



# Smarter Lunchrooms Movement

## In-School Cook-Offs: Students Mix Fun and Learning

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In the quest to deliver educational value in bold and exciting mediums, In-School Cook-Offs blend practical cooking skills with innovative nutrition education. These fun, exciting events bring communities and classmates together to celebrate teens' teamwork and creativity and to expand the possibilities of school meals. For the past eight years, high schools in central-western Wisconsin have hosted a student-centered Harvest Challenge Cook-Off that mixes creativity, food science, and home economics, with a dash of friendly competition for spice. This event expands students' understanding and appreciation of healthy foods in school.

For this competition, teams of five to eight students are challenged to design, prepare, and serve a new school lunch (entrée plus side dish). Each team is assisted by a faculty advisor and a local chef mentor. Recipes should be creative, appetizing, and visually appealing, while following USDA guidelines for school meals. That's a tall order! These restrictions include price range (just \$1.00 per meal), required meal components, and mandated portion size. Local municipal officials act as judges, and students, parents, and community members are invited to sample and vote on their favorites in exchange for a small donation to offset event costs. Schools can win in three categories: judges' choice, students' choice, and community choice. A grand trophy circulates between the schools, proudly held by the current winner until the next Challenge event.

Winning dishes have included local seasonal ingredients and target foods such as beans, fruits, and vegetables. They demonstrate innovative pairings and presentation such as pumpkin cornbread with chili, apple pie burritos, and breakfast tacos. The students are encouraged to create dishes that are interesting, flavorful, and on-trend.

The competition has yielded impressive results. Since its inception, this friendly competition has grown and garnered increasing community engagement. The number of teams has increased from three to as many as eight and a variety of healthy new items have gone on to be added to the high schools' menu. Over 200 spectators attend the event and support the teams. The students have a forum to share their preferences on flavors, recipes, and meal components, which help inform the lunchroom staff when they menu plan and consider adding new items. Finally, the restrictions on portions, price, and ingredients teach valuable lessons about nutrition, budgeting, and the value of every cent in the food preparation process. It also increases students' and parents' understanding of the school nutrition program.

School districts across the nation can take inspiration from the success of the Harvest Challenge and host their own local and regional cook-offs throughout the school year. These events foster learning and community engagement. Multi-school competitions allow students to interact with a wider group of peers and foster intraschool relationships. They learn high-interest, interactive, hands-on lessons about nutrition and practice culinary skills, the latter of which many students are ill-informed about. Dietitians, school nutrition staff, and chefs from the community can serve as valuable mentors to the students. Teachers from a variety of fields can involve their classes in multiple ways: nutrition (culinary arts and health), organizing the taste test and analyzing survey results (math), and event

promotion (art, photography, newspaper/creative writing, and media arts). In grower states or regions, Cook-Offs can offer insight into the farm-to-table life cycle of food, and in non-grower regions, they can teach students about hydroponic gardens and alternative growing methods.

These events have widespread appeal to students and their communities and can foster interest and appreciation for the school food program. They can be held year-round, taking advantage of seasonal foods, farm-to-school partnerships, and high-interest school events or holidays. Cook-Offs provide an invaluable medium to bring together communities, schools, and peers in the common goal of learning, growing, and, of course, eating.



Hillsborough High School 2018 Judges' Choice Winners

Extra reading:

In school cook offs:

<https://www.usda.gov/media/blog/2016/09/26/annual-harvest-challenge-student-teams-supported-chefs-move-schools-and-farm>

Facebook page @farmtoschoolvc

[https://lacrossetribune.com/community/westbytimes/news/local/harvest-challenge-judge-s-choice-goes-to-hillsboro/article\\_49d37493-3948-5971-9ebd-84ad484b2d80.html](https://lacrossetribune.com/community/westbytimes/news/local/harvest-challenge-judge-s-choice-goes-to-hillsboro/article_49d37493-3948-5971-9ebd-84ad484b2d80.html)

Crystal Lake IL

<https://www.nwherald.com/2018/03/09/crystal-lake-school-district-47-students-to-battle-in-3rd-annual-cooking-competition/aho650b/>

Culinary boot camp instructor's manual

<http://www.orfaleafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Culinary-Boot-Camp-Instructor-Manual-Pages-v12.pdf>