

# Suburban School Districts Need Kitchen Upgrades

## Overview

Across the country, school food is becoming healthier. The U.S. Department of Agriculture has issued updated nutrition standards that have led to meals with more fruit, vegetables, low-fat dairy products, and whole grains; with less fat, sugar, and salt; and without excessive calories. The vast majority of schools are meeting these standards. Unfortunately, many lack the right tools and must rely on expensive, inefficient, and unsustainable workarounds to prepare healthy and appealing meals.

To assess the needs of districts for kitchen equipment, infrastructure, and food service training, the Kids' Safe and Healthful Foods Project—a collaboration of The Pew Charitable Trusts and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation—commissioned a survey of the school food authorities\* (SFAs) that administer the National School Lunch Program and the School Breakfast Program.† This brief describes the facility and staffing challenges and opportunities faced by SFAs in suburban‡ areas as they strive to serve delicious meals that meet the USDA's nutrition standards.

Based on survey responses, approximately 3,075, or 22 percent, of all SFAs serve suburban communities.

## Expected cooking changes in suburban schools

To meet updated nutrition standards, suburban SFAs made or expected to make changes that could affect their equipment, infrastructure, and training needs. For example, schools may need to increase refrigerated storage space to accommodate larger quantities of fresh foods. Among respondents serving suburban communities:

- 78 percent implemented or plan to implement standard recipes and/or work methods.
- 53 percent moved or expected to move to more scratch cooking.

\* A school food authority is the local administrative unit that operates the national school breakfast and lunch programs for one or more school districts.

† This issue brief is part of the *Serving Healthy School Meals* series of reports that addressed the topics of districts' readiness to meet updated nutrition standards, school food service equipment and infrastructure needs, and districts' staff development and training needs related to implementation of the updated nutrition standards. For more detailed findings and to read earlier reports, visit [healthyschoolfoodsnow.org](http://healthyschoolfoodsnow.org).

‡ The term "suburban" was not defined in the survey and was self-reported by respondents.

## Kitchen equipment needs and costs

On average, suburban SFAs need \$64,358 in kitchen equipment per school, compared with \$68,682 per school for all other SFAs. Districts often do not have the financial resources to make these improvements, which is true in many suburban communities:

- 49 percent of suburban SFAs reported having no plan for equipment replacement and upgrades.
- 25 percent of suburban SFAs reported having no line item for capital equipment purchases in their annual budget.

## Top equipment needs

When asked about their needs in relation to meeting nutrition standards, the majority of respondents said that serving a greater variety of fruits and vegetables presented their greatest equipment challenges.

When asked what specific equipment they need to meet all of the nutrition standards, suburban districts responded:

1. **44 percent:** Utility carts. This equipment is used to transport items within a kitchen or cafeteria. Without enough carts, food service personnel must carry items and make multiple trips that waste valuable time.
2. **43 percent:** Walk-in refrigerators. These are used to safely and efficiently store large quantities of perishable foods and beverages.
3. **43 percent:** Scales. Industrial scales weigh bulk ingredients. Without them, ingredients must be weighed in smaller batches—a process that is time-consuming, inefficient, and potentially fraught with error.
4. **41 percent:** Walk-in freezers. Schools need walk-in freezers to store large quantities of frozen foods and beverages.
5. **40 percent:** Food processors. Without bulk processors, school cooks must cut and mix foods by hand or prepare recipes in smaller, less-efficient batches.

## Kitchen infrastructure upgrades

Food service infrastructure capacity is a crucial component of the efforts to serve healthy school meals that meet the USDA's nutrition standards. For example, new equipment such as walk-in refrigerators and freezers may require upgrades to electrical systems.

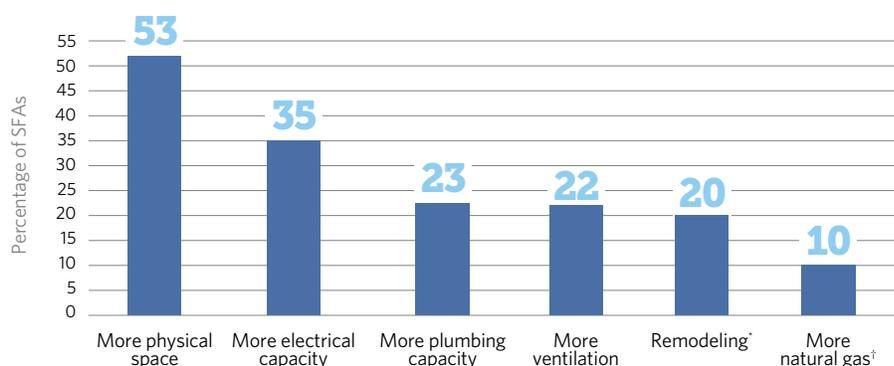
Suburban SFAs were more likely to report needing additional physical space in their school kitchens than were urban and rural SFAs combined. (See Figure 1.)

## Food service training needs

To meet the new meal requirements, the majority of SFAs expected to make at least one change in their production approach. Such changes may require additional training in cooking skills, food safety, and the use of new ingredients and kitchen equipment. (See Table 1 for the top training needs for school food service professionals in suburban SFAs.)

Figure 1

## Food Service Infrastructure Upgrades Needed in Suburban School Districts



\*“Remodeling” indicates that the facilities need updating to meet revised local health department codes.

† “More natural gas” refers to increased pressure or location of pipes.

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Table 1

## Top 5 Training Needs by Food Service Function for Suburban SFAs

Type of staff	Training need	Percentage
<b>SFA directors and food service management teams</b>	Developing or modifying menus	76.4*
	Completing applications and/or paperwork for federal additional reimbursement and Coordinated Review Effort reviews†	74.2*
	Revising food purchasing specifications	68.9*
	Marketing and promoting the new meal requirements	68.3*
	Understanding compliance with meal standards and nutrient requirements‡	68.2*
<b>Kitchen and cafeteria managers</b>	Understanding compliance with meal standards and nutrient requirements	73.3*
	Completing production records	72.2*
	Basic cooking skills	60.2*
	Basic nutrition training	59.1*
	Modifying and/or standardizing recipes	54.7
<b>Cooks and front-line servers</b>	Understanding compliance with meal standards and nutrient requirements	67.3*
	Basic cooking skills	66.4*
	Basic nutrition training	59.5*
	Basic food safety and/or ServSafe training	54.1
	Completing production records	52.8*

\* The difference between suburban SFAs and all other SFAs is significant.

† The Coordinated Review Effort is a comprehensive on-site evaluation of school nutrition programs.

‡ These elements are known collectively as the meal pattern among school nutrition professionals.

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## Conclusion

Schools are doing their best to provide students with meals that meet national nutrition standards, but most need some help to supply their kitchens and staff with the right tools for this important work. Addressing the equipment, infrastructure, and personnel training needs would help schools efficiently store, prepare, and serve healthy and appealing foods.

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**For further information, please visit:**

[pewtrusts.org/kitchen-equipment](http://pewtrusts.org/kitchen-equipment)

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**The Kids' Safe and Healthful Foods Project**, a collaboration between The Pew Charitable Trusts and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, provides nonpartisan analysis and evidence-based recommendations to make sure that all foods and beverages sold in U.S. schools are safe and healthful.