



A New Recipe for School Food Careers: The Power of Apprenticeship

AT A GLANCE

JFF spotlights Chef Ann Foundation's Healthy School Food Pathway, an apprenticeship pathway model that strengthens the school food workforce, facilitates district capacity for scratch cooking, and builds a public-sector pathway for worker advancement.

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Advancing The School Food Workforce

Across the United States, school districts and states are investing in scratch-cooked school meals, prepared with fresh, whole, minimally processed ingredients. These efforts reflect growing understanding of the link between nutritious meals and student health, learning, and academic success.¹ At the same time, school food departments face persistent workforce challenges: staffing shortages, high vacancy and turnover rates, and limited training opportunities for kitchen staff.² This is exacerbated by a lack of clear career pathways into the field; careers in school food are not prominent in culinary school curricula or community college programs, so prospective workers may be unaware that school food offers stable public sector jobs with opportunities for advancement and meaningful impact.

Over the last decade, federal and state leaders have invested in Registered Apprenticeship (RA) as a proven earn-and-learn model, with growth in the number of programs and apprentices across industries. While RA has historically been concentrated in construction, manufacturing, and skilled trades, recent efforts to expand the model have led to more programs and apprenticeships in health care, IT, education, and the public sector. No previous RA programs, however, have focused on the school food workforce.

What Is Pre-Apprenticeship?

Pre-apprenticeship prepares individuals to enter and succeed in a Registered Apprenticeship. Quality pre-apprenticeship programs include³:

- Approved curriculum
- Simulated experience
- Facilitated entry
- Increased access
- Supportive services

What Is Apprenticeship?

[Registered Apprenticeship is a job](#) from day one that combines:

- Paid employment
- Structured on-the-job learning
- Related technical instruction
- Sustained mentorship
- Industry recognized credential



Chef Ann Foundation's [Healthy School Food Pathway](#) (HSFP) changes that by introducing the nation's first pre-apprenticeship and RA pathway, designed specifically for school food professionals to address upskilling and training at every level of career. It offers a concrete example of how an evidence-based model can be adapted for public-sector environments and for an occupation that has not traditionally been associated with RA.

Chef Ann Foundation created HSFP as a workforce development pipeline with state and local partners to:

- Build a skilled, stable workforce to help grow and expand scratch-cooked school meal programs across the country
- Make school food a visible, respected career pathway in the broader culinary and workforce ecosystem
- Use RA as a systems change tool to improve operations, job quality, and student outcomes across K-12 school food

The Healthy School Food Pathway Model

HSFP is more than a single apprenticeship track. This multi-tier pathway integrates three distinct learn-and-earn opportunities: one Pre-Apprenticeship, and two Registered Apprenticeships—the Apprenticeship and the Fellowship. This stacked design, from entry-level training to systems-level leadership, goes beyond many RA programs that focus only on occupation and a single career within a career pathway. As of June 2026, the HSFP Pre-Apprenticeship and Apprenticeship operate in four states—California, Colorado, New York, and Virginia—and the HSFP Fellowship operates nationally, with participation to-date across 20 states plus DC and Northern Mariana Islands.



The HSFP [Pre-Apprenticeship](#) serves aspiring and early-career school food professionals, providing an entry point into the industry. Coupled with mentorship, skills training, and credentials, it offers an important introduction to the school food profession and helps people determine if these occupations and career pathways are right for them.



The HSFP [Apprenticeship](#), a state and federally registered apprenticeship program, engages people who want to pursue work in school food and deepen their knowledge and understanding of the sector as a whole. Apprentices participate in nine months of on-the-job training and related technical instruction, earn credentials, and build important social capital that positions them for continued advancement. The HSFP Apprenticeship is aligned with a School Food Specialist occupation.



The HSFP [Fellowship](#), which is also a federal Registered Apprenticeship program, offers mid-to-upper-level school food professionals 13 months of training and hands-on learning opportunities that support advancement into leadership roles where they serve as changemakers across the larger scratch-cooked school food movement. The Fellowship prepares participants for a School Food Director occupation.

Healthy School Food Pathway Snapshot

Since June 2022, HSFP has engaged over:



1,050

Pre-Apprenticeses



220

Apprentices



90

Fellows



175

K-12 district partners

Innovative Impacts of HSFP in the Apprenticeship Landscape



Registered Apprenticeship follows a rigorous structure grounded in federal regulations and requirements. As the model has expanded into new industries, more innovation and creativity have been applied to how programs are designed, who they serve, and the career trajectories they support. HSFP offers several examples of what innovation within the RA system can look like as a non-traditional public sector apprenticeship focused on K–12 school food operations. The model builds a talent pipeline while preparing the school food workforce for school food systems change. Early evaluation findings by the Food Insight Group show that the design and implementation of the model is not only influencing individual careers but also how districts approach scratch cooking and job quality. Below is an overview of how HSFP demonstrates innovation in the context of the broader RA field.

All HSFP quantitative data cited in this section come from the California program (the longest-running program with available evaluation data), offering an early snapshot of impact and a preview of what may be possible as the model scales.

HSFP is proven to provide participants with an increase in knowledge, skills, and abilities.

90%
of districts
reported
improved
culinary skills

89%
reported increases
in technical skills
and knowledge
among participants

The majority of alumni report using their new knowledge and skills daily.⁴



59%
Pre-Apprentices



57%
Apprentices



79%
Fellows

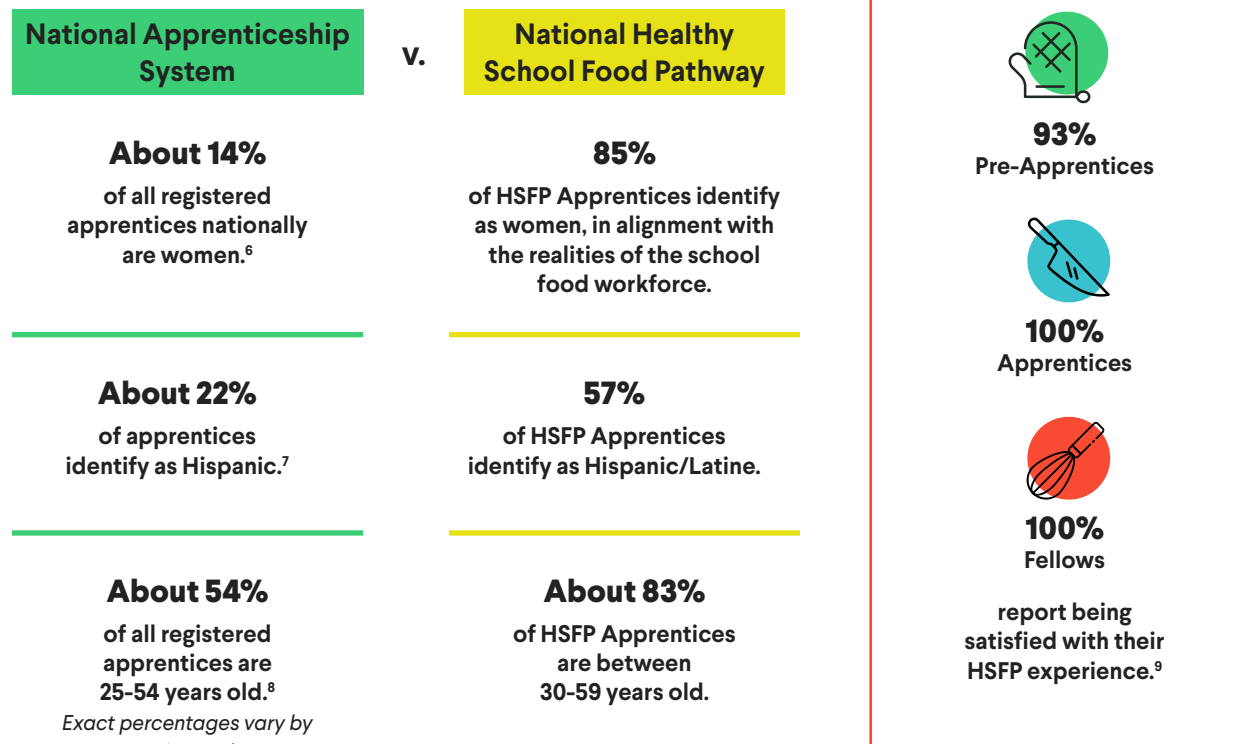


Opportunity for an Underrepresented Workforce

HSFP serves a greater proportion of populations that are underrepresented in RA overall, including women and Black and Latine workers. HSFP has primarily supported incumbent K-12 school food professionals, connecting them to structured earn-and-learn pathways that support their continued advancement and economic mobility. As the program has expanded, however, and scaled to new states and districts, CAF has tailored its recruitment and outreach efforts to open the door to new workers who may not have prior school food experience. This includes providing program and application materials in English and Spanish, supporting applicants as they navigate the enrollment process, and offering training that meets a range of learner needs.

Through paid training and leadership development, HSFP creates opportunities for advancement for these populations that are underrepresented in RA as a whole; districts that promoted Pre-Apprentices and/or Apprentices after their participation in HSFP said the promotions resulted in higher pay (88%), more hours (82%), and more benefits or increased benefit eligibility (65%).⁵ Participants advance and gain both skills and a deeper understanding of scratch-cooked school food operations. Districts, in turn, benefit from a more skilled, stable workforce equipped to implement scratch cooking and other values-aligned practices.

Demographic Comparison



Systems Change Through Integrated Technical Assistance

Most RA programs focus on individual occupations, helping apprentices master the skills needed for specific jobs. HSFP goes further by integrating traditional workforce training with innovative district-level technical assistance (TA).

Chef Ann Foundation staff conduct on-site assessments and provide TA focused on five domains of school food systems change: food, finance, facilities, human resources, and marketing. Tailored TA helps districts analyze menus and facilities, adopt scratch-cooking practices, improve financial tracking, address staffing and workflow challenges, and engage with their school community.

Districts that receive custom TA are more likely to increase

scratch cooking
(75% versus 50%)¹⁰

purchasing of locally grown, organic, and climate smart products
(79% versus 30%)¹¹

than districts that do not.

As HSFP increases district capacity for scratch cooking and values-aligned procurement, it opens up new possibilities for how public dollars are spent. By purchasing from nearby farms and other regional producers, school districts can support local agricultural economies.

HSFP Host District, Los Gatos Union Elementary School District, introduced raw proteins onsite for the first time with tailored TA from the Chef Ann Foundation. 98% of students who sampled the entrée, BBQ Chicken & Cornbread, gave a thumbs-up. The scratch-cooked entrée will now be part of the menu cycle moving forward.¹²



These shifting mindsets are critical for sustaining and scaling operational changes, and they demonstrate how apprenticeship, when paired with intentional TA, can drive systems-level transformation—not only in individual careers, but in how districts run their school food programs and engage with local food systems.

A Stacked Pathway and Pipeline Advancement

Pre-apprenticeship has been a strategy for expanding access to RAs. However, successful connections from pre-apprenticeship programs to RAs remain inconsistent. Many pre-apprenticeship programs lack formal agreements with RA sponsors needed for successful entry into RA programs. As a result, conversion from pre-apprenticeship to RA varies widely and, in some sectors, is low.¹³

HSFP offers a clearly defined and intentionally structured, stacked pathway that facilitates direct entry from pre-apprenticeship training into RA programming. The direct and facilitated connections between both models result not only in stronger bridges for participants, but also drive greater and more successful enrollment in RA. This approach ensures that there is a meaningful next step for participants, offering clear opportunities for continued training and career advancement.

National data does not specifically indicate whether RA completers stay in the sector they train for, but HSFP data show that an intentional training approach drives worker retention and advancement in the school food field, which is critical for the sector's long-term health. As of a 2024 survey, 77% of HSFP Pre-Apprentices, 71% of Apprentices, and 100% of Fellows are employed in school food service.¹⁴ Further, 80% of HSFP Pre-Apprentices and 60% of Apprentices say they are likely to start or continue working in school food over the next five years.¹⁵ This level of reported commitment may indicate that HSFP can support retention and pipeline development.

The inclusion of a second HSFP Registered Apprenticeship (the Fellowship) also offers a strong example of how RA programs can be stacked to build well-articulated and structured pathways supporting long-term advancement. HSFP's stacked design also extends beyond work-based learning into formal postsecondary and leadership pathways. Fellows earn college credit and other credentials, giving them a head start toward related certificates or degrees.



HSFP demonstrates positive impacts across metrics typically measured by Registered Apprenticeship, such as job progression and promotion.

94%
of district leaders agreed that HSFP supported leadership development

43%
reported new hiring or promotion through HSFP.¹⁶

At the same time, Chef Ann Foundation is working to establish the Fellowship as an education equivalent to meet USDA Professional Standards for School Food Director roles, positioning it as a recognized route into district-level leadership and further strengthening the long-term pipeline from entry-level roles into school food leadership positions.

In many states across the country, school food programs are grappling with shifting school food standards and legislation expanding their

commitments to healthier, scratch-cooked meals. These changes require school food professionals to take on more complex culinary, procurement, and leadership responsibilities. By combining technical training, leadership development, and a clear pathway into advanced roles, HSFP helps districts build a workforce that is equipped to meet the changing responsibilities of the job as policies and sector priorities continue to evolve.



An HSFP day in the life: A central kitchen example¹⁷

At the Kern County Superintendent of Schools (KCSOS) Central Kitchen, a Chef Ann Foundation partner, staff prepare thousands of meals for schools across the region. KCSOS reports that with HSFP:

- Apprentices learn everything from high-volume scratch cooking and food safety to procurement and logistics.
- One HSFP Apprentice, a parent of three children who benefited from school meals, described the work as both “Zen” and deeply meaningful, saying she wants “to give back” by ensuring that other students have access to nutritious meals.

According to the district’s senior director of food and nutrition services, HSFP builds both operational skills on the kitchen floor and administrative skills like procurement and menu planning, helping apprentices “put what they learned into practice” in real time.

For district leaders, HSFP reduces the burden of driving change alone. Instead of a single director pushing for scratch cooking, there is a growing cadre of trained staff and Fellows who understand the “why” and “how” of change and have structured support to implement it.

Continued Innovation in Apprenticeship

As more sectors face staffing, skills, or other workforce challenges, Registered Apprenticeship offers an evidence-based solution. HSFP's innovative approach and early results provide a strong example of how both pre-apprenticeship and RA can be designed and adapted to meet unique labor market and sectoral needs while serving both new and incumbent workers and advancing meaningful systems change. This model demonstrates how pre-apprenticeship can be more formally connected to RA, leading to broader access to these programs. It also offers employers, sponsors, and policymakers an example of how earn-and-learn models can serve as a long-term workforce and talent development strategy for sectors in need.

As the HSFP model continues to scale to new states, it is poised to help more districts build capacity for scratch-cooking, enable more local and regional procurement, and create the conditions for healthier meals that support student participation, attendance, and learning while keeping more public dollars circulating in local economies. Moreover, the continued expansion of HSFP will support further growth of this essential workforce and help more workers and learners find value and economic opportunities in these important jobs.

Follow along with HSFP programming and progress at chefannfoundation.org/hsfp.



Endnotes

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About JFF

Jobs for the Future (JFF) transforms U.S. education and workforce systems to drive economic success for people, businesses, and communities. jff.org

JFF's Center for Apprenticeship & Work-Based Learning bridges systems and practices to scale inclusive and high-quality work-based learning and apprenticeship models that serve all industries and all workers and learners. The Center works with stakeholders at every level, including employers, intermediaries, workforce boards, state and federal agencies, education providers, and community-based organizations, to co-design, implement, and improve apprenticeship and work-based learning programs and increase access to high-quality career pathways.



Building a Future
That Works
For Everyone

About Chef Ann Foundation

The Chef Ann Foundation gets schools cooking. We help schools replace ultraprocessed foods with fresh, healthy, and delicious scratch-cooked meals that nourish kids and protect the planet. Since 2009, our programs have reached more than 19,000 schools in all 50 states, bringing better meals to 5.9 million kids. chefannfoundation.org

About Food Insight Group

Food Insight Group develops actionable research and evaluation for nonprofits, foundations, state agencies, and other institutions. We strengthen our partners' capacity to deliver innovative food systems solutions for people and the planet.