

School Nutrition Association Annual National Conference Features Exhibits, Education Sessions and Demos

More than 6,000 school nutrition professionals from across the country gathered in Charlotte, NC, July 12-14, 2026

ARLINGTON, VA, UNITED STATES, July 14, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- More than 6,000 school nutrition professionals from across the country gathered in Charlotte, NC, for School Nutrition Association's (SNA) Annual National Conference (ANC) this week. ANC allowed school menu planners to sample healthy menu options for their students, preview new equipment and products for kitchens and cafeterias and share best practices to overcome financial and operational challenges. The conference came as school meal programs prepare for forthcoming federal rules to align [current school nutrition standards](#) with the new Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGA).

More than 130 ANC education sessions shared tactics to manage staffing and equipment limitations and offered procurement and financial management strategies to help schools control costs. Sessions highlighted menu swaps to help schools meet July 2027 limits on sodium and added sugar and strategies to expand scratch cooking while ensuring food safety. ANC also offered tips for expanding local foods in schools, including a pre-conference tour of Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools' Food Distribution Warehouse with a chef-led demo of the NC Farm to School program.



SNA's Annual National Conference featured the nation's largest taste-test of school foods



More than 130 education sessions were featured at SNA's Annual National Conference in Charlotte

ANC featured the nation's largest exhibit hall in school nutrition. Attendees taste tested foods and beverages, previewed equipment, supplies and technologies and discussed pricing and product availability with nearly 360 exhibitors. Trends showcased in the exhibit hall include:

- Global flavors and menu alternatives with student appeal, including Chicken Tikka Masala, Korean BBQ Dumplings, Sous Vide Beef Birria for use in speed scratch recipes, whole grain Yakisoba noodles for freshly prepared Asian

bowls, and recipes for Pastélon and Quesabirria Ramen. Attendees also sampled plant-based entrees and allergen free alternatives to support dietary accommodations.

- Culinary demonstrations and training to expand scratch preparation. Chef-led demos offered tips and recipes for incorporating more fresh ingredients on student menus and culinary training services to help short-staffed programs more efficiently prepare meals.

- Menu options that mirror the DGAs. Attendees sampled menu options such as egg bites and whole grain sausage biscuits to boost protein on breakfast menus; muffins and after-school snacks with less added sugar; and beverages, dressings and sauces without artificial colors.

- Specialty equipment to support unique school foodservice needs. Exhibitors showcased equipment designed to support high volume production of fresh and scratch-prepared meals to help reduce labor strain and simplify kitchen workflows.

During remarks at ANC's closing session, U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Secretary Brooke L. Rollins recognized the efforts and contributions of school nutrition professionals. The Secretary also introduced a voluntary state-level pledge that was later released by USDA, aimed to build upon school meal program successes. Among pledge priorities, Secretary Rollins flagged whole food options for breakfast and updates to standards for snacks.

Current federal nutrition standards require schools to offer fruits, vegetables, milk, whole grains and lean protein. Today's school meals must also meet limits on calories, saturated fat, sodium and added sugar. While at ANC, attendees shared ideas on increasing fresh school menu options despite challenges. SNA's [SY 2025-26 School Nutrition Trends Survey](#) revealed widespread needs for increased funds, staffing, culinary training, equipment and infrastructure to help school meal programs expand scratch cooking and reduce reliance on ultra-processed foods.



USDA Secretary Brooke L. Rollins, SNA immediate past-president Stephanie Dillard and 2026-27 SNA President Dr. Ashley Powell

In the [2026 Position Paper](#), SNA urges Congress to increase school meal funding, protect and expand access to healthy school meals for all students and ensure updates to school nutrition standards are operationally feasible for schools.

ANC attendees also welcomed Ashley Powell, PhD, RD, FAND, SNS as SNA President for the 2026-27 School Year (SY). In this role, she will serve 50,000 SNA members and continue the Association's push for increased support for school nutrition professionals nationwide. Powell is the Child Nutrition Director for Auburn City Schools, Alabama. Powell's 60-member child nutrition team served approximately 300,000 breakfasts and 840,000 lunches last school year, offering a variety of locally grown foods including fresh produce and Alabama beef, used in chili, spaghetti and burritos.

About the School Nutrition Association:

The School Nutrition Association (SNA) is a national, non-profit professional organization representing 50,000 school nutrition professionals across the country. Founded in 1946, SNA and its members are dedicated to making healthy school meals and nutrition education available to all students. For more information about ANC, visit www.SchoolNutrition.org/ANC.

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