

HUNGRY FOR GOOD JOBS



THE STATE OF THE SCHOOL NUTRITION
WORKFORCE IN WISCONSIN



JUNE 2023

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Development, analysis and writing of this report was led by Professor Jennifer Gaddis and Sara Gia Trongone at the University of Wisconsin-Madison with the help of collaborators Allison Pfaff Harris, Amy Washbush, and members of the Healthy School Meals for All (HSM4A) Wisconsin coalition's labor, wages, and compensation working group: Mike Gasper, Bobbie Guyette, Caitlin Harrison, Irene Pawlisch, Representative Kristina Shelton, Representative Francesca Hong, and Paige Anderson. In addition, the School Nutrition Association generously shared a copy of their national labor, wages, and compensation survey instrument and answered questions about study design.

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ABOUT HSM4A

The Healthy School Meals for All (HSM4A) coalition includes public institutions, civil society organizations, elected officials, and youth across the state of Wisconsin who are advocating for free school meals for all K-12 students, a respected school nutrition workforce, and a strong local food economy.

For more information, visit: healthyschoolmealsforallwi.org. To reach the lead authors directly: jgaddis@wisc.edu.



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“I think they [school board] need to all come work in a kitchen and see what it's really like! I don't think any of them understands what we do in there. And how big of an impact we have on some of these kids lives. Some of the kids in my district, breakfast and lunch are the only meals, sadly, that they get. All day long.” - hourly worker

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

HUNGRY FOR GOOD JOBS

June 2023

For two years during the Covid-19 pandemic, K-12 students, families, and communities experienced the [benefits](#) of universal free school meals, which include reduced childhood hunger and food insecurity, improved nutrition and academic achievement, and reduced absenteeism. The federal waivers that allowed schools to serve universal free meals ended on June 30, 2022.

Healthy school meals continue to be a vital source of nutrition for Wisconsin's K-12 students, but ongoing challenges with worker recruitment, retention, and compensation make it difficult for school nutrition programs to provide reliable, high quality meals. As one director stated, “[It’s] hard to impossible to hire staff when there are little hours and pay that is almost half of what can be earned working at McDonald’s. The US Department of Agriculture and Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction push schools to feed students fresh made healthy meals, but we are given no budget for proper staffing.”

To examine statewide trends in school nutrition labor, wages, and compensation, the Healthy School Meals for All (HSM4A) Wisconsin coalition partnered with Professor Jennifer Gaddis at the University of Wisconsin-Madison to prepare this report. Following prior [research on Wisconsin jobs](#), we use the categories of [poverty-wage](#) jobs, low-wage jobs, and good-wage jobs¹ to contextualize the results of our statewide survey. We found the vast majority of non-managerial workers hold low-wage, part-time, 9-month jobs with few employer-provided benefits. Despite wage gains fueled by pandemic-era labor shortages, far too many schools continue to pay their nutrition workers poverty wages. Only one district, Madison Metropolitan School District, now provides good wage jobs to school nutrition employees thanks to a \$5 per hour [wage increase](#) that was approved in [September 2022](#). Making all jobs in school nutrition “good jobs” is a necessary step toward ensuring that all Wisconsin students have access to the stigma-free nutrition they need to learn and thrive. Wisconsin’s hourly school nutrition workers want access to full-time jobs, employer-provided benefits, and optional summer hours. Investing in these workers is key to unlocking the potential for schools to cook healthy meals from scratch using locally sourced ingredients that keep dollars circulating in Wisconsin’s food and farm economy.

Much can and should be done at the state level. At the same time, the federal government must take action to improve labor conditions in child nutrition programs. To this aim, the USDA announced a cooperative agreement to study child nutrition workforce issues as part of the [Food and Nutrition Service Research and Evaluation Plan for Federal Fiscal Year 2023](#). This will fund research on topics such as workplace satisfaction, workplace conditions, professional standards, training, collective bargaining, and wages. In addition, the USDA issued new [guidance](#) in April 2023 for schools that contract with food service management companies to provide meal services. This includes offering family-sustaining wages and a wide range of employer-provided benefits that are consistent with other district employees, along with supporting and communicating to workers the choice to form or join a union.

We hope this report gives Wisconsin’s school nutrition directors and advocates a better understanding of the systemic challenges of and opportunities for improving labor and compensation. We further hope that our analysis and recommendations will be useful to the HSM4A Wisconsin Coalition and SNA-WI at the state level and to other state and national advocacy efforts.

Workforce Snapshot

- Wisconsin has approximately 5,089 K-12 school nutrition workers, 94% of whom are women and 88% of whom are white, and 273 school nutrition directors, 85% of whom are women and 98% of whom are white.²
- **Part-time workers make up the backbone of school nutrition programs.** 4 out of 5 non-managerial employees work part-time.
- **Seasonal employment significantly reduces annual earnings.** Non-managerial employees³ at roughly 80% of schools work 9 months or less annually. A part-time worker earning the median starting wage of \$14.70 would take home only \$10,584 per year working a 20 hour/week 9-month schedule.
- 53% of schools employ at least one temporary or substitute staff member. These workers rarely receive any benefits.
- **Employee benefits vary widely.** Roughly 25% of schools offer sick days, vacation time, retirement benefits, health, dental, life, and disability insurance to full-time employees.
- Only 26% of schools offer health insurance to part-time staff. When it is offered, part-time employees must shoulder the bulk of their healthcare insurance costs.

Wages and Compensation

- Annual salaries for school nutrition directors vary from \$24,000 - \$106,000 with a median salary of \$59,000 per year.
- **Full-time work at \$12.74 an hour pays \$26,500 annually, assuming year-round work.** However, very few employees work full time (roughly 20%), and even fewer (less than 10%) work a 12-month schedule.
- Median starting and typical wages⁴ for part-time non-managerial employees are \$13.60/hr and \$14.70/hr respectively.
- Median starting and typical wages for full-time non-managerial employees are \$14.60/hr and \$15.80/hr respectively.
- **Full time jobs have a wage premium, but schools are not offering strong seniority or incentive pay to retain employees.**

"I've been there a long time... when I first started, they used to offer benefits for food service at four hours.. but now, they have to work at least six hours." - Hourly worker

"The pay is not worth the time away from your family or the constrictions of being able to take time off." - Manager

POVERTY- WAGE JOBS:

Jobs paying \$12.74 an hour or less

LOW- WAGE JOBS:

Jobs paying \$12.75 - \$19.11 an hour

GOOD- WAGE JOBS:

Jobs paying \$19.12 an hour or more



24%
of schools offer
poverty-level
starting wages

**Only one school
district in the
state**



**provides
good-wage
jobs**

One job should be enough to afford housing

Because of their low annual wages, most of Wisconsin's school nutrition workers are "cost-burdened," meaning they spend more than 30% of their income on rent or a mortgage payment. They may be unable to afford basic necessities like food, clothes, transportation, and healthcare. [Cost-burdened renters](#) are more likely to be evicted and to rely on social safety net programs. **The financial precarity stemming from low wages and seasonal employment pushes many of these hourly workers to take second jobs.**

"I think we had 4 people this year who lasted a week or less, and they're gone. And that's a lot in a staff of 10. And it's hard because you spend all that time training. And then they're gone. So then the stress is even more, because you think, 'Oh, I'm getting relief', and you put all of this effort, and then they're gone." - Manager

"It seems like the entire pool of applicants is gone... We've gone through Indeed. We've tried school signboards. We've tried sending things home with students in the parent newsletters... those types of grassroots type methods, but it doesn't seem to have helped at all." - Director

Wages & Cost of Living: Head Cooks [Full-Time: 40 hrs per week, ≤10 months per year]

	Starting Wage	Median Gross Rent	Annual Rent as % of Annual Income
West Allis	\$12	\$881	55% - SEVERELY RENT BURDENED
Necedah	\$15	\$812	45% - RENT BURDENED
Holmen	\$18.70	\$974	39% - RENT BURDENED

Sources: UW-Madison Statewide Survey on the school nutrition Workforce; Census Data DP04, 2021 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

School Nutrition Assistants [Part-Time: 20 hrs per week, ≤10 months per year]

	Starting Wage	Median Gross Rent	Annual Rent as % of Annual Income
Plymouth	\$11.85	\$763	107% - CAN'T MAKE RENT
Chippewa Falls	\$14.02	\$853	101% - CAN'T MAKE RENT
Madison	\$21.44	\$1,212	85% - SEVERELY RENT BURDENED

Sources: UW-Madison Statewide Survey on the school nutrition Workforce; Census Data DP04, 2021 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

Inadequate compensation creates a severe mismatch between supply and demand for school foodservice jobs. 58% of schools experience significant challenges finding and hiring non-management level employees, while only 16% face similar challenges attracting management-level staff who are far more likely to have full-time hours and comprehensive benefits. **Meal quality declines when school nutrition departments can't fill vacancies or retain the employees they invest in training.** When this happens, students who can afford to pack lunches from home or purchase meals off campus typically do so. This reinforces nutritional inequities and takes time, labor, and financial resources for families to navigate.



What the Job Requires

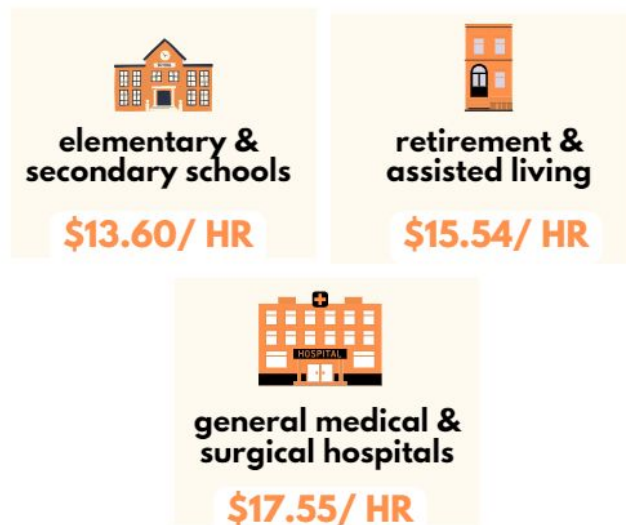
School nutrition workers use their culinary and customer service skills in a fast-paced environment, comply with complex federal, state, and local regulations, follow food safety protocols, accommodate special diets, and communicate nutritional information to students. Annually they must complete 4-12 hours of continuing education to comply with federal [professional standards](#).

"[School foodservice] is not like cooking at home...Like, sure you make meals, you know, at home for your family of five or whatever. But we cook meals for 500 kids instead of five. I compare it to planning a wedding every day... And all the details that goes into it, all of the regulations. [Our staff] have to learn what a meal is, they have to learn whether that child has a meal on their tray or not...get all those kids through line in 12 minutes [and] have a pleasant conversation with every child. And when we are done with that...all the paperwork!" - Director

"Working the long hours to keep up with the paperwork would not be as bad if we got paid more. I could go to Culver's and make more per hour there and wouldn't have to worry about all the reports, contracts, surveys, etc...I'm doing a whole series of classes this week from DPI and the detail they want you to go into with each recipe and our production records just about made me want to cry..." -Director

School Food vs. Comparable Jobs

Mean wages for cooks, nationally



Cooks in K-12 schools earn far less than cooks in other institutions like hospitals and assisted living facilities due to the part-time, seasonal nature of their work. Yet, they too, must carefully monitor the nutritional content of meals and modify meals for students' individual needs. As one director said, *"Parents with kids who have allergies... send them to school and trust us to take care of it."*

Wage differences in elementary & secondary schools, nationally



There is a significant [gender wage gap](#) between Wisconsin's public K-12 cooks (88% women) and custodial workers (72% men). Directors point to this as a major source of frustration and believe that their staff is not adequately compensated: *"Why is it that custodial is making \$1.02 more an hour? ... [If] my staff don't show up, I don't serve a meal, we're in a lot of trouble... [If] my staff don't clean the dishes properly, you have a foodborne illness... if they don't get things to temperature, proper serving, proper portions, you can lose federal funding."*



Who wins with stronger labor standards? Kids, families, workers, and the economy

The prevailing model of low-wage, part-time, seasonal employment has many [hidden costs](#). It directly impacts what children are eating by pushing schools to serve more “heat-and-serve” items and ultra-processed foods. Only 28% of Wisconsin’s K-12 schools cook a majority of lunches [from scratch](#) and less than 10% prepare a majority of breakfasts from scratch. Many Wisconsin schools have the infrastructure for scratch cooking, but lack the labor to do so, while others also need investments in equipment and infrastructure. Notably, a [statewide study](#) found that California schools with high levels and low levels of scratch cooking spend the same combined percentage of their budgets on food and labor. Those with high amounts of scratch cooking spent a larger portion of their budgets on labor and less on food: they employed more full time workers (64% of

employees versus 36% in schools with little-to-no scratch cooking) and offered more benefit-level positions. An investment in scratch-cooking training and full-time jobs would lead to higher levels of community satisfaction and stronger nutritional standards. [Studies](#) have shown that scratch cooking improves student consumption of meals, influences parent perception of school meal quality, and enables schools to eliminate [unwanted ingredients](#) found in many ultra-processed foods. It is key to accessing the many [benefits of farm to school](#), including the benefit to local farmers. For example, if Wisconsin’s K-12 schools served the farm-to-school muffin developed by the Madison Metropolitan School District, they would purchase \$97,326 of locally grown sweet potatoes each time the muffins are served to eligible students statewide. Making these changes would yield a tremendous [return on investment](#) for Wisconsin’s economy, but it requires public investment. Other states are leading the way, with California recently investing \$45 million in a [workforce development program](#) to increase scratch cooking in schools. Individual schools or districts cannot be expected to shoulder this responsibility alone. State and federal action is necessary.

Growing Wisconsin's food economy with good jobs: Action strategies

Policies



- Make school meals free for all students
- Establish minimum wage and benefit standards for school nutrition programs
- Lobby for additional state and federal school meal funding that is earmarked for labor costs and adjusted to local cost of living
- Follow [best practices](#) for contracting with management companies

Programs



- Increase the starting wage and provide higher longevity bonuses
- Eliminate the wage gap between school nutrition staff and other education support professions
- Provide bonuses linked to professional development milestones and credentials
- Increase full-time and year-round employment by maximizing participation in all federal [child nutrition programs](#)

Partnerships



- Develop a Wisconsin [Healthy School Meals Pathway](#) apprenticeship and youth apprenticeship program
- Support workers’ right to organize collectively and participate in policy making on industry-wide standards and job quality



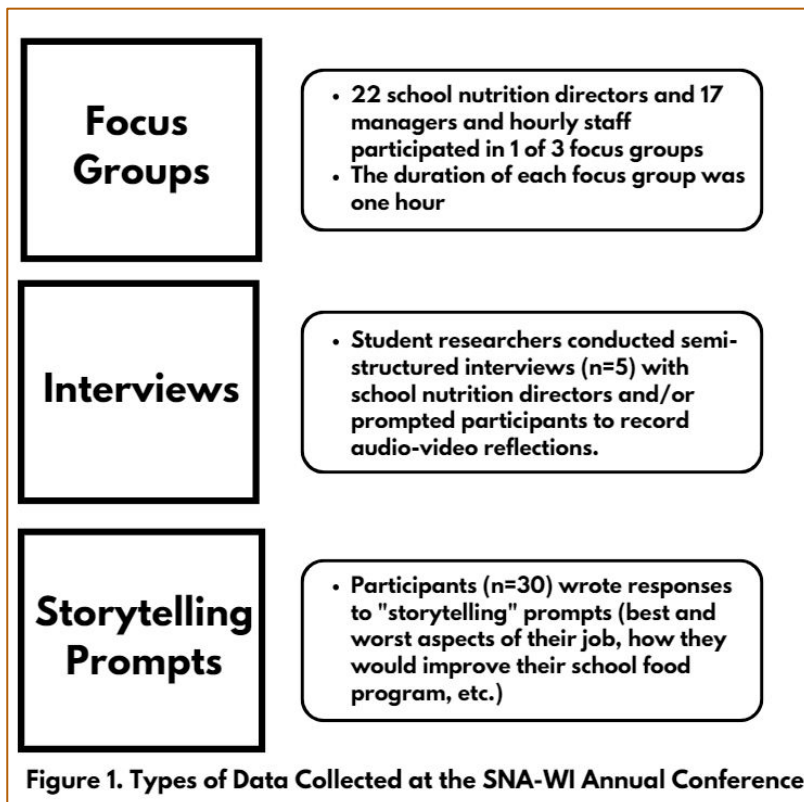
FULL REPORT

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

In June 2022, the School Nutrition Association of WI (SNA-WI) and the Wisconsin Healthy School Meals for All Coalition conducted the first statewide survey of the Wisconsin school nutrition workforce in collaboration with Dr. Jennifer Gaddis from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. The survey was modeled off of the School Nutrition Association's 2019 national survey, the results of which are analyzed in the SNA [2020 Compensation and Benefits Report](#). The survey was fielded as an online form and sent to 668 school food authorities across the state, using the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction's contact list for school food directors or authorized representatives for the 2021-22 school year. Data collection occurred in two waves from late-June to August and again from early-September to early-October 2022.

The research team also traveled to SNA-WI's annual conference in Green Bay during June 2022. Members of the Coalition set aside physical spaces throughout the three-day conference for interactive storytelling booths, interview stations, and other qualitative data collection mechanisms. The research team also conducted a series of simultaneous focus groups held during a "breakout session" on the second day of conference programming.

A diverse sample of school nutrition professionals participated in the focus groups. The first group consisted of 12 school nutrition directors representing districts with student enrollment that ranged from 850 students (smallest) to 7,300 (largest). The second group included 10 school nutrition directors with as few as 400 students and 5 employees to as many as 5,000 students and 48 employees. 17 managers and hourly workers from 6 different school districts participated in a third focus group. The groups were formed at random at the start of the session, with managers and hourly workers kept separate from school nutrition directors to elicit more candid responses.



The research team transcribed all audio recordings from focus groups, interviews, and storytelling stations and developed a shared code book. All textual data was then coded with Dedoose, a qualitative analysis software program that facilitates simultaneous coding and agreement scoring across multiple coders. The research team then grouped data into key themes with supporting evidence. This information was presented back to members of the HSM4A Coalition and SNA-WI at an August 2022 virtual meeting for feedback and further refinement.

Insights from this qualitative portion of the study and the statewide survey are shared in this report.

Surveying Wisconsin

Over 25% of Wisconsin school food directors completed the Labor, Compensation, and Benefits survey between June-October 2022. Our sample included a diverse range of 166 School Food Authorities (SFAs) representing small private schools, public charters, parochial schools, and public school districts from every Cooperative Educational Service Agency (CESA) in the state. We often use “schools” as shorthand for SFAs throughout this report. All survey questions were voluntary, and selected data highlights where the number of respondents is less than 166 are not necessarily representative of the full sample.

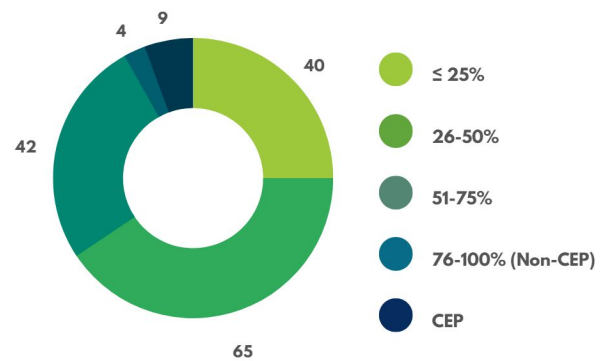
The vast majority of responding schools (78%) are self-operated. Chartwells and Taher were the most common third-party food service management companies listed in our sample. (7 schools contracted with Chartwells and 6 with Taher.) 56% of programs that use a management company have been outsourcing their operations for at least a decade.

District/School Size

Number of enrolled students	Number of respondents
< 500	61
501 - 1,000	45
1,001 - 5,000	49
5,001 - 10,000	9
10,001 +	2

Free/Reduced Price Lunch Eligibility

Number of respondents by category



CESA

CESA	Number of respondents
1	25
2	17
3	11
4	16
5	12
6	18
7	19
8	6
9	9
10	12
11	14
12	7



MEAL OFFERINGS AND PREPARATION

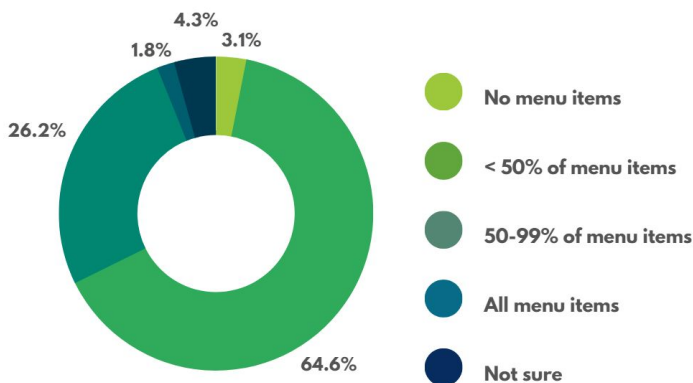
Wisconsin schools widely participate in the [federal child nutrition programs](#). Virtually all of the surveyed schools offer lunch (98%), but fewer offer breakfast (83%), the fresh fruit and vegetable program (23%), or after school supper (8%) program. A majority use school-based production kitchens (65%), where meals are prepared and served in the same building, while others use central production kitchens (45%), or have more limited school-based kitchens that receive and warm-up pre-made meals (29%).

Wisconsin schools offer a mix of “heat-and-serve” and scratch-made foods for breakfast and lunch. In the survey, we defined “scratch cooking” as “when a district cooks its own meals (either in a central kitchen or school-based kitchens) using whole and minimally processed ingredients, rather than pre-assembled or processed meals and meal components.” In a typical school year, the majority of Wisconsin’s K-12 schools cook less than 50% of all menu items from scratch for both breakfast and lunch. Breakfast, in particular, tends to include more pre-made and pre-packaged foods, with 22% of schools reporting that no breakfast items are cooked from scratch.

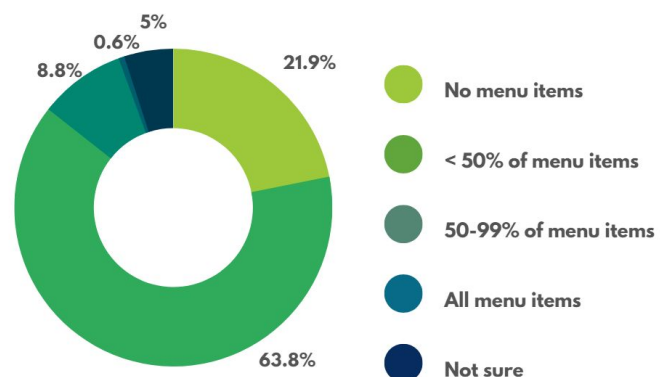


Many of Wisconsin’s school nutrition directors would like to increase the amount of scratch cooking in their programs, but they lack the necessary kitchen infrastructure and staff to do so. As one director stated, “[There are] programs that would love to evolve and to change and to get back to more semi scratch or scratch processing. But we can barely keep our staff right now with the way the program is modeled.” Yet more and more students are asserting the need for meals to be freshly prepared. For example, in recent surveys conducted in the Milwaukee Public Schools and the Madison Metropolitan School District, high schoolers (who are least likely to participate in the federal child nutrition programs) emphasized that serving more “real” or “fresh” foods (i.e., scratch prepared meals) would make them want to eat the government-subsidized meals.

Percent of National School Lunch Program Meals Cooked from Scratch



Percent of National School Breakfast Program Meals Cooked from Scratch



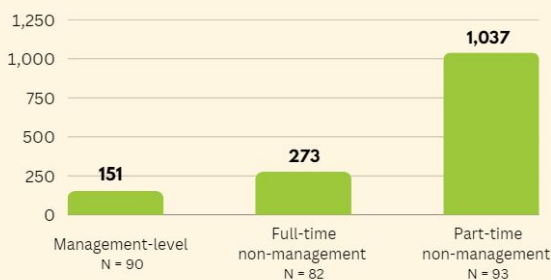
EMPLOYMENT ACROSS WISCONSIN



School nutrition programs employ people in every community across the state, but the economic potential of these jobs is limited by the current model of part-time, low-wage, seasonal work that dominates the profession. According to the Department of Public Instruction’s data, Wisconsin’s public school system has approximately 5,089 K-12 school nutrition workers, 94% of whom are women and 88% of whom are white, and 273 school nutrition directors, 85% of whom are women and 98% of whom are white.⁶ Our survey, which included over 25% of Wisconsin SFAs, gives a snapshot of how the profession is structured and what opportunities exist for career mobility between hourly jobs and management-level positions.

The schools included in our sample collectively employ 1,461 people, but only 10% of these employees have management-level positions and only 29% have full-time positions. Notably, the number of hours a school nutrition employee must work per week to be classified as full-time varies significantly across school, with responses ranging from 15 to 40 hours per week. In addition to hiring mostly part-time staff, 53.2% of survey respondents employ at least one temporary or substitute staff member, with the majority of these programs employing less than five temporary/substitute workers. This heavy reliance on part-time workers, coupled with poverty- or low-wages and seasonal employment, as we discuss in greater depth later in this report, makes it difficult for schools to attract and retain employees. This negatively impacts both program quality—which hurts children and families across the state who rely on schools to provide nutritious, appetizing school meals—and the financial health of thousands of school nutrition workers and their families.

Total Number of People Employed 2021-22



4 out of 5
non-managerial
employees
work part-time hours

Very few school nutrition employees are organized into unions. Only one program out of 94 respondents reported that some of their employees might be members of a union, and 7 programs indicated that they “weren’t sure” about employee unionization status. Low union density is often associated with lower wages, fewer benefits, and less job security. Without collective representation, food service workers have little say over their job quality and working conditions.

SKILLS AND JOB TASKS

School nutrition workers use their culinary and customer service skills in a fast-paced environment, comply with complex federal, state, and local regulations, follow food safety protocols, accommodate special diets, and communicate nutritional information to students. Annually they must complete 4-12 hours of continuing education to comply with federal [professional standards](#).

[School foodservice] is not like cooking at home...Like, sure you make meals, you know, at home for your family of five or whatever. But we cook meals for 500 kids instead of five. I compare it to planning a wedding every day... And all the details that goes into it, all of the regulations. [Our staff] have to learn what a meal is, they have to learn whether that child has a meal on their tray or not...get all those kids through line in 12 minutes [and] have a pleasant conversation with every child. And when we are done with that...all the paperwork! - Director

Working the long hours to keep up with the paperwork would not be as bad if we got paid more. I could go to Culver's and make more per hour there and wouldn't have to worry about all the reports, contracts, surveys, etc...I'm doing a whole series of classes this week from DPI and the detail they want you to go into with each recipe and our production records just about made me want to cry and has me questioning if I want to continue with this position. -Director

The "lunch lady," and I mean that in the most positive way, with the highest regard, is the only person that most children will see every day. [She] knows them and their behaviors, possibly more than anybody else in the district. I will see a child and be like, "wait a minute, they've stopped eating, or they're eating more than they usually do or whatever. They aren't smiling when they are the smiley one." - Director

Despite the student-facing nature of their work, multifaceted job tasks, technical knowledge, and professional standards, school nutrition employees are often the lowest paid category of school employees.



COMPARABLE JOBS

Mean wages for cooks, nationally



**elementary &
secondary schools**

\$13.60/ HR



**retirement &
assisted living**

\$15.54/ HR



**general medical &
surgical hospitals**

\$17.55/ HR

Cooks in K-12 schools earn far less than cooks in other institutions like hospitals and assisted living facilities due to the part-time, seasonal nature of their work. Yet, they too, must carefully monitor the nutritional content of meals and modify meals for students' individual needs. As one director said, "Parents with kids who have allergies... send them to school and trust us to take care of it."

Wage differences in elementary & secondary schools, nationally



cooks

\$13.60/ HR



custodial

\$16.76/ HR

There is a significant [gender wage gap](#) between Wisconsin's public K-12 cooks (88% women) and custodial workers (72% men). Directors point to this as a major source of frustration and believe that their staff is not adequately compensated: "Why is it that custodial is making \$1.02 more an hour? ... [If] my staff don't show up, I don't serve a meal, we're in a lot of trouble... [If] my staff don't clean the dishes properly, you have a foodborne illness... if they don't get things to temperature, proper serving, proper portions, you can lose federal funding."



School nutrition and comparable private sector jobs has far exceeded any higher level of benefits and job quality historically associated with public sector employment. Further, the disparity between comparable jobs in institutional foodservice settings and the wage gap between school cooks and custodial workers is a clear and concerning trend.

This creates an economic incentive for school nutrition staff to transition into other better-paid departments or into private sector food jobs. "We've lost people to retirement, of course, but we've also lost them to custodial, because they offer summer hours and the benefits are better," a manager explained in one of our focus groups. Likewise, a director shared her frustration: "It's almost like they come shopping in my department. It drives me nuts... Like, I just hired this person. And now you're taking them away?!"

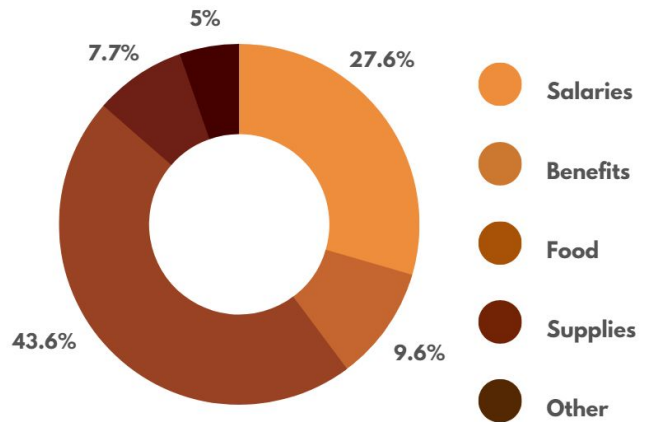
When these professionals transition into higher paying careers, nutrition departments lose staff who have established relationships with students and staff, significant on-the-job experience, institutional knowledge, and other forms of expertise cultivated through their professional development requirements. This makes it difficult for schools to offer the highest quality meal programs and can lead to declines in participation and revenue.

BUDGET ALLOCATIONS

As in other states, Wisconsin's school nutrition programs are primarily funded by federal meal [reimbursements](#), which differ based on student eligibility for free, reduced, or paid meals. The remainder of school nutrition department funding comes from student payments for meals and snacks, along with revenue from staff meals and school catering, and an additional [contribution from the state](#) (if appropriations are sufficient). Local school food authorities set their own prices for a la carte offerings and "paid" meals, typically between \$2.50-\$2.75 for lunch and \$1.20-\$1.30 for breakfast in most Wisconsin SFAs during the 2022-23

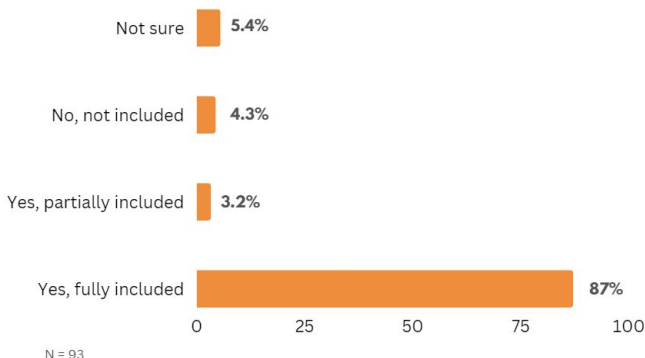
school year. Local school food authorities may choose to provide additional funding for school meal programs, but financial capacity is variable, and most expect their programs to be financially self-sufficient using the revenue streams listed above. The total reported annual operating budget for the 2021-22 school year ranged from \$31,200 to \$3.8 million in our survey sample. The reported median is \$542,900. However, both of the larger metropolitan school districts declined to answer this question, so the range and median should be interpreted as most reflective of suburban and rural districts in the state. On average, school food budgets for the 2022-23 school year were projected to increase over the previous year.⁵ The average annual operating budget for 2021-22 was \$1,400,896 and the projected average for the 2022-23 school year is \$1,464,320.

Average Annual Operating Budget Allocations

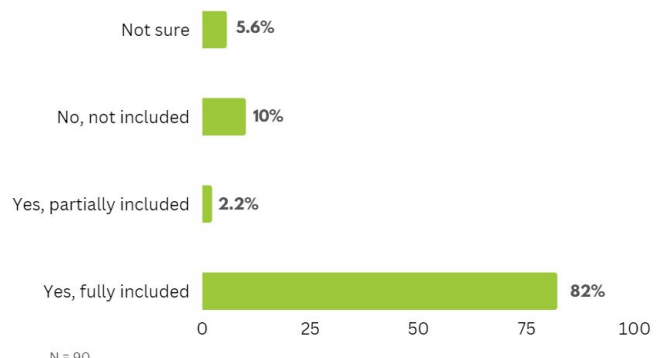


Most Wisconsin schools report that both salaries and benefits for school nutrition staff are fully included in their annual operating budgets, which means that worker compensation is largely dictated by program revenue. Comparing data from Wisconsin with national statistics from the School Nutrition Association's (SNA) 2020 Compensation and Benefits Report, we find that Wisconsin schools spend a comparatively smaller percentage of their annual operating budgets on salaries and benefits (40% on average) than what SNA's 2020 report found to be "a very tight range of about 44% to 52%" regardless of district enrollment, location, or budget size." Thus, Wisconsin districts are directing a smaller percentage of their program revenue to worker compensation than the nationwide average.

Are Staff Salaries Included in Your Annual Operating Budget?



Are Staff Benefits Included in Your Annual Operating Budget?



Budget Allocations - Who Decides?

For two years during the Covid-19 pandemic, federal waivers allowed schools to serve meals free of charge to all students and reimbursed each meal at the “free” rate. This enabled participating districts to reduce their levels of unpaid meal debt, with 47% of survey respondents (78 schools) reporting no unpaid meal debt at the end of the 2021-22 school year. The average amount of unpaid meal debt across schools was \$6,944 (the median was \$2,000).

Overall, the financial picture improved for many schools because of their ability to serve all students free meals and the higher federal reimbursement rate. 81 respondents reported their fund balance for the school nutrition budget at the end of the 2021-22 school year, with balances ranging from negative \$1,200 to positive \$3,153,533. The mean fund balance was \$383,267.20, and the median was \$118,000. Having a positive fund balance does not necessarily mean that programs are able to increase worker compensation. The limiting factor is district administration, not USDA or DPI regulations, as one school nutrition director explains:

“We had a huge excess balance this year because of the reimbursement rates, and we were told, “No, you cannot use those for bonuses. You cannot use this for wage increases. Go buy more equipment. Go get better food quality.” And our ladies looked at us like, “Okay, I guess that's how we're treated...” And it's really unfortunate because we have this big excess. But [school administrators]... don't want us to out-compete with custodians and para professionals... We did our work to get that extra fund balance. We can't reward our own department, which is really frustrating.”

School food directors indicated they have significant authority over employee compensation in less than half of the surveyed schools. When asked which school officials or administrators play the largest role in determining how wages and compensation are set for school nutrition employees in their district or school, most schools answered that school business officers/managers, the school board, and the superintendent held the most sway.

These decision-makers often believe they do not have sufficient funds to increase worker compensation without sacrificing meal quality or going over-budget since federal reimbursements are the primary funding source that covers labor, food, and other operational costs. Most decide to prioritize spending on food for several reasons: (1) menu patterns and nutritional content are heavily regulated by the federal government, (2) they fear that student participation - which brings revenue into the program - will rapidly drop if food quality declines, and (3) past experience suggests that many school nutrition workers will stay in their jobs, despite poor compensation, because they care about the students they feed. The result is wage stagnation and poor compensation across Wisconsin's school nutrition programs.

School food operators are so accustomed to making due with limited budgets that 77% of surveyed schools indicated that the per meal reimbursement rate for lunch in 2021-22 was “sufficient” to cover the costs of producing a meal, including food, labor, and supplies and 79% of schools with breakfast programs reported that the per meal breakfast reimbursement rate was “sufficient.” Yet, as we show in this report, school nutrition programs make their budgets “sufficient” through a staffing structure primarily composed of part-time, seasonal positions that pay poverty- or low-wages. Consequently, schools across Wisconsin, like most places in the United States, struggle to recruit and retain enough hourly employees, and this trend may be exacerbated as inflation puts additional financial pressure on low-wage workers.

HOURLY WAGES

Our survey collected detailed compensation and work schedule data for nine district-level and seven school-level positions. All positions except “Farm-to-School Coordinator” were copied from SNA’s 2019 national survey, which included a [list](#) of “key positions most likely to be found in districts of all sizes.” Respondents were asked to reference this list when providing information about each position.

Relatively few programs in our sample reported wage data for district-level positions. Where there is a sufficient number of respondents ($n \geq 5$), two wage metrics appear in the chart below: the annual salary for full-time staff and the hourly rate for part-time staff. The area shaded in green lists the median compensation (annual or hourly) for each position.

Annual Wages by District-Level Position

Shaded areas indicate the most common responses for each position. Part-time is not listed where $n < 5$.		10th percentile	25th percentile	50th percentile (median)	75th percentile	90th percentile	N
School Nutrition Director	Full-Time	\$ 30,000	\$ 43,000	\$ 59,000	\$ 78,000	\$ 87,000	15
	Part-Time	\$12/hr	\$14/hr	\$14.9/hr	\$15.9/hr	\$30/hr	13
School Nutrition Supervisor/Asst. Director	Full-Time	\$ 33,477	\$ 46,057	\$ 52,145	\$ 60,899	\$ 80,000	8
School Nutrition Coordinator	Full-Time	\$ 30,000	\$ 38,000	\$ 45,000	\$ 60,000	\$ 92,500	5
Kitchen Manager	Full-Time	\$ 28,000	\$ 30,000	\$ 39,050	\$ 45,000	\$ 51,000	14
	Part-Time	\$15/hr	\$15.6/hr	\$16/hr	\$16/hr	\$22/hr	5
Executive Chef	Full-Time	\$ 32,000	\$ 40,000	\$ 44,000	\$ 69,000	\$ 80,000	5
Nutritionist/Registered Dietitian insufficient data ($n < 5$)							
Warehouse Manager insufficient data ($n < 5$)							
Administrative Assistant	Full-Time	\$ 16,841	\$ 25,000	\$ 41,000	\$ 42,869	\$ 50,039	10
	Part-Time	\$14/hr	\$16/hr	\$18.6/hr	\$19.9/hr	\$22/hr	11
Farm-to-School Coordinator insufficient data ($n < 5$)							
Dashes indicate zero responses							

At the school level, programs were asked to report both the starting wage and the typical wage for full- and part-time staff across seven positions—manager, assistant manager, head cook, school nutrition assistant, dishwasher, cashier, and driver. Only three programs in our sample employed Assistant Managers. Wage estimates for this position were withheld due to the small sample size. Consistent with SNA national data from the 2020 Compensation and Benefits Report, managers and drivers typically earn the highest wages, and the median starting wage for school nutrition assistants, dishwashers, and cashiers is below \$15/hour. There does appear to be a slight wage premium associated with seniority since typical wages are higher than starting wages for every position by about one dollar, on average.

Starting Wages by School-Level Position

Shaded areas indicate the most common responses for each position. All wages listed in dollars (\$) PER HOUR		10th percentile	25th percentile	50th percentile (median)	75th percentile	90th percentile	N
Manager	Full-Time	\$ 14	\$ 15	\$ 16	\$ 19.5	\$ 21.6	21
	Part-Time	\$ 12	\$ 13	\$ 14.4	\$ 17.5	\$ 25	8
Assistant Manager	Full-Time	insufficient data (n<5)					
	Part-Time						
Head Cook	Full-Time	\$ 13.1	\$ 14	\$ 15	\$ 16.2	\$ 17	39
	Part-Time	\$ 12	\$ 13	\$ 14	\$ 15	\$ 16	32
School Nutrition Assistant	Full-Time	\$ 12.5	\$ 13.7	\$ 14.2	\$ 15	\$ 16.4	21
	Part-Time	\$ 11	\$ 12	\$ 14.1	\$ 15.1	\$ 16.3	38
Dishwasher	Full-Time	\$ 6	\$ 12	\$ 14.5	\$ 15	\$ 16	8
	Part-Time	\$ 10.4	\$ 11.2	\$ 13	\$ 15	\$ 15.1	29
Cashier	Full-Time	\$ 13	\$ 13.9	\$ 14.3	\$ 15	\$ 15	11
	Part-Time	\$ 11	\$ 11.9	\$ 13	\$ 14.8	\$ 16.5	24
Driver	Full-Time	\$ 12.5	\$ 15	\$ 17.5	\$ 22	\$ 23.8	7
	Part-Time	\$ 11	\$ 15	\$ 15.7	\$ 20	\$ 25	9

Typical Wages by School-Level Position

Shaded areas indicate the most common responses for each position. All wages listed in dollars (\$) PER HOUR		10th percentile	25th percentile	50th percentile (median)	75th percentile	90th percentile	N
Manager	Full-Time	\$ 15	\$ 16	\$ 18	\$ 19.5	\$ 22.5	21
	Part-Time	\$ 12.5	\$ 14.8	\$ 15	\$ 16.9	\$ 25	8
Head Cook	Full-Time	\$ 14	\$ 14.6	\$ 16	\$ 18	\$ 19	39
	Part-Time	\$ 13	\$ 14	\$ 15	\$ 16.5	\$ 17.4	31
School Nutrition Assistant	Full-Time	\$ 14	\$ 15.1	\$ 16	\$ 16.6	\$ 17.3	21
	Part-Time	\$ 12	\$ 14	\$ 15.3	\$ 16	\$ 17.5	38
Dishwasher	Full-Time	\$ 12	\$ 14	\$ 15.5	\$ 16	\$ 16	7
	Part-Time	\$ 11.5	\$ 13	\$ 14	\$ 15.7	\$ 16.5	29
Cashier	Full-Time	\$ 14	\$ 14.5	\$ 15.1	\$ 16	\$ 17	11
	Part-Time	\$ 12	\$ 13	\$ 14.4	\$ 15.9	\$ 18	24
Driver	Full-Time	\$ 15.5	\$ 16	\$ 18	\$ 19.5	\$ 25.1	6
	Part-Time	\$ 14	\$ 15	\$ 16.5	\$ 21.2	\$ 30	9

Starting and typical wages for management-level employees were slightly higher at schools that contracted with a third-party food service management company versus those that were self-operated. The average typical wage for full-time managers at outsourced programs was \$19.67/hr versus \$18.80/hr for self-operated programs. Non-managerial employees earned more, however, at self-operated programs. The difference was especially stark for new full-time employees. Self-operated SFAs offered starting wages for head cooks at \$15.34/hr, on average, whereas outsourced programs offered nearly a dollar less at \$14.35/hr.

While starting wages for school nutrition assistants were roughly comparable, with workers at outsourced programs earning 24 cents less, on average, new drivers at outsourced programs fared much worse. Drivers for food service management companies earned \$2.28 less than their counterparts in self-operated food service programs.

Typical wages for non-managerial employees were fairly similar across operational status (with employees of self-operated schools earning between 5 and 10 cents more, on average), with two notable exceptions: Self-operated schools paid part-time school nutrition assistants an average of \$15.14/hr whereas outsourced programs paid \$14.80/hr; and part-time drivers at school food management companies earned over \$5 less than those employed directly by a school district (\$15/hr versus \$20.94/hr, respectively).

Schools that contract with foodservice management companies should ensure they are following [best practices](#) as outlined by the USDA. This includes important labor contract provisions related to staffing levels, full time jobs, hourly wages, and benefits.

Typical wages for public versus private school workers are less patterned by school type, but there are significant wage disparities among managers and head cooks. Managers and head cooks at private schools earn significantly less, on average, than their public-sector counterparts.

Typical Wages by School-Level Position, Public v. Private SFAs

50th percentile (median) hourly wage. Shaded cells indicate highest wages per category.		Public	Private
Manager	Full-Time	\$ 18.25	\$ 15
	Part-Time	\$ 16	\$ 14.88
Head Cook	Full-Time	\$ 16.25	\$ 15
	Part-Time	\$ 15.71	\$ 14
School Nutrition Assistant	Full-Time	\$ 15.87	\$ 16
	Part-Time	\$ 15.65	\$ 15
Dishwasher	Full-Time	\$ 15.25	\$ 16
	Part-Time	\$ 14	\$ 14.25
Cashier	Full-Time	insufficient data	
	Part-Time	\$ 14.54	\$ 14
Driver	Full-Time	insufficient data	
	Part-Time	\$ 14	\$ 15

Starting Wages by School-Level Position, Outsourced v. Self-Operated SFAs

50th percentile (median) hourly wage. Shaded cells indicate highest wages per category.		Self-Operated	Outsourced
Manager	Full-Time	\$ 17.74	\$ 18.53
	Part-Time	\$ 14.14	\$ 18.66
Head Cook	Full-Time	\$ 15.34	\$ 14.35
	Part-Time	\$ 14.13	\$ 13.8
School Nutrition Assistant	Full-Time	\$ 14.63	\$ 14.4
	Part-Time	\$ 13.9	\$ 13.8
Dishwasher	Full-Time	\$ 13.2	\$ 13
	Part-Time	\$ 13.3	\$ 12.25
Cashier	Full-Time	\$ 14.58	\$ 13.5
	Part-Time	\$ 13.86	\$ 13.28
Driver	Full-Time	\$ 18.95	\$ 16.66
	Part-Time	\$ 18.38	\$ 14.33

LOW-WAGE WORK

Following prior [research on Wisconsin jobs](#), we group school food wage scales into three categories: poverty-wage jobs, low-wage jobs, and good-wage jobs. [Recent reports](#) indicate that school foodservice workers are typically older (50 years old compared to an overall average workforce of 42 years old)⁷ and are more likely to have dependent children under 18 in the household (63% of cafeteria workers nationally had children under 18 years of age at home versus 44% of all workers)⁸. Given these demographic trends, we use MIT's December 2022 estimates of poverty-level wages for a family of four in the state of Wisconsin (in 2019 dollars). A full-time worker in Wisconsin would need to earn \$12.74 an hour to keep a partner and two children out of poverty. Full-time work at \$12.74 an hour pays just \$26,500 annually, assuming year-round work. However, very few school food employees work full time (roughly 20%), and even fewer (less than 10%) work a 12-month schedule. Thus, our poverty-wage of \$12.74 an hour is a conservative estimate. Although we assume that the average worker is supporting dependent children, the seasonal and part-time nature of school food employment depresses the real value of their starting wages. The remaining two categories, low-wage jobs and good-wage jobs, are determined using a simple multiplier of base poverty wages. Low-wage jobs are those that are up to 1.5 times the poverty wage (from \$12.75 to \$19.11 per hour), and good-wage jobs are those that pay above \$19.11 per hour.

Although the starting median wage for most school-level positions is above the poverty level, low-wage jobs leave little room for families to weather fluctuations in the economy and rising housing costs. As we detail on page 27 of this report, annual wage increases seldom keep pace with inflation. While the Consumer Price Index rose 7.5% in the Midwest in December 2021 over the previous year, schools reported offering an average wage increase of only 3.6% to part-time, non-management employees in the 2021-22 school year. Full-time employees saw even smaller annual increases at just 0.68%. Even at \$16 an hour (wages that are solidly in the middle of the low-wage job spectrum), a part-time school food worker would struggle to afford rent. Median gross rent in the state of Wisconsin is \$916 per month or \$10,992 annually. Part-time work, seasonal work (20 hours a week for 9 months of the year) at \$16 would net \$11,520 annually, leaving only \$528 for food, clothing, transportation, and additional basic living costs.

DEFINING JOB QUALITY

\$12.74
AN HOUR

Wage required for a full-time/year-round worker to keep a family of four out of poverty

POVERTY-WAGE JOBS:

pay \$12.74 an hour or less

LOW- WAGE JOBS:

pay \$12.75 - \$19.11 an hour

GOOD- WAGE JOBS:

pay \$19.12 an hour or more



SEASONAL WORK

Seasonality, or the number of months worked per year, affects total compensation and benefits for school nutrition workers in both district-level and school-level positions. Most district-level employees have a 12-month work schedule, barring School Nutrition Coordinators, who, according to our small sample, are equally likely to work 12-month or 9-month contracts. Over a third (40.1%) of districts indicated that Central Kitchen Managers work a schedule of nine months or less per year. At the school level, a 9-month work schedule is the most common across all positions. More than 80% of SFAs indicated that Assistant Managers, Head Cooks, School Nutrition Assistants, Dishwashers, and Cashiers work 9 months or less annually. Dishwashers and Cashiers may have an especially difficult time securing year-round work. Head Cook and School Nutrition Assistant positions appear most prevalent in individual schools. Notably, some non-managerial staff may work year-round without being “contracted” to do so. As one manager/hourly worker shared in a June 2022 focus group, “I work summer, but I’m not contracted to do it... I have to run the summer program—this is now my fourth summer—and they will not consider me a full-time employee so I can get vacation time and stuff like that, even though I am there literally every day of the year.”

The seasonal nature of school nutrition employment affects the quality and scope of programming provided. Schools with relatively few 12-month employees are less likely to offer robust summer meal programs, which can lead to higher rates of childhood hunger and malnutrition in their communities during the summer months. In addition, employees (especially school nutrition directors) who do not have 12-month contracts are less likely to have paid time to devote to professional development and program improvement (e.g., developing relationships with local farmers or food producers, leading staff training for scratch cooking, developing new recipes).

Annual Work Schedule by Position - District Level

<i>Shaded areas indicate the most common responses for each position</i>	12 months	11 months	10 months	9 months	8 months	> 8 months	N
School Nutrition Director	53.5%	13.8%	12.1%	19.0%	1.7%	—	58
School Nutrition Supervisor/Asst. Director	66.7%	—	16.7%	16.7%	—	—	12
School Nutrition Coordinator	44.4%	—	11.1%	44.4%	—	—	9
Central Kitchen Manager	33.3%	—	26.7%	26.7%	6.7%	6.7%	15
Executive Chef	66.7%	—	—	33.3%	—	—	6
Nutritionist/Registered Dietitian	insufficient data (n<5)						
Warehouse Manager	insufficient data (n<5)						
Administrative Assistant	42.9%	4.8%	28.6%	23.8%	—	—	21
Farm-to-School Coordinator	insufficient data (n<5)						

Dashes indicate zero responses

Annual Work Schedule by Position - School Level

<i>Shaded areas indicate the most common responses for each position</i>	12 months	11 months	10 months	9 months	8 months	> 8 months	N
Manager	34.6%	3.9%	15.4%	46.2%	—	—	26
Assistant Manager	16.7%	—	—	83.3%	—	—	6
Head Cook	6.1%	—	14.3%	77.6%	—	2%	49
School Nutrition Assistant	7.5%	—	10%	80%	2.5%	—	40
Dishwasher	3.1%	—	6.3%	84.4%	3.1%	3.1%	32
Cashier	—	—	11.5%	88.5%	—	—	26
Driver	14.3%	7.1%	21.4%	57.1%	—	—	14

Dashes indicate zero responses

PART-TIME WORK

Part-Time Hours

In addition to seasonal employment, part-time hours dramatically reduce the annual take-home pay for non-managerial school nutrition professionals, contributing to them earning far less than similarly skilled workers in other sectors of institutional foodservice. A part-time worker earning the median starting wage of \$14.70 would take home only \$10,584 per year working a 20 hour/week 9-month schedule. This is far less than a full-time worker, who, at the median starting wage of \$14.60 an hour, would earn \$30,369 annually, assuming year-round work (although less than 10% of non-managerial employees work a 12-month schedule).

While some employees with school-aged children may be attracted to 9-month positions that align with the school-year calendar and part-time hours that align with the school day, the majority of directors and hourly employees who participated in focus groups at the SNA-WI annual conference in June 2022 indicated that access to summer hours and full-time positions would reduce their struggles with recruitment and retention.

Short and Split Shifts

Another issue impacting workers' overall earning potential is the prevalence of both short shifts (less than 4 hours per day) and split shifts. A "split shift" is a scheduling practice where there is unpaid time off between one or more paid work shifts (e.g., an employee works the breakfast shift from 7am-9am and the lunch shift from 11am-1pm for a total of 4 hours of paid work in a given day). Respondents were asked to list the lowest number of hours part-time non-managerial employees worked per week during a typical school year. Responses ranged from zero hours per week to 35. The average across our sample (n = 90) was 14.7 hours per week. However, the vast majority (73.9%) did not use split shifts to schedule non-managerial staff.

The prevalence of low-wage, short-hour positions exacerbates staffing challenges. "It's difficult to find workers who have to drive a distance to work for only 2-3 hours per day," one director shared, while another said it is "hard to impossible to hire staff when there are little hours and pay that is almost half of what can be earned working at McDonald's."

**80% of schools
employ non-
managerial staff**



**for 9 months or less
annually**

**Part-time employees
work an average
minimum shift of**



**14.7 hours
per week**

SALARY INCREASES

Multiple avenues exist for increasing school nutrition wages, beginning with annual salary increases, which vary significantly by type of employment contract. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, most non-temporary or substitute employees could expect to receive some kind of salary increase. (Although 40% of schools reported no change in the yearly salary of full-time, non-management employees in a typical year.) Annual raises were quite modest for management-level and full-time employees (1.6% and 0.68%, respectively, both of which are less than the rate of inflation from 2016-2022). Part-time, non-management employees received the highest annual salary increases, on average, at 3.6%, and temporary or substitute workers typically saw no change to their incomes.

Typical Annual Salary Increase, Pre-COVID

<i>Shaded areas indicate the most common responses for each employee category</i>	Salary increased	Salary decreased	Stayed the same	Average % Increase	N
Management	69.1%	1.2%	29.8%	1.6%	84
Full-time, non-management	58%	1.2%	40.7%	0.68%	81
Part-time, non-management	73.3%	1.2%	25.6%	3.6%	86
Temporary or substitute	38.5%	1.3%	60.3%	0%	78

On average, wages rose for all Wisconsin school nutrition workers in our sample during the 2021-22 school year, with management-level and part-time employees receiving the largest pay increases (3.6% and 3.4% respectively). Over 65% of schools reported offering some sort of salary increase to permanent employees in the 2021-22 school year. Many temporary and substitute employees enjoyed a small wage boost at 1.6%, up from 0% in previous years, although only 45% of SFAs provided wage increases to non-permanent employees.

Typical Annual Salary Increase, 2021-22 School Year

<i>Shaded areas indicate the most common responses for each employee category</i>	Salary increased	Salary decreased	Stayed the same	Average % Increase	N
Management	69.8%	2.3%	27.9%	3.6%	86
Full-time, non-management	65.9%	1.2%	32.9%	1.3%	82
Part-time, non-management	79.1%	1.2%	19.8%	3.4%	86
Temporary or substitute	45.6%	1.3%	53.2%	1.6%	79

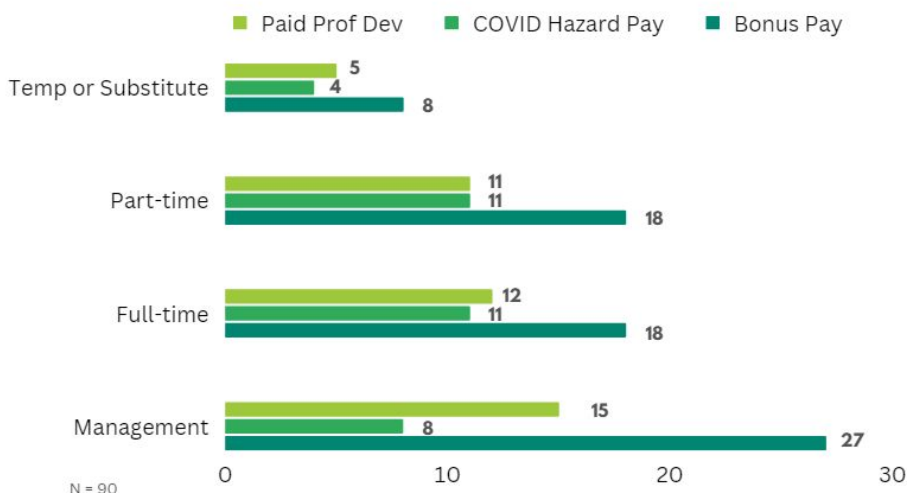
For many schools, these wage increases were part of a broader strategy to address ongoing recruitment and retention issues, which were exacerbated during the pandemic. While these wage increases are a step in the right direction, many foodservice directors noted that they were unable to keep up with private sector competitors. As one director stated, “Why would they take a job in school food service for \$15 an hour when they go right down the road to Culver’s starting at more or go to McDonald’s...making \$25 an hour? I don’t know. It’s scary.” Moreover, some workers find that annual salary increases are effectively canceled out by increases in their insurance contributions or rising inflation rates.

OVERTIME & BONUSES

In addition to salary adjustments to base wages, bonuses and overtime pay can increase school nutrition workers' take-home pay. In our sample, management-level employees were more likely to receive bonus pay than hourly non-managerial workers and paid professional development opportunities that exceeded federally mandated hours. Temporary and substitute workers were the least likely to receive any sort of bonus pay or paid professional development exceeding federal minimums.

In our June 2022 focus groups, school nutrition directors expressed frustration that they were not allowed to offer larger bonuses, particularly in recognition of the work their employees did during the Covid-19 pandemic (very few schools provided Covid-19 hazard pay). "We had a huge excess balance this year because of the [higher federal] reimbursement rates, and we were told, "No, you cannot use those for bonuses. You cannot use this for wage increases. Go buy more equipment. Go get better food quality," one director shared. "They... don't want us to out-compete the custodians and para-professionals... We can't reward our own department, which is really frustrating."

Number of Schools that Provided Bonus Pay in the Past Year by Employee Type



Overtime by Position

Position (School-Level)	% Eligible for Overtime
Driver	71.4%
Assistant Manager	66.7%
Head Cook	58%
Cashier	50%
Manager	42.9%
School Nutrition Assistant	41.5%
Dishwasher	40.6%

Sample sizes vary by position and range from 6 to 50

Smaller school nutrition programs in our sample were less likely to have overtime-eligible employees than their larger counterparts, although there is some variation across positions in medium-sized programs. Medium-sized programs (those employing between six and thirteen part-time employees) were slightly less likely to offer overtime to school nutrition assistants, dishwashers, and cashiers than to head cooks and drivers. The table above shows the percentage of employees eligible for overtime across all schools in our sample. Drivers and assistant managers were more likely to be eligible for overtime than school nutrition assistants or dishwashers overall. Regardless of position, the most common overtime multiplier by far was time-and-a-half. Only one district did not offer an overtime multiplier and instead used the standard hourly rate.

COST OF LIVING

School nutrition workers' compensation is primarily dictated by federal reimbursement rates for the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs, which are adjusted annually to reflect changes in the Food Away From Home series of the Consumer Price Index for All Urban Consumers. While these adjusted rates help school nutrition programs continue their normal operations, they do not provide supplemental or earmarked funding for increasing workers' wages or overall compensation. What's more, the federal reimbursement rates do not vary by geographic region (other than Hawaii and Alaska versus the 48 contiguous states) or local cost of living (e.g., Milwaukee or Madison versus Plymouth or Appleton).

The [MIT living wage calculator](#) is a user-friendly tool for estimating the local wage rate that a full-time worker requires to cover the costs of their family's basic needs where they live. This tool provides county-level wage data for all Wisconsin communities and specific wage data for select Metropolitan statistical areas in the state. For this report, we used more specific data from the 2021 American Community Survey to provide a snapshot of rent variability in a range of Wisconsin communities.

Wages & Cost of Living: Head Cooks [Full-Time: 40 hrs per week, ≤10 months per year]

	Starting Wage	Median Gross Rent	Annual Rent as % of Annual Income
West Allis	\$12	\$881	55% - SEVERELY RENT BURDENED
Necedah	\$15	\$812	45% - RENT BURDENED
Holmen	\$18.70	\$974	39% - RENT BURDENED

Sources: UW-Madison Statewide Survey on the school nutrition Workforce; Census Data DP04, 2021 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

School Nutrition Assistants [Part-Time: 20 hrs per week, ≤10 months per year]

	Starting Wage	Median Gross Rent	Annual Rent as % of Annual Income
Plymouth	\$11.85	\$763	107% - CAN'T MAKE RENT
Chippewa Falls	\$14.02	\$853	101% - CAN'T MAKE RENT
Madison	\$21.44	\$1,212	85% - SEVERELY RENT BURDENED

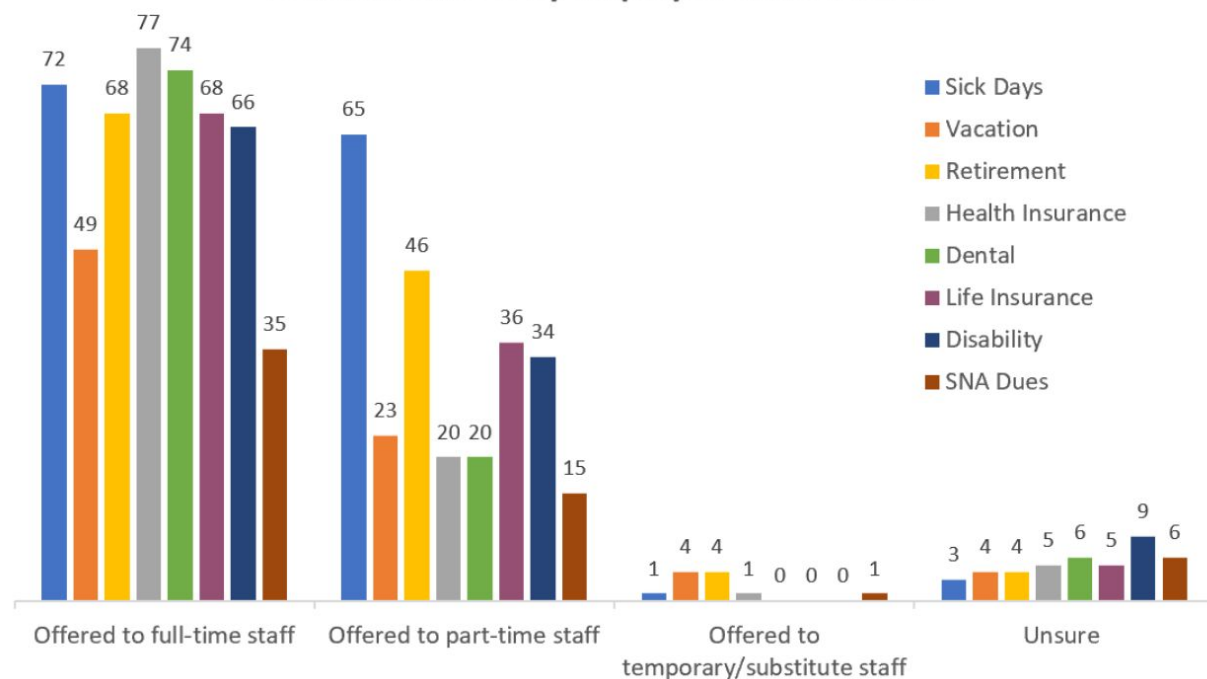
Sources: UW-Madison Statewide Survey on the school nutrition Workforce; Census Data DP04, 2021 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

Because of their low annual wages, most of Wisconsin's school nutrition workers are "rent-burdened," meaning they spend more than 30% of their income on rent or a mortgage payment. They may be unable to afford basic necessities like food, clothes, transportation, and healthcare. [Cost-burdened renters](#) are more likely to be evicted and to rely on social safety net programs. The financial precarity stemming from low wages and seasonal employment pushes many of these hourly workers to take second jobs or quit. Both actions negatively impact school nutrition programs by adding financial and time stress to workers' lives, which may adversely impact their job performance, and through direct costs associated with recruitment, training, and turnover that has program-wide implications. As one manager explained in a June 2022 focus group: "I think we had 4 people this year who lasted a week or less, and they're gone. And that's a lot in a staff of 10. And it's hard because you spend all that time training. And then they're gone. So then the stress is even more, because you think, 'Oh, I'm getting relief', and you put all of this effort, and then they're gone."

BENEFITS

“Something is changing in the pool of candidates that we have in our community that’s making [getting health insurance] even more important than it used to be,” one director shared. At the same time, these jobs have become scarcer over time. As one long-time hourly worker shared: “When I first started, they used to offer benefits for food service at four hours. We would get a lot of farmer’s wives and stay at home moms that just needed the insurance... but now, they have to work at least six hours. And those are just our higher hour jobs [and] you have to work your way up to them... but right now, we... can’t fill those either.” In our sample, on average an employee must work a minimum of 32.3 hours per week to be eligible for full-time benefits. Benefits offered vary appreciably by employee type. Full-time employees are more likely to receive health insurance, sick days, and dental insurance, whereas part-time employees are offered sick days and retirement.

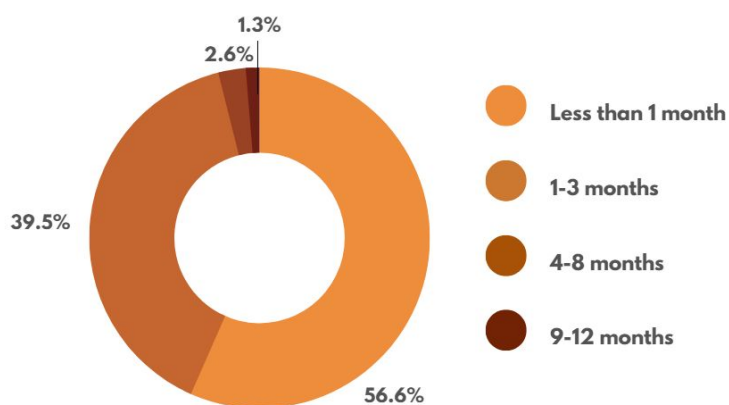
Benefits Offered by Employee Classification



Numbers indicate the # of SFAs that offer each benefit type

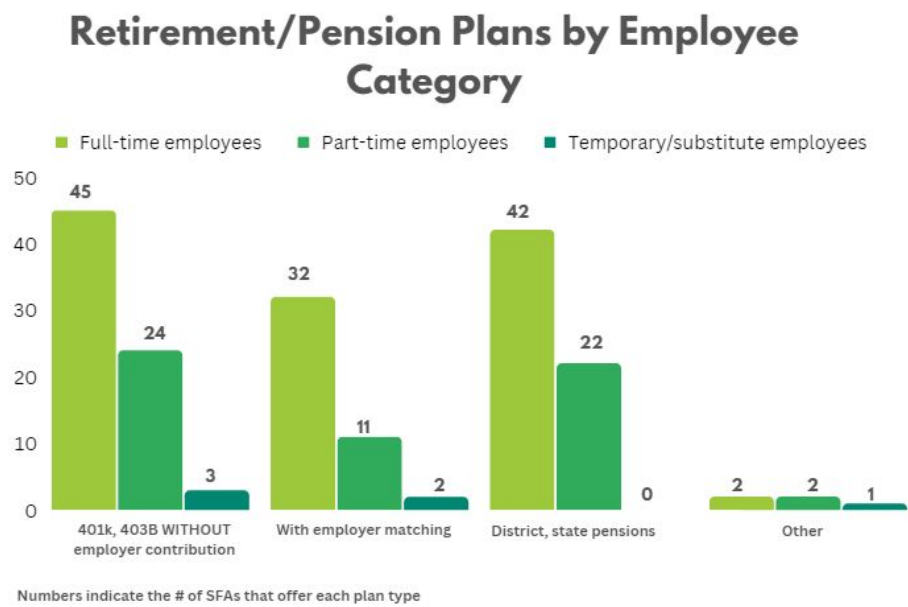
Temporary or substitute staff seldom receive benefits of any kind. Only 5% of surveyed schools offered vacation time and retirement benefits to non-permanent employees. Roughly 25% of respondents offered all eight major benefits—sick days, vacation, retirement, health insurance, dental, life insurance, disability, and SNA dues—to full-time employees. The typical waiting period for new employees to become eligible for benefits is quite short. Over half of schools enroll benefits-eligible employees after less than one month of employment. Only a small percentage have waiting periods of four months or more.

Waiting Period for New Employees to Become Eligible for Benefits



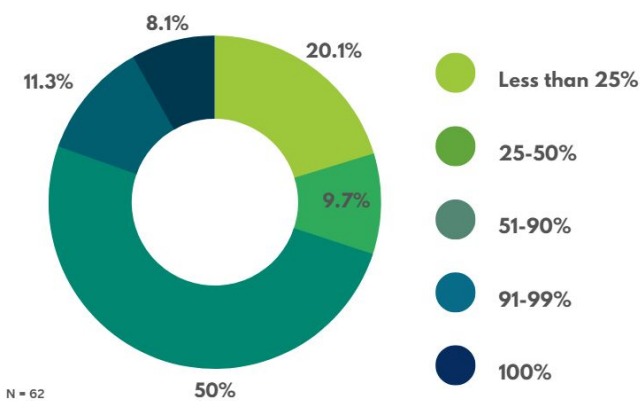
Retirement Benefits and Health Insurance Premiums

Schools offer their nutrition employees different types of retirement and pension plans. The most common retirement or pension benefit was a 401k, 403B, or other plan that allows employees to make pre-tax contributions without any additional employer contribution, followed by pension plans funded by the district, state, or other entity.

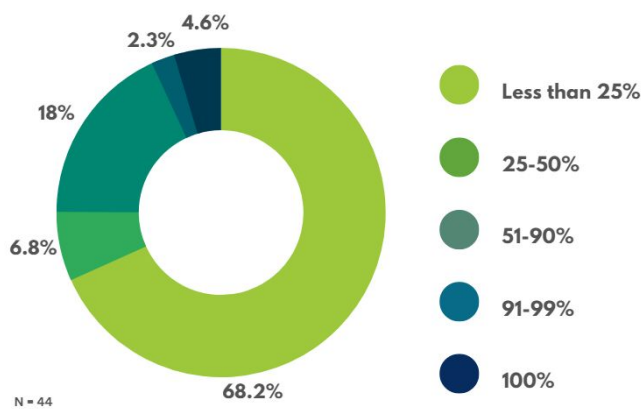


Schools offer a variety of health insurance plans. Survey respondents were asked to report which kinds of health insurance plans they offered their employees (they could select multiple options.) 70 schools in our sample (n = 77) offered insurance plans that covered employees and their families; 44 provided employee-only coverage, and 36 offered coverage for both employees and their spouses. The majority of schools pay a significant share of the cost of health insurance premiums for their full-time staff. 69.4% of respondents reported paying more than 50% of the premium, and 8.1% pay the entire cost for full-time employees. Part-time employees, however, must shoulder the bulk of healthcare costs. 68.2% of schools pay less than 25% of health insurance premiums for part-time staff, and fewer than 25% pay 50% or more. Temporary or substitute workers, when they do receive health insurance, are responsible for paying the entire premium. All 36 respondents indicated that 0% of the health insurance premium is typically paid by the district for temporary or substitute staff.

Percent of Health Insurance Premium Paid by the District Full-Time Employees



Percent of Health Insurance Premium Paid by the District Part-Time Employees



STAFFING TRENDS & TURNOVER

There is no consistent trend in staffing size changes across Wisconsin's school nutrition programs. There was a modest decrease among 32% of schools, perhaps due to the Covid-19 pandemic, but others saw either no change or a modest increase in staffing levels between 2020-2022. When asked about the next two years, most school nutrition departments reported no expected changes in their staffing levels. Preparation style (amount of scratch cooking) and average daily participation are two factors that may affect staffing size. Those schools that are feeding increased numbers of students or preparing more labor-intensive menus may have a need to increase staff size, although these increases may be relatively modest (with the most common responses between 1% and 6%).

Staff Size Changes



The majority of Wisconsin schools report very little turnover among their management and full-time staff; however, turnover is considerably more common among part-time staff, with 11% of all schools experiencing turnover rates of 50% or higher annually.

Staff Turnover

Management		Full-time non-management		Part-time non-management	
No Turnover	Average Turnover	No Turnover	Average Turnover	No Turnover	Average Turnover
83.53%	4.84%	71.8%	3%	29.4%	15.1%

N=85

Job quality (as measured by wages, benefits, and total compensation) is a strong predictor of turnover. The vast majority of Wisconsin schools report no turnover in management-level and full-time, non-management positions in a typical year (nearly 84% and 72%, respectively), whereas only 29% of schools report no turnover among their part-time non-management employees. While turnover appears low for certain employees, Wisconsin's average turnover is comparatively high. SNA's 2019 national sample reported average turnover rates for management, full-time, and part-time employees at 0.8%, 3.0%, and 6.1% respectively. Although the turnover rate for full-time employees is the same, respondents' management-level turnover rate is six times higher than the national average and the part-time turnover rate is two and a half times higher.

RECRUITMENT & RETENTION

Inadequate compensation creates a severe mismatch between supply and demand for school foodservice jobs. 58% of schools experience significant challenges finding and hiring non-management level employees, while only 16% face similar challenges attracting management-level staff who are far more likely to have full-time hours and comprehensive benefits.

Staffing Challenges

Shaded areas indicate the most common responses per category

	Significant challenge	Somewhat of a challenge	Little challenge	Not a challenge at all	Average score
Finding and hiring management level staff	16%	13.3%	18.7%	52%	0.93
Retaining management level staff	11.8%	6.6%	35.5%	46%	0.84
Finding and hiring non-management level staff	57.7%	22.4%	14.1%	5.9%	2.3
Retaining non-management level staff	36.3%	30%	23.8%	10%	1.9

N ranges from 75 - 85. The "average score" is based on a 0-3 scale where 0 is "not a challenge at all" and 3 is "significant challenge."

Meal quality declines when school nutrition departments can't fill vacancies or retain the employees they invest in training. When this happens, students who can afford to pack lunches from home or purchase meals off campus typically do so. This reinforces nutritional inequities and takes time, labor, and financial resources for families to navigate. Conversely, school nutrition programs can drive program improvements by ensuring that all positions are adequately staffed. As one director shared, "If the wages were higher, we could attract higher skilled workers that would allow our district to increase our scratch cooking even more. Higher wages would also increase employee stability and keep the turnover rate much lower."

Previous research estimates that increasing school nutrition workers' wages by 35% would lead to a 50% decline in turnover. This has financial implications. Replacing employees is costly—from the direct costs of recruitment, selection and training of workers to the indirect costs associated with reduced productivity (e.g., when programs are understaffed and/or new employees are learning the job) and declines in meal quality and customer service. Thus, researchers estimate that a 50% reduction in turnover would offset 18% of the cost of increasing the average school nutrition worker's wages by 35%.⁹

While raising school nutrition workers' starting wages is a necessary step in achieving pay equity and reducing the challenges associated with recruiting and retaining sufficient staff, it is also necessary to provide seniority and incentive pay increases to avoid wage compression between new hires and longtime employees. Among other issues, wage compression can impact employee morale. As one hourly worker shared, "They said they were going to increase the starting pay to \$17.50, and I'm like uh, I've been here for how many years, and I'm not getting \$17.50. It sucks. These kids are right out of school, and they're getting paid more than we are."

Recruitment Techniques and Limitations

The best thing schools and policymakers can do to help nutrition departments recruit and retain staff is to improve the wages, hours, benefit eligibility, and overall compensation they are able to offer their employees. Wisconsin's school nutrition programs use a wide variety of recruitment techniques, sometimes to no avail. "No one wants to take a job that pays less than a fast food establishment...too many regulations, too much work with little to no staff at bottom level wages," explained one director. "It seems like the entire pool of applicants is gone," said another. "We've gone through Indeed. We've tried school signboards. We've tried sending things home with students in the parent newsletters... those types of grassroots methods, but it doesn't seem to have helped at all."

More broadly speaking, in our focus groups, school nutrition directors listed the (Wisconsin Education Career Access Network (WECAN), Facebook, Indeed, Craigslist, district newsletters, SchoolMessenger, local job fairs, flyers at churches/food pantries/retirement centers, brochures at football games, and a common Google Form for applying to one or more support staff positions as recruitment techniques they regularly use. Some of these recruitment outlets are required of them, while others are expressions of their own agency and community knowledge.

In our survey, respondents listed similar tools and techniques for attracting prospective applicants. The most common response was "social media" (n=61), followed by Internet job sites like Indeed.com (n=43) and WECAN (n=39). Fewer SFAs made use of job fairs (n=16), referral bonuses (n=12), or professional association websites like SNA (n=5). Among those who checked "Other," fifteen respondents reported relying on newspaper advertisements or school newsletters and websites to advertise job openings, and three used "word of mouth."



"The staff that I feel like do the best in the kitchen, are the ones that care so much about the kids and care about putting out a quality product," one director shared. But certain recruitment methods and requirements can pose barriers for prospective applicants. For example, one director stated, "My lowest food service worker has to fill out WECAN," which is a centralized job application portal used for employment in over 500 Wisconsin K-12 schools that requires prospective applicants to learn and navigate a new online system to submit their application. This may exclude candidates who would otherwise excel in a school nutrition position, simply because their prior experience has not required extensive computer skills. Moreover, in some Wisconsin communities, the applicant pool may include more people whose first language is not English, or whose English language literacy is below the high-school level.

TRAINING & CONTINUING EDUCATION

School nutrition programs use a variety of techniques to onboard new employees and satisfy ongoing training requirements. The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 introduced annual professional development requirements for school nutrition employees at all levels: 12 hours for school nutrition directors; 10 hours for school nutrition managers; 6 hours for school food professionals who work more than 20 hours per week; and 4 hours for those who work fewer than 20 hours per week.

For initial onboarding, school nutrition directors emphasize the importance of structured on-the-job learning with strong mentorship. They suggest cross-training all workers and having new employees learn from the “best” staff. One director who has a very strong leader at a local middle school, shared their strategy: “I’m starting a new program where I have (hopefully) every staff member starting in her school for at least two weeks to start their job. She will train them on just the very basics with her team, and then they will move to their school.” Directors from programs that are relatively short staffed recommended giving staff paid time to watch online videos (produced by district employees or sourced from an online training program), then having the employee(s) answer comprehension questions through a simple Google Form. Some of the virtual training programs most widely used in Wisconsin’s school nutrition programs to onboard new hires and provide continuing education are those provided by the [Institute for Child Nutrition](#), the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction [School Nutrition Team Training](#), the School Nutrition Association’s [Career and Training](#) website, the US Department of Agriculture’s Team Nutrition [Webinars and Training](#), and the Chef Ann Foundation’s [School Food Institute](#).

In our statewide survey, 54 schools responded to the following open-ended prompt: “Please describe what types of workforce development and training you offer to employees in your school nutrition program.” Those with “little” to “no” challenges recruiting non-management employees shared examples of how they invest in training:

- *We have a scholarship program for continuing education. We offer ServSafe certification paid by us. We offer leadership mentoring.* - mid-sized district in CESA 11
- *Our employees are all ServSafe certified and we run trainings in our monthly meetings.* - small district in CESA 6

Directors with “significant” retention challenges report mixed abilities to provide training for non-managerial staff:

- *We pay for the employees ServSafe class and test. We pay for all employees’ SNA fees. We have speakers come in and cover things and we pay the employees time for that.* - small district in CESA 7
- *What development? We are given no budget for this.* - small district in CESA 5
- *We offer management training, servsafe training and mental health training in addition to job skills training.* - mid-sized district in CESA 10
- *We provide significant amounts of professional development every 6-8 weeks. Unfortunately when polling staff, they don’t care about training, they want more pay.”* - mid-sized district in CESA 7

Directors who report that retention is “somewhat” of a challenge expressed feelings of time pressure and a desire to do more training:

- *Required continuing ed hours is all we’ve really had time for.* - mid-sized district in CESA 2
- *Sadly, it is often ‘learn on the job’ as we are often working short with no one to do the training for new employees. For existing employees we have an annual day of training as well as offering the SNA state conference.* - mid-sized district in CESA 11

VALUING EMPLOYEES

School nutrition employees feel like they are at the bottom of the school hierarchy, yet their work is very important and challenging in ways that most people don't realize. In addition to improving compensation for school nutrition staff, it is important to treat these professionals with respect as vital members of the school community. "We're peons compared to the custodial staff and the teachers," one hourly worker stated in a June 2022 focus group, while a manager shared a specific example: "Oh, it's staff appreciation day? 'How about you make us 700 salads?' On staff appreciation day. I'm a staff! I didn't get to eat one of those salads! I made them for you!"

The disrespect that many workers feel has consequences for program quality and labor dynamics. As one director shared, "I worked for a different school district where I felt like food service was really kind of like bottom of the barrel. We were not respected. We didn't get viewed highly. And I think it showed in the turnover that we had in staff and the participation in the program." Other directors noted that feeling disrespected can lead to disempowerment and discourage collective action. "They know that they're at the bottom of the barrel. And I think it's really unfortunate," one director explained, further expressing frustration that "there's not a whole lot I can do until the district agrees to see their value and pay them more." Another director shared a similar frustration: "...it gets so hard for them to advocate, because they're in this place that's at the bottom of the barrel, so when they go, they get turned down. We get turned down when we're trying to fight for them... Even as directors, we get turned down for advocating for ourselves." Yet even these unsuccessful advocacy efforts can help school nutrition workers feel seen and valued by their supervisors. "We have a great director... but she gets stopped," one hourly worker explained. "She has the money to pay us more, but [the school administration] won't let her because then it makes problems everywhere else with all the other support staff."



It is important to help school nutrition employees feel like a respected part of the school system. One director explained how respect (or lack thereof) impacts employee retention: "The culture of the school district has to be something that they feel like they can be a part of... If you feel like you're not important enough to work somewhere, then you're not going to stay there. And if you're not valued, you're not going to stay there." This speaks to the broader issue of school nutrition departments being siloed off from the rest of the school (e.g., separate budgets, mealtimes not being counted as instructional time, and nutrition staff not being viewed as educators despite their daily interactions with students). In our focus groups with school nutrition staff, multiple people expressed appreciation for weekly email updates, visits to the kitchen or cafeteria by the school principal or other staff, end-of-year parties, retirement celebrations, and other

employee recognition events. However, some cautioned that recognition is best when it is both genuine and specific. "I think our district is trying to make an effort and they do come in and our director, he makes an effort as well," one manager shared. However, we can tell when it's genuine, and when it's scripted. "Thanks for all you're doing" or "hey, I saw what you did, and I know you're running a beta program on that computer and it's not fun and I really appreciate it." That's genuine."

OVERCOMING OBSTACLES & IMPROVING COMPENSATION

In our focus groups, school nutrition directors noted multiple obstacles that must be overcome in order to improve compensation:

- Obstacle:** Setting wages, benefits, and staffing levels for school nutrition departments by gathering “comparable” information from other school nutrition departments (e.g., in the same CESA or of comparable enrollment size) suppresses compensation across the entire sector. As one director explained, “I’m the highest paid in my CESA, so I’m not allowed to be paid higher.” **Recommendation:** Comparisons with other education support professionals, support services staff, and institutional food service occupations would provide a more appropriate compensation benchmark. This should be the new standard practice. We further recommend that school nutrition directors be involved in conversations about compensation for workers within their departments.
- Obstacle:** School nutrition directors who advocate for improved compensation are denied by administrators and hiring managers for a variety of reasons (only some of which are true): school nutrition staff do not have advanced degrees; they do not interact directly with students; they do not work summers; they are only part-time; and they are easily replaceable (“Anyone can scoop nuggets,” one director was told). **Recommendation:** School nutrition department leaders may wish to work with their HR department, or applicable department, in adjusting job descriptions and titles to accurately reflect the work expected. SNA-WI could also work within their means to develop job descriptions that accurately reflect the full range of required skills and job tasks for school nutrition professionals to be shared on their website. The HSM4A Wisconsin coalition may also wish to collect and make publicly available a database of jobs descriptions and contract language from members across the state who have successfully advocated for their staff.
- Obstacle:** School administration doesn’t want foodservice employees to be compensated better than other departments. **Recommendation:** Organize to improve wages and compensation for all departments. Advocate for increased education funding from the state with earmarked funding for improved wages and compensation of all workers (including school nutrition workers whose wages and benefits are generally paid from Fund 50 in public schools and not the general education budget).
- Obstacle:** Summer hours present an issue for job security or employee satisfaction, both resulting in staff leaving positions or not applying in the first place. Local districts seem to have different ways of handling summer employment. Some require staff to re-apply for positions in the summer, some do not cover benefits, and some are a mix of both. One manager recalled: “I was told in the interview that I was expected to work school year and summer as an expectation of the job. Then when summer came around I was told I needed to apply for my summer job. Why did they not list the position by days of the year? Does that mean someone else could take my job for the summer? This is not good job security.” And a director stated: “Some of my...



4. ... employees have worked full years since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. For some, this will be their fourth year working year-round and still paying their health insurance premiums in full over two summer months. The hours worked should be factored into benefit pricing and offerings to all employees."
- Recommendation:** Ensure that summer hours are counted toward benefit eligibility and pricing for all school staff, and remove the barriers of separate positions for summer work. Rather than providing partial year contracts and requiring existing employees to apply for summer hours, convert school nutrition director and other relevant positions to full year contracts if they are expected to work in the summers. Also ensure that administration in school districts understand that summer hours for school nutrition leadership positions, whether it be director positions or manager/lead positions is a crucial time to update procedures, prepare and test new recipes, apply for grants, update kitchen equipment and flow, meet new vendors or farmers, and be fully prepared for the new school year.
5. **Obstacle:** Foodservice management companies require many school nutrition employees to sign non-compete agreements. Across industry sectors, noncompete agreements artificially [suppress wages](#) by preventing workers from leaving for higher paying jobs (and reducing the incentive for employers to retain workers through improvements to compensation or working conditions). Noncompetes also exacerbate gender and racial [wage gaps](#). What's more, noncompete fines make it difficult (and financially prohibitive in some cases) for school boards to end their contracts with foodservice managements and retain their existing school nutrition staff. **Recommendation:** Advocate for the Federal Trade Commission's [proposed rule](#) to ban employers from imposing non-compete agreements on their workers.
6. **Obstacle:** School nutrition directors are unsure whether their positive fund balances will continue. Higher food and delivery costs and uncertainty surrounding federal child nutrition policy (i.e., whether the higher pandemic-era reimbursement rates will continue or for how long), combined with unpaid meal debt and fluctuations in student participation, could reduce fund balances or even lead to negative account balances for some school nutrition programs. Given the expectation to be financially self-sustaining, this financial scenario restricts the number of benefit-level positions and overall compensation packages that school nutrition programs offer. Directors worry that if they use their current fund balances to make these improvements in labor and compensation, they may not be able to afford them in the future.



Recommendation: School nutrition directors should maximize participation in the Community Eligibility Program and advocate for the passage of free school meals for all at state and federal levels. SNA-WI and the Healthy School Meals for All Wisconsin coalition should advocate for supplemental funding for school nutrition workers and higher overall education funding in the state budget. Some schools may also wish to advocate for a portion of school nutrition labor costs to be covered by general education funds.

WHAT PROGRAMS WOULD DO WITH MORE FUNDING

“The US Department of Agriculture and Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction push schools to feed students fresh made healthy meals, but we are given no budget for proper staffing,” explained one director of a small district in CESA 5. So, what might school nutrition programs in Wisconsin look like if these challenges were remedied? At the conclusion of our 2022 survey, we asked respondents: “What could you do more, better, or differently in your school nutrition program if you had more funding to increase workers’ wages and benefits?” The 57 responses mostly focused on two topics: (1) paying fair and competitive wages, and (2) expanding program offerings and increasing meal quality.

Pay Fair and Competitive Wages

- “Make 10 months the standard for positions instead of 9 months.” - small district, CESA 4
- “Make sure all staff are full time and/or paid a living wage with benefits.” - small district, CESA 5
- “[Provide] holiday pay, paid time off, paid sick leave. Incentives for coming to work. Pay a fair wage that is competitive” - large district, CESA 1
- “In a small rural school, the food service director is responsible for not only all the paperwork, but also working out on the floor preparing the meals. Increasing funding for benefits would attract more quality employees to take on the food preparation role... This would also help alleviate food service director ‘burn-out’.” - small district, CESA 4

Expand Program Offerings & Increase Quality

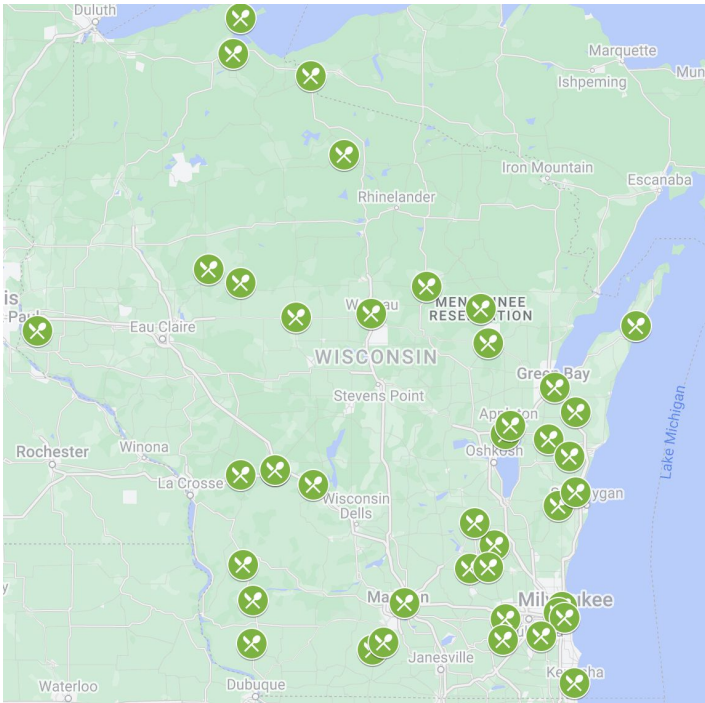
- “I could hire and retain qualified employees thus allowing us to expand our programming” - mid-sized district, CESA 4
- “Recruit better quality candidates; improve the program by adding more scratch cooked items; improve the job quality with better training and support” - small district, CESA 5
- “We would maintain staff levels with high-quality staff. We would also increase our ability to implement more scratch recipes...” - small district, CESA 11
- “Better marketing for the school nutrition programs to hopefully increase participation. Better quality of food/expand food choices.” - mid-sized district, CESA 1
- “We could definitely plan more home cooked meals. The kids definitely love breakfast food items. If we had more labor hours/labor monies we could offer a hot breakfast daily to our students. More homemade soups at lunchtime also.” - small district, CESA 12
- “Hire more staff to make more made from scratch meals and funding to be able to purchase higher quality products to enhance meals offered.” - small district, CESA 11

At the SNA-WI Summer 2022 conference, many participants also spoke about their desire to do more food, nutrition, and garden-based education with students. They emphasized that cafeterias are classrooms too. One director spoke to the myriad ways that school mealtimes connect to curriculum: “It’s an educational opportunity. There’s science involved... mathematics involved, history and culture.” Better compensation and job quality for school nutrition workers would open up more possibilities to facilitate both traditional and experiential learning opportunities for students of all grade levels.

HIGH ROAD SNAPSHOT

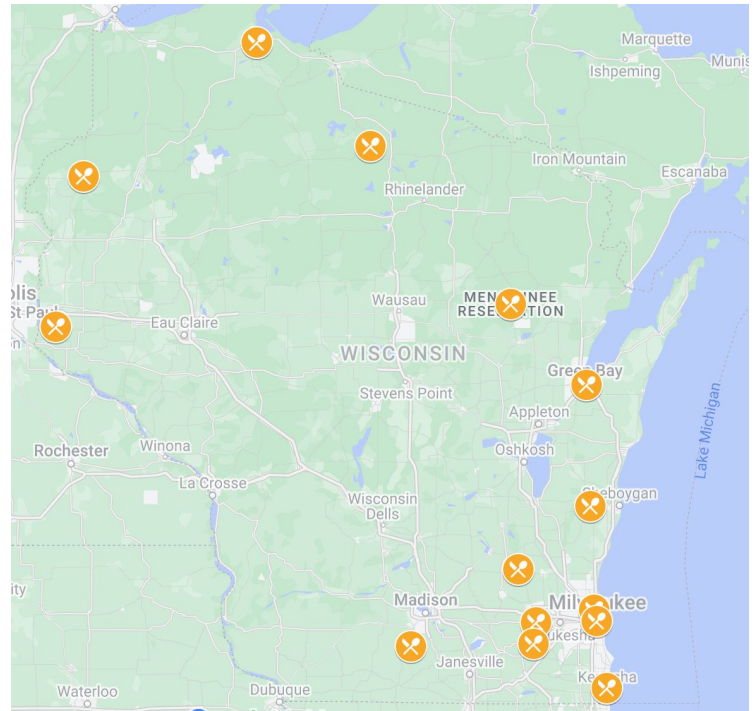
Scratch Cooking

Forty-six schools (27.7% of our survey sample) reported cooking 50-100% of all lunch items from scratch, and fifteen schools (9% of our sample) reported cooking 50-100% of all breakfast items from scratch. High scratch-cooking schools (that consented to data sharing) are mapped below.



Map 1.1. Schools with 50-100% of All Lunch Items Cooked from Scratch

[View map here](#)



Map 1.2. Schools with 50-100% of All Breakfast Items Cooked from Scratch

[View map here](#)

Hourly Wages

90th Percentile Starting Wages: Full-Time Head Cooks

	Starting Wage	Percent Free & Reduced	Enrollment
Holmen	\$18.70	26.1%	3,902
Ashwaubenon	\$17.88	37.8%	3,257
Mount Horeb	\$17	17.5%	2,384

90th Percentile Starting Wages: Full-Time School Nutrition Assistants

	Starting Wage	Percent Free & Reduced	Enrollment
Madison	\$21.44	54.1%	25,497
Oregon	\$17.50	19.2%	4,159
Wisconsin Rapids	\$16.43	55.9%	4,838

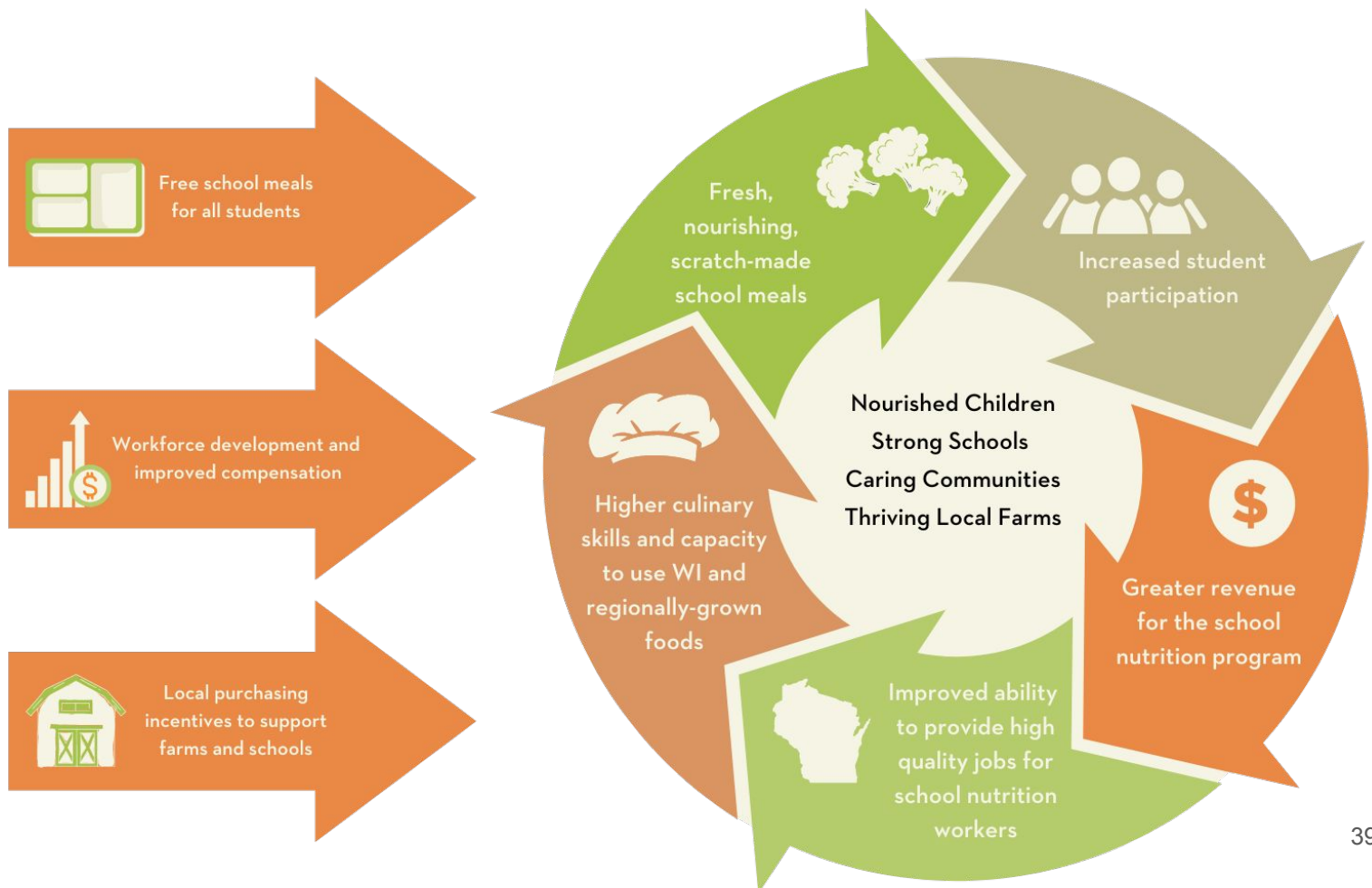
*Good wage data provided only for respondents who opted to share their district/school name and individual responses.

CONCLUSION & FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS

The prevailing model of low-wage, part-time, seasonal employment has many [hidden costs](#). It directly impacts what children are eating by pushing schools to serve more “heat-and-serve” items and ultra-processed foods. Only 28% of Wisconsin’s K-12 schools cook a majority of lunches [from scratch](#) and less than 10% prepare a majority of breakfasts from scratch. Maximizing scratch cooking would support more full-time jobs and enable the state’s children, families, and communities to access the many [benefits of farm to school](#) and increase support for local farms. Doing so requires public investment and other states are leading the way, with California recently investing \$45 million in a [workforce development program](#) to increase scratch cooking in schools.

Higher reimbursement rates and universal free meals would bring more revenue into school nutrition programs and enable all schools to improve compensation and job quality for their nutrition workers. As one director from a relatively affluent district explained, “You can’t pay people more unless you have more revenue to pay them with... The whole reimbursement model that is currently in place is broken, especially if you have a low free/reduced [rate]. I get 40 cents on a paid meal. I can’t sell a meal at an elementary school for what a school gets reimbursed for a free meal. Nobody will buy it for that. So what do I do? This presents an impossible problem, as another director put it: “You move your meal price higher, your participation crashes. If you don’t have a program, you can’t pay people with money you don’t have.”

Individual schools or districts cannot be expected to shoulder the full cost of changing this system. Sourcing local food, serving meals to all students free of charge, and providing high quality jobs are the necessary ingredients to achieving financially sustainable school meal programs that also maximize the true public value of school meals. State leadership is necessary and would yield a tremendous [return on investment](#) for Wisconsin’s economy.



There are many ways that individual schools and districts can take immediate action to improve compensation and overall job quality for school nutrition workers. However, there are limits to what individual schools or districts can accomplish on their own, particularly when school nutrition budgets are separate from general operating funds and largely dictated by federal reimbursements and meal participation rates. We recommend pursuing a “both/and” set of strategies: when possible, individual schools and districts should make improvements at the program level, but they should also collaborate with others across the state and nation to change policy and build strategic partnerships.

Programs



- Increase the starting wage and provide higher longevity bonuses.
- Eliminate the wage gap between school nutrition staff and other education support professions.
- Provide bonuses linked to professional development milestones and credentials.
- Increase full-time and year-round employment by maximizing participation in all federal [child nutrition programs](#).
- Involve staff in program advocacy. “We set up a listening session with just my leadership team (my managers) and our assistant superintendents and bosses,” one director shared. “So it wasn’t just me and him... he had to sit and look everybody in the eye and they all had to tell him what their biggest issues were and what their biggest needs were. That is harder to refuse.”

Policies



- Make school meals free for all students.
- Establish minimum wage and benefit standards for school nutrition programs.
- Lobby for additional state and federal school meal funding that is earmarked for labor costs and adjusted to local cost of living rates.
- Follow [best practices](#) for contracting with food service management companies.
- Find creative ways to work around policies that suppress wages and compensation (e.g., creating new position titles and reclassifying jobs to allow for higher wages and better benefits). For instance, when one director was told by her district that she could not raise wages, she altered her staff’s job descriptions to include the higher-paid duties that would be allowable for someone in a “cook” position. “But I’m really not changing anything,” she explained.

Partnerships



- Develop a Wisconsin [Healthy School Meals Pathway](#) apprenticeship and youth apprenticeship program to ensure that Wisconsin’s K-12 schools have a robust, highly skilled workforce capable of preparing nutritious meals from scratch using locally sourced ingredients.
- Support workers’ right to organize collectively and participate in policy making on industry-wide standards and job quality.
- Build solidarity as a community of school support staff. Work to elevate the level of respect that students, families, and school administrators give to one another’s positions.

ENDNOTES

¹ Poverty-level wages are based on MIT's [calculations](#) for the state of Wisconsin in 2019 dollars. Low-wage jobs are above poverty level but only up to 1.5 times the poverty wage, or \$19.11 per hour (following COWS's multiplier), and good-wage jobs are those that pay above \$19.11 per hour.

² Demographic data is from the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction's [Public All Staff Report](#), 2021-22 school year.

³ The full report provides wage data for a wider range of job titles, but here we report only on the most prevalent non-managerial positions of head cook, school nutrition assistant, dishwasher, and cashier.

⁴ Median wages for non-managerial employees were calculated using a weighted average with weights assigned based on sample size for each job category.

⁵ This should be interpreted with caution due to slightly different response rates. 73 SFAs entered their total annual operating budget for 2021-22 and 71 entered a projected amount for the 22-23 school year.

⁶ See endnote 2 regarding demographic data on the school nutrition workforce.

⁷ See the Congressional Research Service, *The School Foodservice Workforce: Characteristics and Labor Market Outcomes*, July 2022, p. 20, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R47199>.

⁸ Ken Jacobs and Dave Graham-Squire, Labor Standard for School Cafeteria Workers, Turnover, and Public Program Utilization, *Berkeley Journal of Employment and Labor Law* 31, no. 2, 2010, p. 447-458, https://www.jstor.org/stable/43551793?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_content.

⁹ Ibid.

