



*Impact Report*  
Urban School Food Alliance,  
Cooking for Healthy Kids



# Objectives

- Measure the effectiveness of the *Cooking for Healthy Kids* culinary skills training program among participating school districts
- Assess how the training impacts sustainability in each district
- Locate barriers to implementing training skills, techniques, and concepts
- Determine potential next steps to improve training outcomes in the future



# Methodology

The following research project utilized a mixed-method design and involved two phases for data collections.

**Initial Training:** Members of the Urban School Food Alliance (USFA) attended two five-day culinary skills trainings. The first cohort was in May 2023 and the second cohort was in April 2024. Following each training, participants completed program evaluations.

- **Phase 1:** Survey designed based on program evaluation data and sent to 42 participants
  - SurveyMonkey used as platform
- **Phase 2:** Virtual meetings held October 2024 with each cohort over Zoom for participants to reconnect and discuss impacts of the training



# Reviewing the Initial Feedback

# Both cohorts had very positive feedback

≥ 95% of all participants agreed or strongly agreed with the following statements:

The workshop objectives were communicated and achieved.

The workshop provided me with an opportunity to actively participate.

The content was well-organized.

The activities supported learning.

The activities held my attention.

I can apply what I learned in this session to my job.

The trainer(s) answered questions adequately.

The training activities helped me to understand the content.

The handouts provided will be useful reference materials.

Attending the workshop increased my knowledge and skills on the topic.

I would recommend this workshop to others.

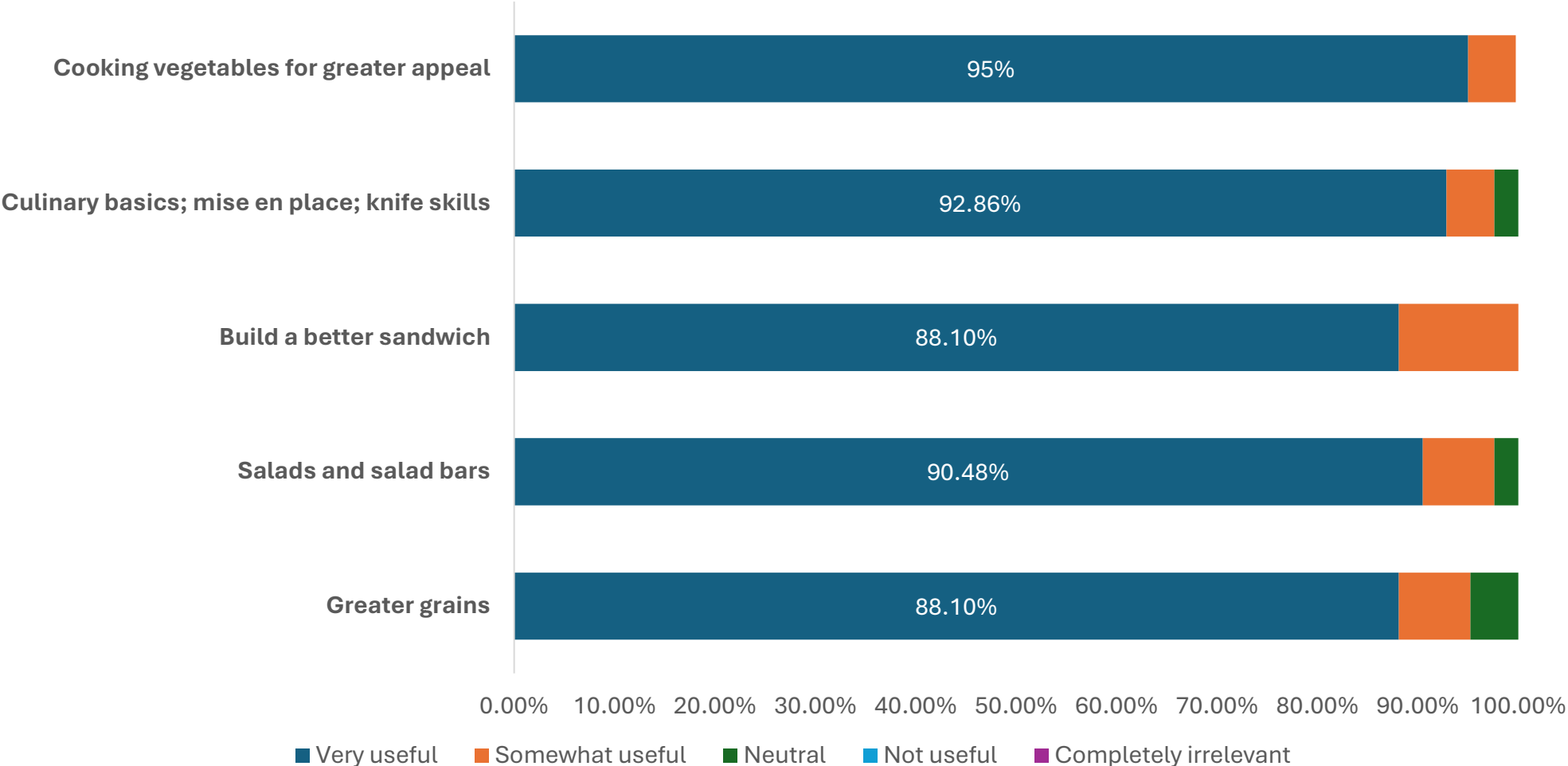
Overall, the workshop met or exceeded my expectations.



# Participants viewed all the culinary sessions as useful



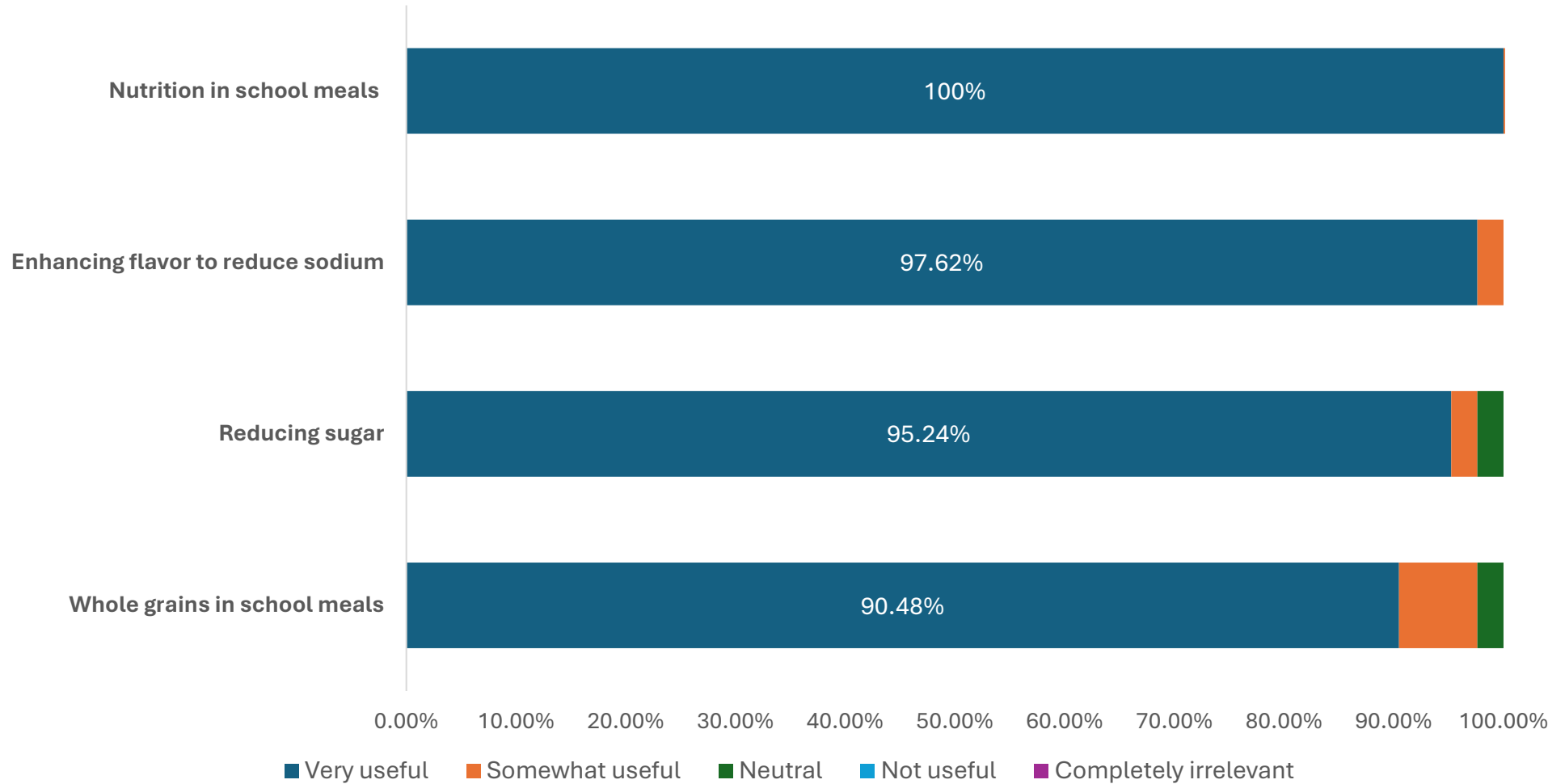
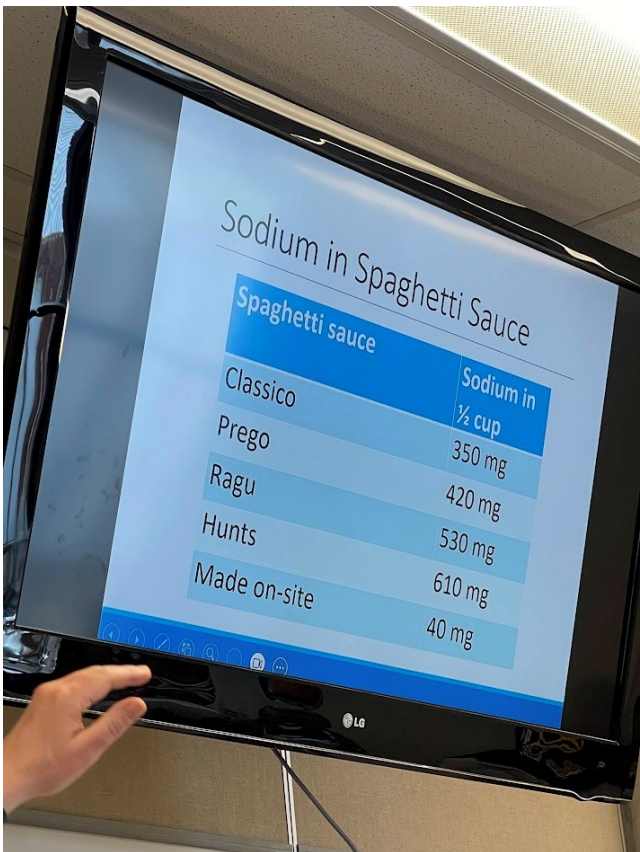
Please rate the individual culinary sessions: (n = 42)



**Culinary Basics/Mise en Place/Knife Skills and Cooking Vegetables for Greater Appeal** were perceived as the most useful trainings among 2023 participants

# Participants viewed all the nutrition sessions as useful

Please rate the individual nutrition sessions: (n = 42)



# What participants liked best about the trainings

“Networking opportunities and class interactions; thinking about cooking for a school audience”

“The versatility of the way we could present the same ingredients in different ways without sacrificing quality”

“How to properly hold a knife. How to plank, stick, dice my veggies. I feel much more confident in the kitchen.”

“Useful ways to use items in my inventory on the menu. (bread, vegetables, dressings, chicken products, etc.)”

“Ways to create your own seasoning blends to make cooked veggies taste great without all the additives”

“Variety. I am truly amazed by how much I can do to enhance my districts healthy menu”





# Participants wished they had learned more about:



Industry challenges: funding, limited equipment and space

Practical methods for preparing food for schools (closed packaging instead of displays)

Adding variety to a set menu

Recipes: construction, crediting, and calculating nutrition

More breakfast options (especially high protein recipes)

Serving line set up, presentation, and maintenance throughout a meal service

“This training was very well organized and executed. I thoroughly enjoyed the entire session and feel that it is essential for all Child Nutrition operators to have the chance to attend. I am grateful for the opportunity and look forward to incorporating all of the valuable information I learned into my district!”

“It was great to train with other school food service professionals from different districts. Learning how they operate opened my eyes to new ideas, I can implement within my own district.”

**100% of participants strongly agreed that the Cooking for Healthy Kids training is a valuable USFA member benefit**

“This training is NECESSARY for all school food service professionals especially those who work within the school kitchens or center kitchens.”

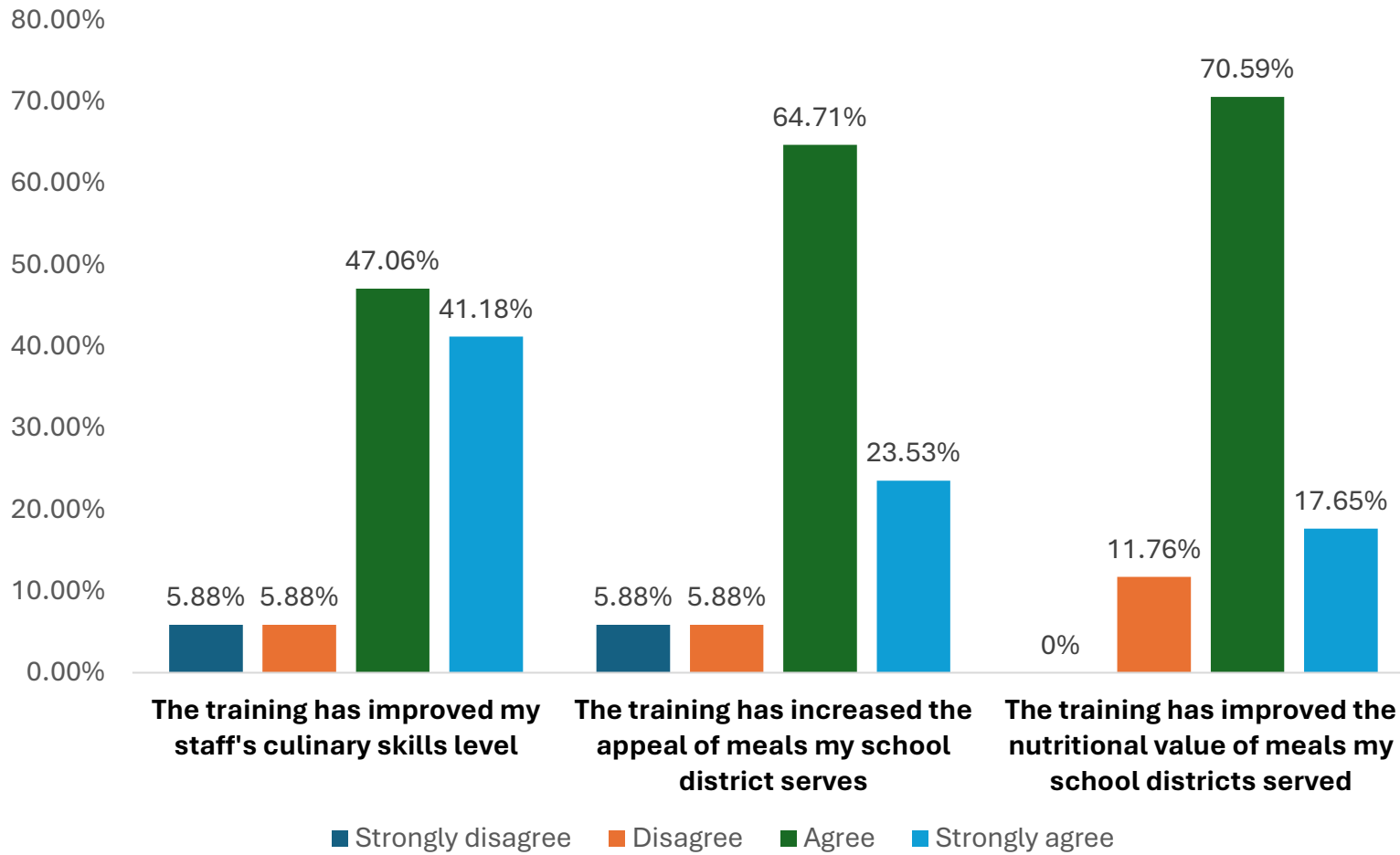
“Excellent hands-on kitchen instruction and classroom instruction as well.”

“This was the BEST experience, the BEST trainers and the BEST material to bring back to my school district! I am truly thankful for this opportunity. THANK YOU ALL!!”

# Phase 1: Measuring Effectiveness and Outcomes



# Participants agree that the training met its goals



Over 88% of respondents agree or strongly agree with all three training objectives



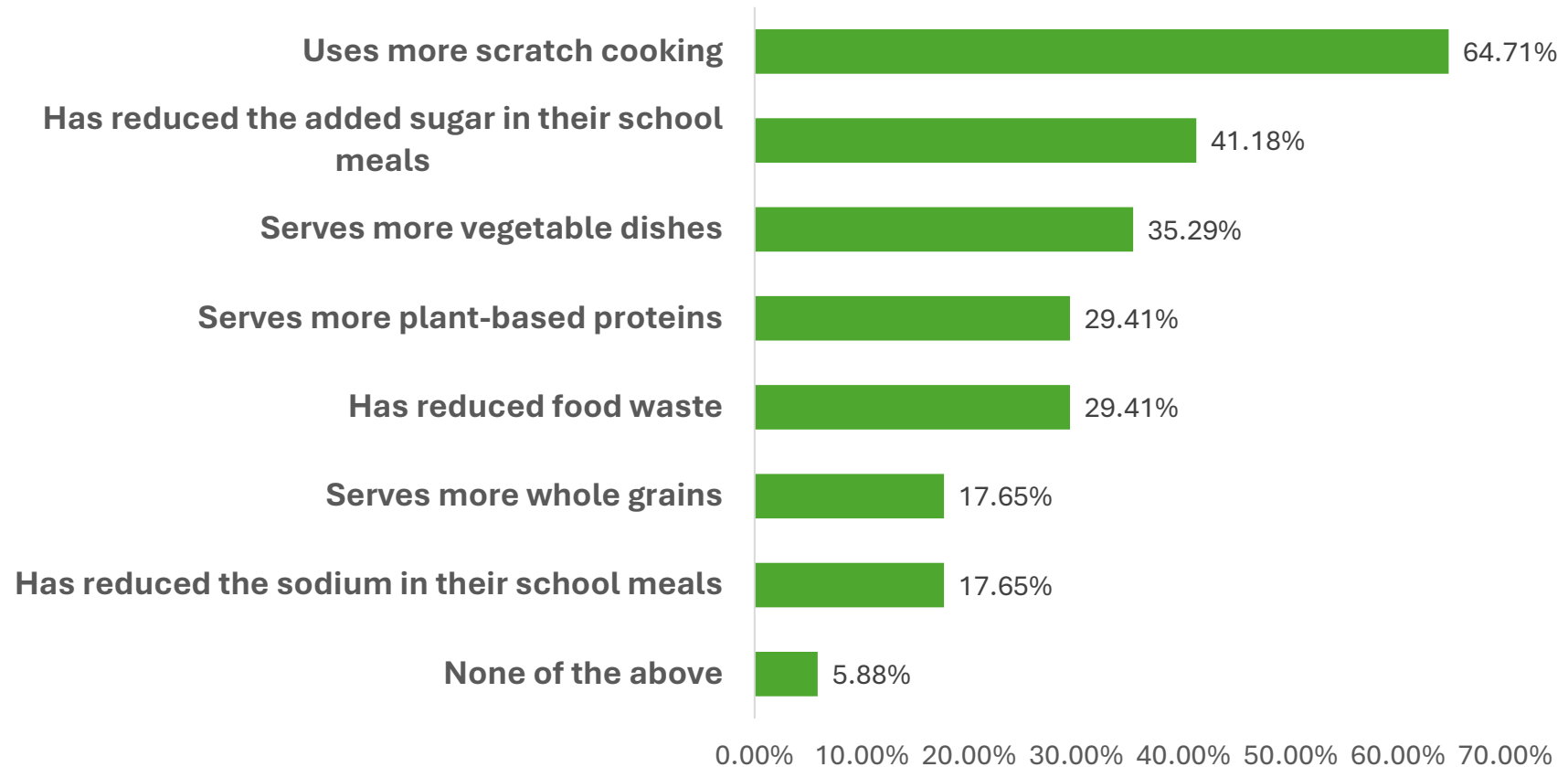
Q: Please select how much you agree / disagree with the following statements regarding the Cooking for Healthy Kids training: (n = 17)

# 16 out of 17 participants report making positive changes as a result of the training

“We have elevated our menus and sourced more local products which improves quality.”



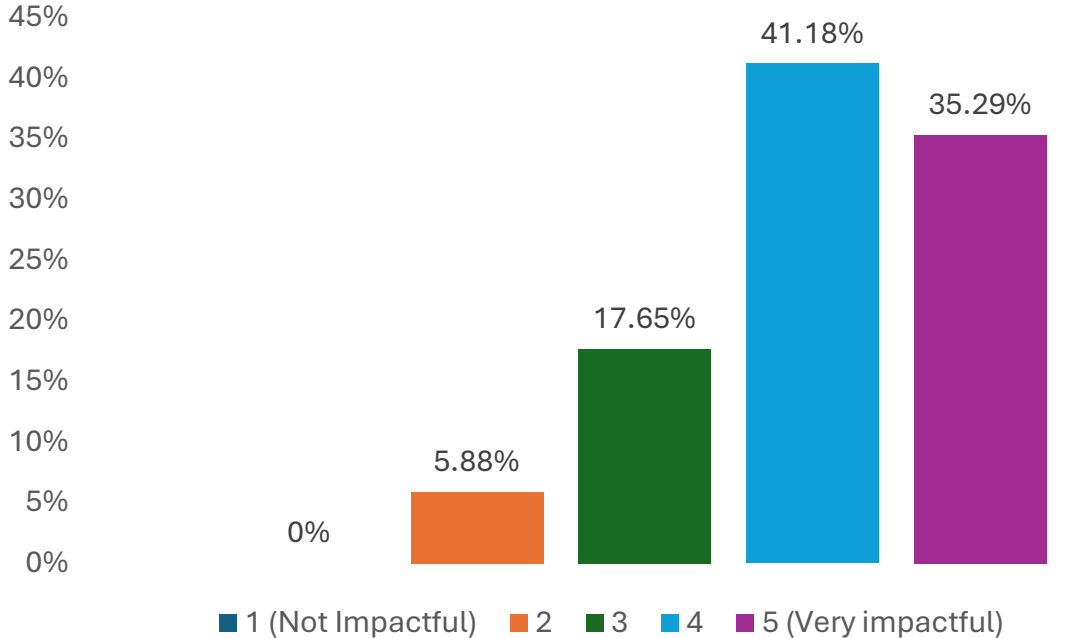
## Since completing the **Cooking for Healthy Kids** training, my school district: (select all that apply) (n = 17)



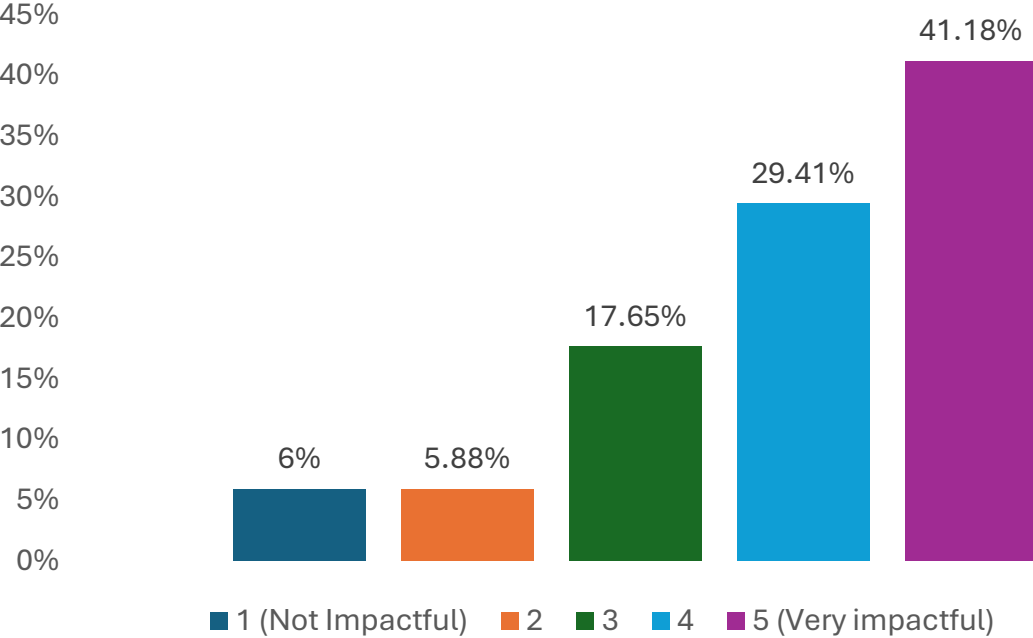
# Culinary Basics and Cooking Vegetables for Greater Appeal are viewed as the most impactful trainings among districts



### Culinary Basics/Mise en Place/Knife Skills



### Cooking Vegetables for Greater Appeal

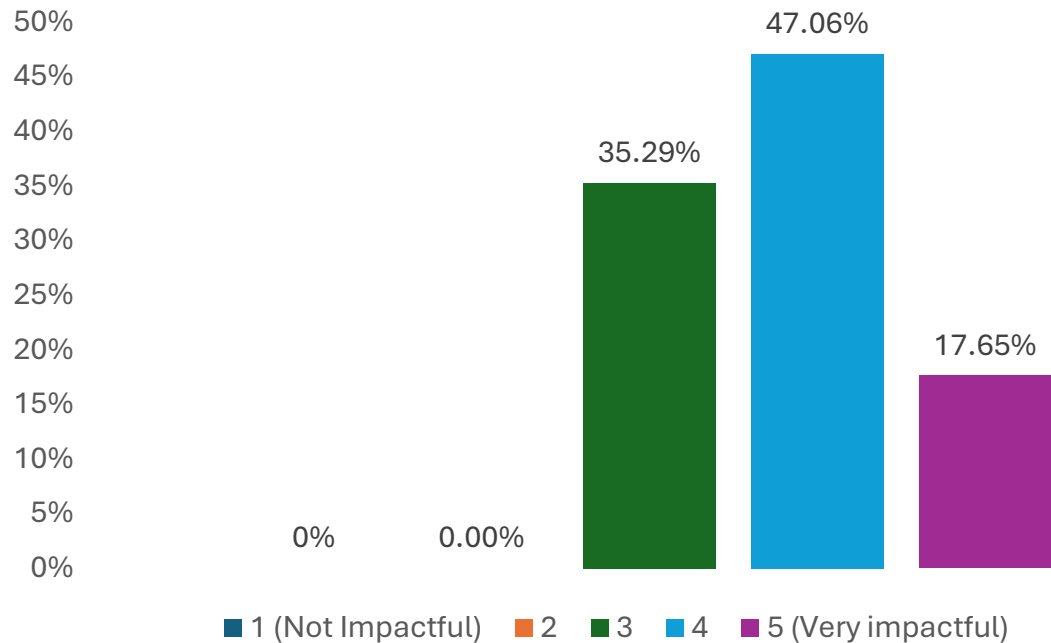


Q: Rank the following components of the Cooking for Healthy Kids training as how impactful they've been to your operation: (n = 17)

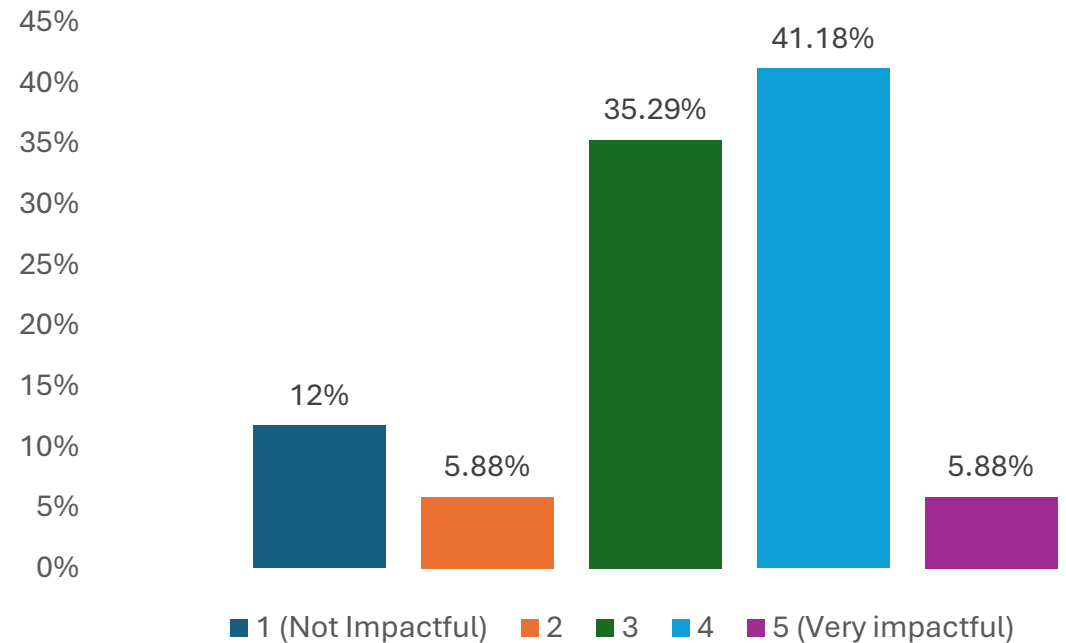
# Success with Salad Bars and Build a Better Sandwich are viewed as moderately impactful trainings



### Success with Salad Bars



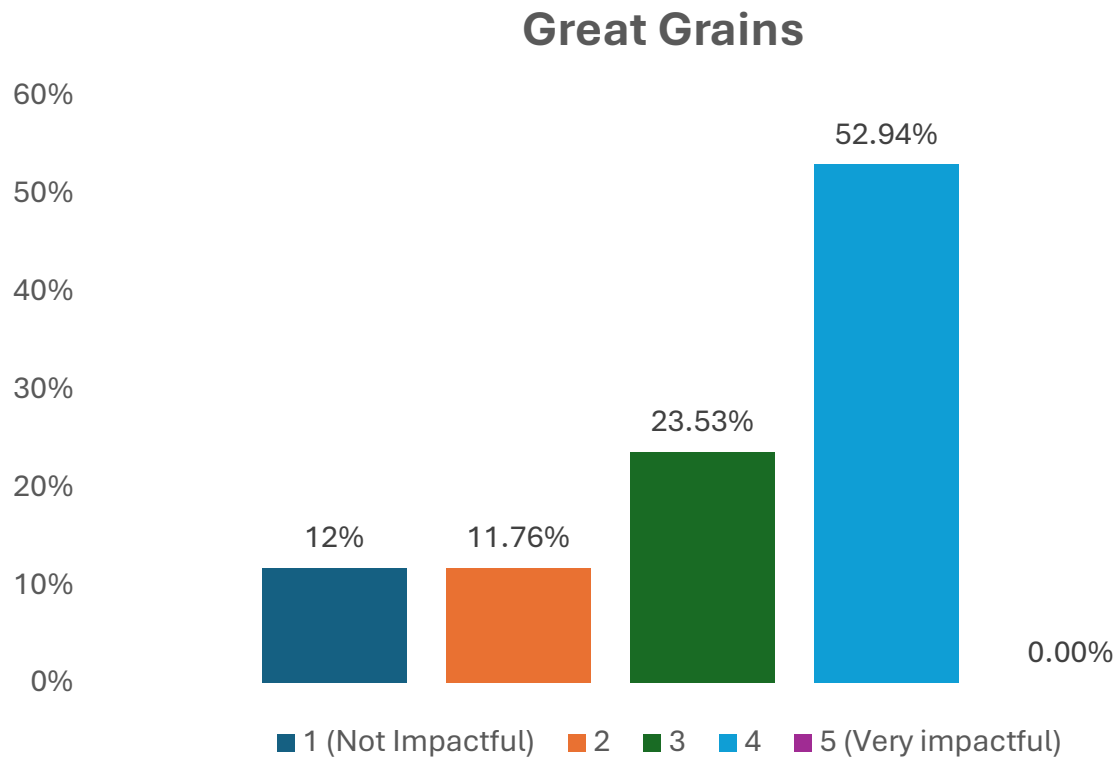
### Build a Better Sandwich



Q: Rank the following components of the Cooking for Healthy Kids training as how impactful they've been to your operation: (n = 17)

# Participants rank *Great Grains* as the least impactful training for their district

However, all five trainings were perceived as impactful overall with a mean weighted average of 3.7



Q: Rank the following components of the Cooking for Healthy Kids training as how impactful they've been to your operation: (n = 17)



100% of participants are still using resources provided by the training

Recipes

Training manual

Healthy School Recipes website

How-to worksheets

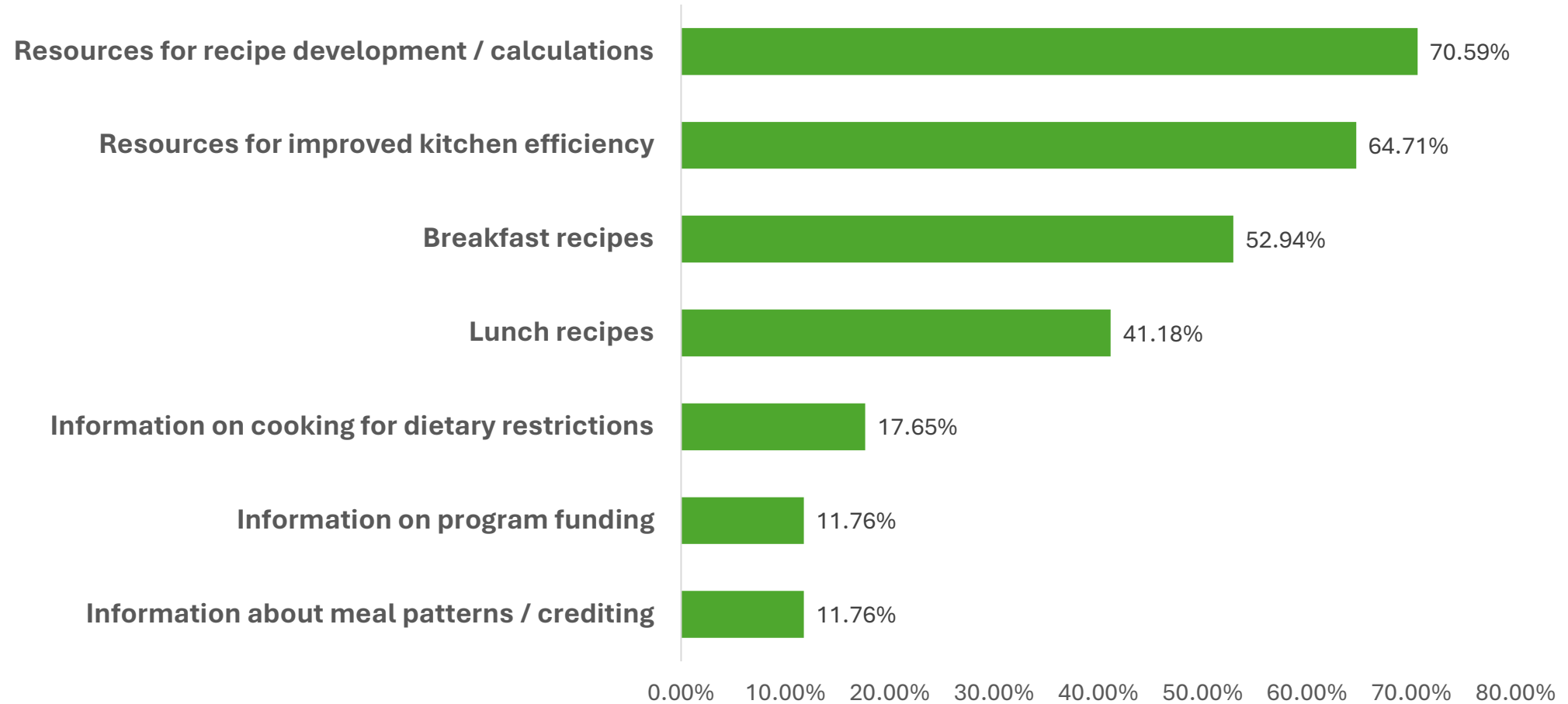
Quick pickling guide

Salad bar materials



Q: Do you still use any of the resources provided by the Cooking for Healthy Kids training?  
If yes - What resources are you still using? (n = 17)

# Participants want additional resources to help their school districts



Q: What additional resources would be most helpful to your school district? Select all that apply. (n = 17)

## What participants say would help their districts:

“Ability to work with others that are using the information and recipes from the CIA on an ongoing basis. Either a working group or platform to post and share and ask questions/advice.”

“Cultural dishes, U.O.M. materials that are helpful but not overwhelming.”

“We have a team of people in food services. It would be nice if Chefs had a better understanding as to how ingredients credit. Ingredients do not all credit evenly.”

“From scratch and speed scratch baking for breakfast and lunch.”





# Phase 2: Reconnecting

# Outcome #1: To clarify outcomes of the Cooking for Healthy Kids training

## Effects of the Training Program

Participants across both cohorts met in two virtual meetings (AKA Class Reunions) in late October 2024. Both cohorts reported that the *Cooking for Healthy Kids* program positively affected their school districts' nutrition programs. Primarily, the training provided an opportunity for a diverse set of school foodservice professionals to connect and share their experiences.

### Popular changes:

- Schools making their own quick pickles / “quickles”
- Increasing the use of scratch and speed scratch cooking; preparing more scratch-made salsas, dressings, and seasoning blends
- Utilizing new recipes with more fresh ingredients



## How has the *Cooking for Healthy Kids* training impacted your staff's culinary skills?

Many participants discussed how the program gave them the hands-on experience, knowledge, and resources required to confidently train their staff. The combination of nutrition education and culinary lessons inspired several USFA members.

After the training, one professional reported telling his staff, **“it’s not just about warming up food anymore, it’s like, ‘hey you’re real chefs, you’re teaching the kids how to eat.’”**

**“We got to walk away with a level of confidence to move forward in anything that surrounds food.”**

**“Even if you’re a chef for decades, you go through a class like that and you have a newfound confidence”**

**“The way you talk about the food and the way you talk about the vegetables and the way you talk about organizing yourself—all of those things brought so much to my experience and helped me to become a better trainer.”**

## Most Impactful Parts of the Training

### *Cooking Vegetables for Greater Appeal*

- Being able to prepare appealing vegetables—by improving cooking methods and adding seasoning blends—benefited participants' school districts.
- A couple members mentioned how implementing techniques from the *Cooking Vegetables for Greater Appeal* training resulted in positive feedback from students and staff.

### *Culinary Basics/Mise en Place/Knife Skills*

- Several USFA members discussed how this part of the training enhanced the way they educated their staff.
- One participant said that when their staff receives training on knife skills, **“they feel good they learned something new; they want to implement it, they want to practice it, they want to do it—and then they want to show it off.”**



## How can this training help your district improve sustainability?

### Increased appeal = Reduced plate waste

- Serving more appealing meals and foods catered toward students' preferences results in kids eating more and wasting less

**“They’re not throwing it [vegetable dishes] in the garbage right afterward, they’re eating it, and they’re looking forward to it again.”**

### More scratch cooking = Decreased plastic waste

- Implementing scratch and speed scratch cooking decreases the need for pre-packaged products, resulting in less discarded supplies.

### Additional methods and ideas for improving sustainability:

- Focusing on compostable materials (utensils, bowls, trays, etc.)
- Hosting plastic-free lunch days by utilizing more finger foods and transforming salad bars into dipper bars
- Compositing, both in the cafeteria and in the kitchen





## Outcome #2: To determine next steps for the *Cooking for Healthy Kids* training

### What barriers have prevented you from implementing techniques or concepts from the *Cooking for Healthy Kids* training?

While participants from both cohorts want to incorporate what they learned from the training into their districts, some USFA members faced setbacks—from a recent teacher strike to increased staff turnover to limited time for training overall.



**“We would love to do a lot of things, but the reality is we just don’t have the staff right now.”**

Many participants discussed the challenges that come with implementing new techniques and concepts. They stated the importance of:

- Making simple changes, one step at a time, so as to not overwhelm staff
- Providing ample practice to build their staff’s confidence



## What resources would be the most helpful moving forward?

Funding opportunities to get the training into the hands of more school foodservice workers and managers

**“We need the people that are actually in the kitchen doing the work to experience these types of trainings”**

- Practice with large-scale cooking needed for schools
- Guidance on recipe creation using different equipment

Many participants expressed the value of connecting with other school nutrition professionals. They felt that having a network to share their experiences would help generate ideas for sustainability and success overall.



## The ripple effect of *Cooking for Healthy Kids* culinary skills training

Three schools districts are highlighted for their implementation of the concepts demonstrated in the training:

- Los Angeles Unified School District
- Boston Public Schools
- North East ISD, San Antonio

# Case Study #1

## Los Angeles Unified School District

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LAUSD staff attended the training in May 2023 and April 2024.

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In the Summer of 2023 LAUSD brought CIA culinary trainers to train the entire Food Services leadership team (75 administrators) in three, one-week trainings.

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This strategy brought buy-in from the leadership to facilitate the training at the site levels.



# Case Study #2

## Boston Public Schools

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The training methods learned during the "Cooking for Healthy Kids" program helped create a base for a major push for better, hands-on training within the district.

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The 2024 back-to-school training focused on hands-on training at schools around the city. Six culinary themes were created for the 2024-2025 school year. Approximately 120 team members were divided into 4 separate training locations, with each location having at least 3 trainers on-site.

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Extensive, hands-on culinary training is being developed for new-hire and existing team trainings to help reinforce the procedural classroom portion of onboarding.



# Case Study #3

## North East ISD, San Antonio, TX

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Additional Area Managers (new positions) attended the *Cooking for Healthy Kids* program, and the result is an added confidence as trainers. Their improved culinary and training skills will be used through in-person and video training.

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Coordinating with CIA to host up to nine 3-day sessions (similar to the first three days of *Cooking for Healthy Kids*) in summer of 2025. Plan to train over 200 hourly employees (about one-third of the staff) in this time frame. Knife skills, vegetable preparation, and selected essential baking techniques will be covered.

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Implemented new culinary processes ,like quick pickling and making a homemade bean dip (hummus), inspired by the recipes in the class.



# Key Findings and Conclusions

- The *Cooking for Healthy Kids* training positively impacted participating USFA members and helped improve their school districts' nutrition programs.
- Concepts from the training can be used to improve sustainability by reducing both plate and product waste.
- Staffing issues are a main barrier for districts when implementing new techniques and concepts.
- **USFA members who participated in the culinary skills training want additional recipe creation and large-scale cooking resources.**
- Moving forward, participants want to connect with other professionals to seek help and share ideas.

