chapin Hall Center for Children, where her research focused on the relationship between constituency building and policy work in effecting systemic school reform in New York State. Prior to beginning her career in research, Robin worked with the Public Education Network in Washington DC, where she provided technical assistance to local education funds around the country on issues of school governance, school health, and public engagement. Robin holds a MEd in education policy from the Harvard University Graduate School of Education, and a Ph.D. from the Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service at New York University. She is currently a trustee on the Kingston City School District Board of Education and serves on the executive committee of the Ulster County School Boards Association.

**Micaela Kayser** is a senior at SUNY New Paltz majoring in Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. She has worked with CRREO on a variety of education-related research projects. Her work with CRREO was included in the SUNY New Paltz Student Research Symposium and she was selected to attend the 2015 NEW Leadership New York (NLNY) Summer Institute, a leadership development program for college women. Upon graduating, Micaela plans to attend graduate school and would like to pursue a career in public service.

## Editorial Staff

Gerald Benjamin, Janis Benincasa

## Sources

For a complete list of works cited for this paper please reference the electronic version at [www.newpaltz.edu/crreo](http://www.newpaltz.edu/crreo).

## Citation

Quinn, Ruth, Jacobowitz, Robin, Kayser, Micaela. (2015), Food services: The potential for sharing among Ulster County school districts (*A 2020 Vision for Public Education in Ulster County*, August 2015). New Paltz, NY: State University of New York at New Paltz Benjamin Center for Public Policy Initiatives.

## Acknowledgements

Many people contributed to the development of this report. Food service directors and business administrators in school districts in Ulster County gave generously of their time and provided insight into the operation of food services at the local level. Staff at the Greater Southern Tier BOCES and Broome Tioga BOCES provided valuable information about the food service collaborative that they manage. They also read, and commented on, early drafts of sections of the paper. Participants of the *A 2020 Vision for Public Education in Ulster County* helped to shape the content of this paper; thank you for your continued commitment to this work. Gerald Benjamin and Janis Benincasa provided much appreciated substantive and editorial guidance. Finally, this work would not have been possible without the support of the Dyson Foundation.

Ulster County  
School Boards Association

# CRREO





860350

**New Paltz**  
STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

CRREO  
1 Hawk Drive  
New Paltz, NY 12561-2443

Nonprofit Organization  
U.S. Postage  
PAID  
Permit #6127  
Newburgh, New York

Independently and in collaboration with  
local governments, business and not-  
for-profits **across the Hudson Valley,**  
CRREO: conducts **independent research**  
on topics of **regional interest;** brings  
**visibility and focus** to these matters;  
fosters communities **working together**  
to better serve the citizenry; and  
seeks to **advance the public interest**  
in our region.