

Federally funded Great Trays Partnership provides training to help schools buy and prepare nutritious foods

Written by

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The Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) and seven public and private partners are collaborating to bring more nutritious, kid-friendly foods into school cafeterias across the state. The *Great Trays Partnership*, funded by a \$2.3 million grant from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, provides training and tools to help schools statewide improve their menus and help kids eat healthier meals.

Great Trays efforts are a critical strategy to fight rising childhood obesity rates, which have tripled over the past three decades. Poor nutrition and obesity put children at risk for lifelong struggles with health conditions such as hypertension, diabetes and heart disease.

"Obesity is one of the most urgent health challenges facing our state and nation today," said Jim Koppel, Minnesota Deputy Commissioner of Health. "Minnesota students consume up to half of their calories at school. *Great Trays* is helping ensure that those food choices are healthy and taste good."

To accomplish this work, MDH has partnered with the Minnesota Departments of Agriculture, Education and Human Services, as well as the Minnesota School Nutrition Association, the Minnesota School Food Buying Group, University of Minnesota Extension and the University of Minnesota School of Public Health. *The Great Trays Partnership* works to train school staff to prepare foods using more Minnesota-grown foods from the farm – and to help overcome equipment and cost barriers that make it hard for many schools to cook with fresh foods.

"Many schools don't even have the right equipment to prepare and provide local foods and fresh fruits and vegetables," said Stephanie Heim, Farm to School coordinator at University of Minnesota Extension. "Nearly three-quarters of school food service leaders surveyed said they could provide more local foods if they had better equipment, such as wedgers, food processors and knives."

The partnership also works to help schools join food-buying cooperatives to make buying nutritious foods more affordable.

Great Trays held initial workshops last winter and will hold another round in June that train school cooks and menu planners in food preparation techniques to do more cooking from scratch and use more farm-fresh, Minnesota-grown foods.

School nutrition staff representing more than a thousand schools have participated in *Great Trays* initiatives thus far. These efforts are more important than ever as schools prepare for stricter federal nutrition standards that require lower levels of sodium and saturated fats.

"*Great Trays* has given me fresh ideas and tools so that I am able to begin menu planning for next year," said Lyn Halvorson, school nutrition director for Winona Area Public Schools. "The more people on the team that have the latest information, the more successful the transition will be to the new nutrition standards."

Great Trays is making a similar impact in schools across the state.

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"We are experimenting with new menu items that are delicious and healthy, and our students are excited to try the new flavors," said Debra LaBounty, president of the Minnesota School Nutrition Association. "Our students learn lifelong habits in school, so increasing these options for healthy foods will have long-term benefits for their health."

To see examples of school lunch successes across the state and to get more information on *Great Trays*

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<http://www.health.state.mn.us/schools/greattrays>

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