

SANTA BARBARA UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT, CALIFORNIA

A strong culinary vision can shift foodservice culture.

Before becoming foodservice director in 2008, Nancy Weiss was a restaurateur focused on scratch cooking with high-quality local and organic ingredients. When she started in school food, Nancy saw a need to introduce the restaurant model and ethic to the cafeteria. This meant taking more care in cooking and food purchasing in order to increase food quality. The “frozen to oven, fast-food model needed to be cleaned up,” she says. The school board hired Nancy to pursue this vision.

Prior to taking on the role, she worked as a cook in the SBUSD cafeteria, observing how things could be improved. Her first step as director was to connect the school district to the local farming community. “By introducing the farmers to the school food program, energetically I was already making the swing in a positive direction, which was infectious,” she says. “People started to listen; and the more they listened, the more participation; and the more participation, the more money from the federal government; the more money, the better the staff and the better the food.”

Strategic partnerships and community engagement support food shifts.

Nancy has partnered with the [School Food Initiative](#),



Nancy Weiss,
Foodservice Director

“Eat to live, live to learn and learn to eat!”

At A Glance

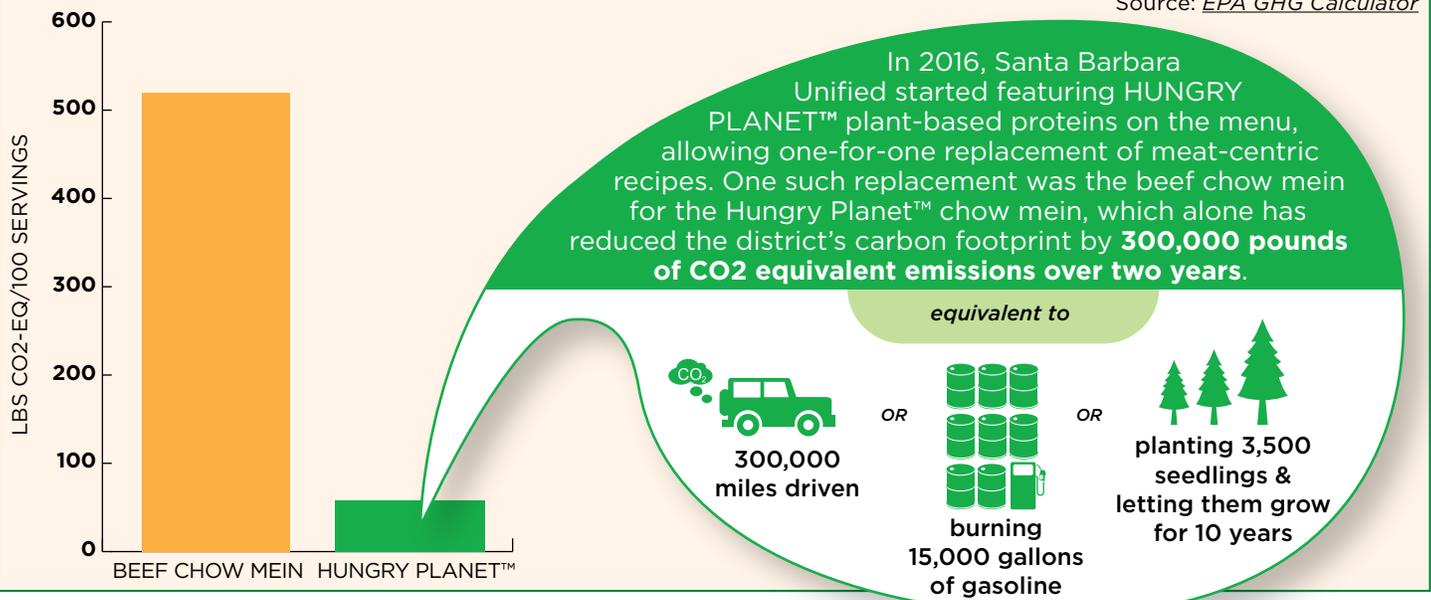
14,546 total students
\$9.1 million total budget
\$2 million food budget (\$1.28/meal)
\$390,000, USDA Foods allocation
8,050 lunches served /day
1,449,000 lunches served /year
50% free & reduced meals
Nearly 100% scratch cooking

Self-operated foodservice with 11 production kitchens including 5 satellite kitchens (with no food prep) and 28 locations district-wide
Hot, plant-based option at every meal, one or two meat-free days per week.

the [Chef Ann Foundation](#) and the Humane Society of the United States’ [Forward Food](#) Culinary Training Program, receiving valuable assistance with procurement, menu planning and education. The School Food Initiative (which has since closed) was particularly instrumental in providing infrastructure grants, local food sourcing assistance and culinary training to promote scratch cooking. The initiative also helped fund seven food trucks (called the Mobile

The Power of One Recipe Swap: Hungry Planet™ Chow Mein

Source: [EPA GHG Calculator](#)



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Cafe) that serve delicious food to both students and community members. “The food trucks are hip and build a positive association with school food,” Nancy says. “Food got more attention, a positive buzz developed about the improved quality of the food, and students and parents began to trust the food more.” The food trucks operate in the summer, giving students more exposure to new foods, engaging the community and increasing revenue, all of which enabled Nancy to make menu changes without sacrificing participation.

The Santa Barbara Unified School District participates in an annual Earth Day festival, which draws 30,000 people over a weekend in April (2018). The Mobile Cafe food truck is present, educating the community about the type of whole foods meal program SBUSD operates. Nancy noted, “We sold out both days this past April, as we highlighted Hungry Planet™’s 100% plant-based products, in a chicken chili verde burrito, hamburger, and meatball sub.” In 2017, Nancy received the U.S. Congressional Woman of the Year Award and the Physicians Committee of Responsible Medicine’s Golden Carrot Award. These accolades affirmed her work and amplified the positive perception of the school food program.

Make plant-forward meals delicious by serving what appeals to the customer.

When Nancy started, SBUSD’s foodservice was losing money; in her first year, it was still not profitable. She explains that she was overzealous, offering complex and unfamiliar dishes like a tandoori veggie wrap and eggplant scaloppini. In her second year, she increased student interest by adapting the food to the cultural context of the community — starting with more familiar foods like tacos, lasagna and burgers, and enhancing them through scratch cooking, including plant-based options like veggie lasagna with tofu and a BBQ tofu sandwich. Offering these familiar foods that kids seemed to like increased participation and put the program on firmer financial ground, enabling employees to be paid a living wage.

In 2016, Nancy brought in [Hungry Planet™](#) a plant-based meat company, which now constitutes most of the district’s plant-based options. The company’s fleet of plant-based meats (using non-GMO soy protein to create beef crumble, beef burgers and chicken strips) make it possible to serve a hot, nutritious option at every meal and eliminate meat on some days. Students have been very receptive to these climate-friendly plant-based or vegetarian spins on classic school meals, such as the beef taco and beef chow mein. In fact, most students chose the plant-based sausage and veggie pizza, even when served alongside the meat option, “BBQ bone-in chicken.”

Nancy’s most popular plant-based entrees include: tacos, nachos, chow mein, plant-based cheeseburger with coconut-based vegan cheese, spaghetti and plant-based meat sauce, plant-based crispy chicken burger and plant-based meatball subs with marinara. She explained that all Hungry Planet™ products are void of fat, so you do need to add fat and some flavor. Although these products are processed, they give Nancy the ability to supply scratch-cooked meals with plant-based protein that kids love. Reflecting on her success in expanding meat-free foods, Nancy explains: “If we want to make an impact, we need to do it at volume and do it with foods kids will come back to. If my kids won’t eat it, it’s a waste of labor and food.”

Meat replacement products can be made more affordable.

It has taken some finesse to make the transition to Hungry Planet™ economically viable within a tight budget. Even at a discounted rate, Hungry Planet™ products cost \$3.45 per pound. So, Nancy saves by using her USDA Foods entitlement dollars on meat and cheese products that are the most expensive items, then uses the remaining entitlement money on canned fruit (for smoothies), canned pinto beans and flour. This provides more flexibility to buy fresh local ingredients and pre-made plant-based proteins from Hungry Planet™. Nancy has boosted participation in other creative ways to capture more reimbursement dollars:

- The district now has a more robust supper program with strong participation and reimbursement rates.
- The department operates seven “Mobile Cafe” food trucks, providing greater reach in the community for supper and summer meal service.
- The Summer Foodservice Program feeds over 2,000 kids daily.
- The Child and Adult Care Food Program serves free supper daily to over 1,000 children.
- The district has a full-service catering division.

All of these operations are amplified with effective marketing strategies. For example Santa Barbara never uses the word “vegan.” Instead, a diamond at the top of the item reads a variation of: prepared from scratch, local, organic, proudly sponsors Hungry Planet™, 100 percent pure protein or soy delicious. This type of positive framing can make a huge impact in boosting participation and student acceptance of plant-based meals.