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## Nutritional Assessment: Program Paper

### *Program Overview: Conscious Kitchen*

Conscious Kitchen is a program of Turning Green that aims to improve food equity, education and access to communities. They do so by bringing organic, scratch-cooked meals, and overall more sustainable food options to K-12 school districts that conventionally serve heavily processed and packaged foods. Conscious Kitchen was first consulted in 2013 in the Sausalito Marin City School District where it launched its first pilot at Bayside MLK Academy in Marin City. Despite existing within one of the wealthiest counties in the country, more than 95 percent of Marin City students qualify for free-and-reduced government-subsidized school meals. Conscious Kitchen's latest pilot has been taking place in Contra Costa County at Peres and Madera elementary schools in the West Contra Costa Unified School District (WCCUSD) since 2017. According to Conscious Kitchen's website, this is a deeply underserved school district as 70 percent of the students live below the poverty line (*Conscious Kitchen*).

### *Project Overview: Food Boxes*

During the typical school year, schools have set contracts with suppliers to provide school meal items. The founder of Conscious Kitchen, Judi Shils, explained to me that these contracts involve bid requests for every category of food, and these underserved schools contractually have to purchase the cheapest food. Consequently, this food is typically of low quality as well. However, when schools closed in march 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic,

they were still required to serve kids food by any means necessary. In order to make this happen, the USDA waived all contracts that districts had with their normal suppliers (USDA). Conscious Kitchen and WCCUSD used this opportunity to supply the students and families in the WCCUSD with weekly organic food boxes filled by predominantly local suppliers.

There are many reasons why Conscious Kitchen chose to roll out this project. As a program, Conscious Kitchen is passionate about changing current conventional food systems to more organic and locally-sourced supply chains for students. This is because organic food and farming has innumerable benefits to human health, environmental and ecological health, and supports local economies (Van Bruggen, et. al). Beyond the value-based reasons for starting this project, the logistical disruptions in food services due to the COVID-19 pandemic is what made this project possible. There were no more contracts, the schools had more money, and the new option to supply whole food items instead of meals was more economically efficient.

#### *Main Challenges and Successes*

The biggest challenge of the Food Box project was that it was a massive amount of work for the schools that were pickup locations because it was so much different than the workers' normal job descriptions. People went from administrative work to hard manual labor, lifting heavy crates, packing food boxes, and so on. There had to be a lot of safety training and even still, people got hurt. Also, there also wasn't always enough refrigeration on site, so some of the food spoiled as a result. Furthermore, WCCUSD had to spend a lot of money on new equipment, like pallet jacks, in order to move around the massive quantities of food.

With that being said, there were major successes of this project as well. One is that it single-handedly saved many organic farmers from going out of business. K-12 is a completely new realm for the organic industry, and the orders were larger than they could've hoped for in a

time of need. Judi recounted a story of one of the suppliers, Mindful Meats, crying on the phone when Judi placed Conscious Kitchen's first order with them because they were ready to close the business. Instead, the Food Box project got them back on their feet and allowed them to thrive again. Mindful Meats is just one of about 40 new organic suppliers that Conscious Kitchen brought to the K-12 food system for the first time. This opens up innovation to expand the reach of organic food and corporate competition in school food systems.

For Judi, the ultimate success was consistently serving kids organic food, teaching them about food at a young age, and removing the body burden of pesticides found in conventional foods. The work Conscious Kitchen is doing is so impactful that she already sees a difference in the children, telling me that hears stories about the kids at these schools no longer having stomach aches after lunch.

#### *Key Findings*

Every single item purchased was tracked through 3 consultants from both Conscious Kitchen and WWUSD. This project, starting in November of 2020 and ending in August of 2021, students and their families were provided with enough food each week for 3 meals a day, plus snacks. This equated to 17 million dollars directed into local economies by purchasing over 10 million pounds of organic food for over 18 million meals that went to the students and families of WCCUSD. These food boxes are filled with organic fruits, vegetables, dairy, grains, protein and more, preparing roughly 644,000 meals each week.

#### *Critique*

The biggest contributing factor to the challenges this project faced was due to the inability to comfortably prepare for it in the wake of COVID-19. With that being said, I do not believe a program like this is very easily reproducible. They were able to pull this off largely in

part to having a food service director, Barbara Jellison, that was extremely supportive and passionately believed in the organic mission. This is not common amongst other school districts. Also, outside of a life-altering pandemic, school employees are not likely to stray from their job description as much as this project required them to. If this program were to be implemented in other schools, they would likely need to hire new employees and purchase new equipment to make this happen. Without the extra funding that schools received from COVID-19 relief, something like this would likely be too expensive and inaccessible for the schools that need it most.

### *Conclusion*

To conclude, Conscious Kitchen's Food Box project was a unique experience for everyone involved. It successfully provided students and families with organic, locally-sourced food in a time of need. This project was faced with many challenges with labor and logistics, but it also introduced organic suppliers to K-12 institutional purchasing for the first time, supported the local economy, increased community access to healthy food, improved food literacy, and promoted both human and environmental health.

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