

Washington's King County Sponsors Cooking Skills Training for School Food Service Staff

Sodium in food is a major contributor to [hypertension](#), also known as high blood pressure, even in children.¹

There are national minimum nutrition standards that schools are required to follow to limit the amount of sodium in the food they serve, but those standards are not in line with the [Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2020–2025](#).

Food manufacturers and vendors do not offer many lower sodium options, so it is challenging for schools to reduce sodium further. Some school food service teams have started creating meals for students from scratch, but the teams often do not have the training, equipment, or budget to create healthy and flavorful meals.

[Public Health—Seattle & King County \(PHSKC\)](#) worked with local school districts to reduce the sodium levels in school meals and improve the appeal of school menu offerings to increase school meal participation. PHSKC hired professional chefs to provide training for local school

food service staff. The training focused on improving culinary skills, enhancing flavors in healthy ways, and learning new recipes. The goal was to improve schools' ability to create delicious and healthy meals for their students.

Public Health Challenge

One in seven children in the United States has hypertension.^{1,2} Alarmingly, 90% of school-age children consume more sodium than is recommended.² In 2012, the United States Department of Agriculture updated the standards for sodium in school meals to gradually bring sodium levels into line with the 2010 *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*.³

Many schools initially met the reduced sodium levels, but efforts to further reduce sodium in schools have stalled. This delay has contributed to challenges with finding affordable lower sodium products from food manufacturers and vendors.⁴ As a result, some school districts are cooking their own meals rather than using pre-assembled or processed meals.

School districts in King County are interested in updating their meal options for students to make meals healthier and more appealing while reducing students' sodium consumption. This is particularly important because between 33% and 75% of students in these school districts are eligible for free or reduced-cost school meals.⁵ Many of these schools also have limited resources to train their staff to create healthy meals.



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500

school food service staff were trained on how to boost flavor with herbs and spices instead of salt

75%

of participants said they were very or extremely likely to use the skills gained from these trainings



“We have learned so many great skills and wonderful techniques to use in the kitchens to make the [meals and snacks] more appealing to students.”

— Training participant

Approach

PHSKC hired two chefs with extensive experience in training school food service staff and creating recipes. The chefs conducted several in-person trainings between 2016 and 2020 and 13 virtual trainings in 2021. The trainings featured demonstrations on basic culinary skills, such as cutting fruits and vegetables; how to boost flavor with herbs and spices instead of salt; and healthy recipe ideas.

The in-person trainings allowed the attendees to do hands-on training and taste various dishes. The virtual trainings involved 20- to 30-minute recorded videos of the demonstrations. All staff were paid for the time they spent in training and received continuing education credits.

Results

More than 500 school food service staff have been trained through these in-person and virtual events. The survey responses show that participants of the in-person trainings

appreciated the hands-on experience and the exposure to new recipe ideas. Attendees of the virtual events liked being able to pause the video and cook along with the chef and being able to rewatch the videos at their convenience. Nearly all participants reported an increase in their knowledge about the topics covered during the training and confidence in using those skills in their job. More than 75% of participants said they were very or extremely likely to use the skills gained from these trainings.

What's Next

PHSKC plans to share the video trainings with other school districts in the state. PHSKC is also working with local school districts to share the importance of providing staff with paid training opportunities and to acquire more kitchen supplies so that staff can apply the skills they learned. With these trainings, schools will have the skills to prepare fresh, healthy, and delicious meals for their students.



Find Out More

Learn more about [Public Health—Seattle & King County](#).

[Watch](#) one of the chef-led virtual trainings—sponsored by PHSKC—that demonstrates basic knife skills for school meals.

[Watch](#) one of the virtual trainings on seasoning basics for school meals, led by a PHSKC-sponsored chef.

Use the [SRCP Implementation Guide](#) to apply sodium reduction strategies derived from the SRCP into your communities.

References

- ¹ CDC. [High Blood Pressure in Kids and Teens](#). Accessed August 9, 2021.
- ² Appel LJ, Lichtenstein AH, Callahan EA, Sinaiko A, Van Horn L, Whitsel L. Reducing sodium intake in children: A public health investment. *J Clin Hypertens*. 2015;17(9):657–662.
- ³ School Nutrition Association. [School Nutrition Standards](#). Accessed September 2, 2021..
- ⁴ Healthy Eating Research. [Schools Find Success in Reducing Sodium in Meals](#). Issue Brief. Washington, DC: Robert Wood Johnson Foundation; 2020. Accessed October 29, 2021.
- ⁵ Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction. [Child Nutrition Program Reports](#). Accessed August 9, 2021.