

SCHOOL DISTRICT OF LEE COUNTY, FLORIDA

Students are receptive to “healthy & fresh” messaging

Amy Carroll started working as Lee County School District’s food procurement supervisor in 2017. She became familiar with the growing interest in plant-based meals among the younger generation initially from her pre-teen daughter, who decided to become a vegetarian when she was eleven.

In 2015, with encouragement from the Humane Society of the United States’ Forward Food Program, Lee County, the 32nd largest school district in the country, instituted a Lean and Green Friday — an entirely plant-based day focused on health and nutrition. The district highlights the positive health and nutritional qualities of the meals (especially the fresh ingredients), rather than the vegetarian or meatless aspect. Using social media and educational cafeteria signage, the district demonstrates the health and environmental benefits of Lean and Green days. Sometimes they promote individual ingredients and highlight the specific nutritional benefits and local sourcing.

Lee County also hosts events like “Farm to Table” days and will implement “Taste It Tuesday” (where students can try different fruits and vegetables and new recipes), which builds enthusiasm for plant-based meals. Amy is convinced that this positive messaging is key to the overwhelming support among



Amy Carroll, RD
Supervisor, Food Procurement

“For us it was just a healthy food transition.”

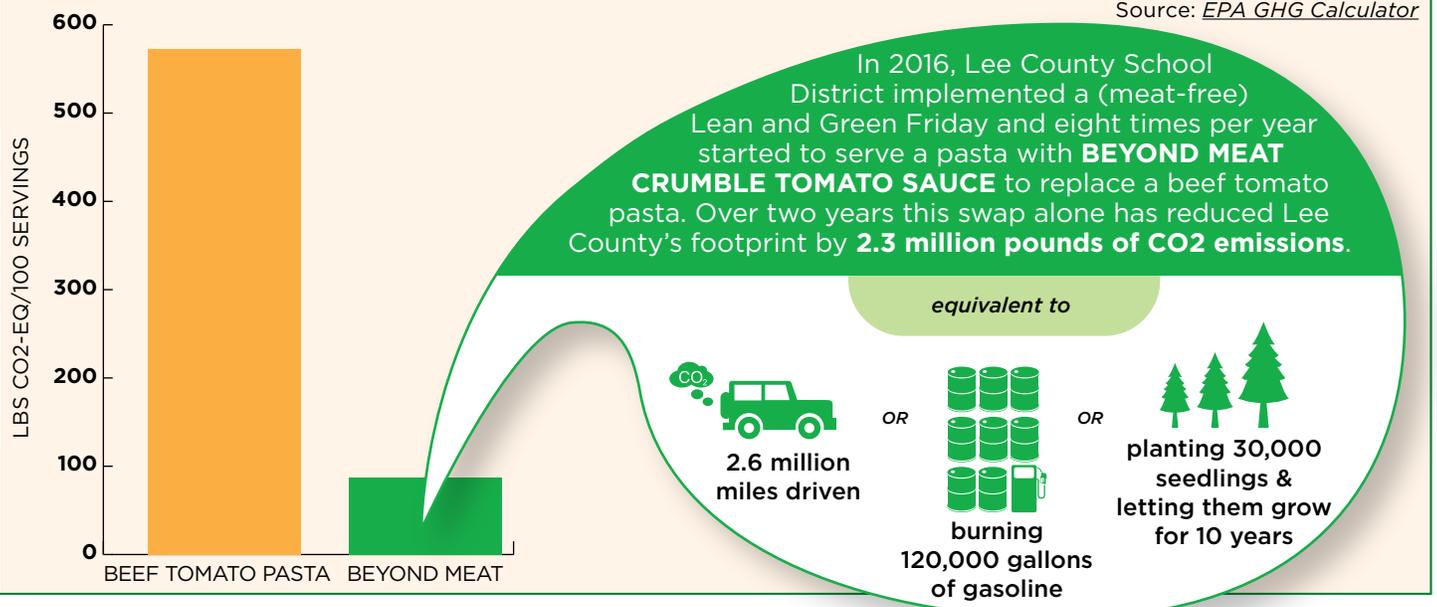
At A Glance

93,221 students (32nd largest in the U.S.)
\$59.5 million total budget
\$17 million food budget (\$1.40/lunch)
32,627 breakfasts /day 55,937 lunches /day
14 million meals served /year
95% free & reduced meals
Limited speed-scratch cooking
Self-operated foodservice Onsite kitchens & no central kitchen Plant-based option at every meal and 100% meatless day every Friday.

students and the community. In fact, Amy says she has only heard feedback asking for more plant-forward menus. Currently, at all of Lee County’s high schools and middle schools, food courts offer a vegetarian option (e.g., veggie entree salad) every day, as do the elementary schools. In response to student enthusiasm, Lee County is planning to pilot a separate vegetarian line in the high school food courts, which would be one of 10 distinct food lines at the high schools.

The Power of One Recipe Swap: Beyond Meat Tomato Pasta

Source: EPA GHG Calculator



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Popularity of plant-based recipes varies across cultural groups.

As Amy explains, “Lee County is so big, something might be popular in one segment of the county but be totally different across town,” highlighting the need to serve culturally appropriate plant-based foods and conduct taste tests at different schools to gain broad acceptance. While several vegetarian recipes were popular throughout the district (e.g., mac and cheese, pasta spirals and tomato sauce made with Beyond Meat plant-based crumbles), other recipes only worked with select populations. For instance, many Latino students didn’t like the flavor of the Fiesta Bowl (bean and cheese) and found it inauthentic, whereas non-Latino kids across town loved it. Amy found that the schools with a curriculum focused on the arts were particularly positive about plant-forward menus. Other food interests are harder to track: “Hummus wraps can be very popular in some schools and less popular in others.” Amy notes, “it’s just hit or miss.” Next year the schools will feature new hummus flavors and add hummus wraps to the grab-n-go section, Amy says. Lee County schools are exploring new creative recipes vetted by students, including a black bean gyro with tzatziki (yogurt sauce), which has been a “total hit” with students so far. In order to support culturally appropriate menu planning, Amy encourages districts in the same region with similar demographics to communicate and share recipes and marketing strategies.



Student enjoys Beyond Meat pasta spirals. Source: Lee County School District

Leadership from the top and outside resources help support plant-based menus.

Like many districts, Lee County successfully capitalized on support from non-profits and community-based organizations to make its plant-based improvements. The Humane Society’s Forward Food Program provided Lee County with culinary training and supported its launch of the Lean and Green Friday program. Amy emphasizes that leadership and support from the superintendent helped smooth the transition to plant-forward food. As a farmer, the superintendent had a strong interest in getting more local fresh fruits and veggies into the cafeterias, and the district is now hoping to invest in a salad and fruit bar in every school.

Making plant-forward meals affordable.

Amy has found that most of the vegan and vegetarian options (e.g., veggie entree salad and bean and cheese burrito) do not cost the district extra money. One exception is the plant-based Beyond Meat Pasta, which costs 71 cents per serving compared to the heavily subsidized ground beef spaghetti at 44 cents per serving. However, the beef spaghetti has much larger hidden health and environmental costs, with a carbon footprint seven times that of Beyond Meat Pasta. The Beyond Meat Pasta is served once a month, so the slightly higher cost is worth the benefits it provides to the students and the environment.

After the devastation of Hurricane Irma in the fall of 2017, a need for greater community assistance meant that the district now qualifies for a 100 percent free breakfast and lunch program. As a result, Lee County will receive the highest level of federal reimbursements, providing more budget flexibility to invest in greater food quality. Lee County is also considering sampling new, pre-made, plant-based products like breaded tofu nuggets ([Asian Food Solutions](#)).



Black bean burger gyros with tzatziki sauce Source: Lee County School District