

# CONSCIOUS KITCHEN LAUNCHES NATION'S FIRST ORGANIC SCHOOL FOOD PURCHASING COOPERATIVE

*California school districts combine purchasing demand to expand access to organic food, strengthen markets for organic farmers and food makers..*

SAUSALITO, CA, UNITED STATES, September 30, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- What if the

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California schools serve over a billion meals a year, an extraordinary market. When districts come together and say, 'This is what we want to buy,' farmers, food makers and distributors can respond.”

*Judi Shils, Founder and  
Executive Director of  
Conscious Kitchen.*

enormous purchasing power of California's public schools could be used not only to feed children well, but to help reshape the food system around them?

Conscious Kitchen today announced the official launch of the [Conscious Organic School Food Purchasing Cooperative](#) (Conscious Co-op), a first-of-its-kind initiative bringing California school districts together to use their collective purchasing demand to make organic food more accessible in school kitchens while creating stronger, more dependable markets for organic farmers and food makers.

The Conscious Co-op has partnered with two leading food

distributors, UNFI and Sysco, to be the bridge between schools and farms, ranches and food makers. UNFI is a leading distributor of natural and organic foods in North America, and Sysco is the global leader in foodservice distribution. The Co-op also brings together 17 founding school districts serving more than 300,000 students, with the potential to reach far more.

Other eligible California school districts can access the Conscious Co-op's contracts through piggybacking, giving them a pathway to Co-op products and pricing without having to conduct their own bid. As participation and purchasing demand grow, the Co-op can continue adding organic products and expanding access to organic food in school meals across California.

The launch is being celebrated today at Cavallo Point Lodge in Sausalito, bringing together school nutrition leaders, organic farmers, food makers, distributors, state officials and partners working to create a stronger organic school food system.

"Our schools have tremendous purchasing power, and when we harness that power together, we can improve the quality of meals we serve students while strengthening California's food system," said Tony Thurmond, California State Superintendent of Public Instruction. "Every student deserves access to fresh, nutritious food at school. The Conscious Co-op is an innovative model for helping districts expand access to organic food, create stronger markets for California farmers and producers, and show what is possible when schools work together at scale."

For more than a decade, Conscious Kitchen has worked alongside school districts and across the food system to understand what it takes to move more fresh, local, organic food into school kitchens. Again and again, the opportunity became clear: schools wanted greater access to organic ingredients, while farmers and food makers needed dependable institutional markets.

"Schools serve more than a billion meals every year in California. That is an extraordinary market," said Judi Shils, Founder and Executive Director of Conscious Kitchen. "When districts come together and say, 'This is what we want to buy,' farmers, food makers and distributors can respond. The Co-op is about turning the massive purchasing potential of school food budgets into a market that can move organic food at a scale we have never seen before."

The Conscious Co-op grew out of years of work helping individual districts source organic food and build relationships across the supply chain. Mt. Diablo Unified School District serves as the lead for the Co-op's grocery bid, working alongside 16 other founding districts and school nutrition leaders who helped shape the model.

"There is tremendous expertise inside school nutrition programs across California, but districts have historically had to solve many of the same challenges on their own," said Alex Emmott, Director of Food & Nutrition Services at Mt. Diablo Unified School District. "When we work together, we unlock that expertise, share what we know and create opportunities that would not exist if we did it alone. That's what makes this Co-op so exciting."

For Barbara Jellison, who has worked alongside Conscious Kitchen since 2017 in West Contra Costa Unified School District, the Co-op represents the evolution of an idea tested and refined in school kitchens over many years.

"We have spent years proving that students will eat and love fresh, organic food and that school kitchens can make it work," said Barbara Jellison, VP of Food Services, West Contra Costa USD. "The next challenge has always been how to make that possible for more districts. The Co-op gives schools a way to take what we have learned and move it to a completely different scale."

That scale is already beginning to influence the marketplace. UNFI and Sysco are working with the Co-op to expand the organic products available to participating districts, giving schools access to major distribution networks while giving distributors clearer visibility into the collective demand for organic food. Additional products are expected to be added as the Cooperative grows.

“For a distributor, visibility into demand matters,” said Steve Brancamp, VP Sales of UNFI. “When districts come together and show us what they need, not for one school, but across a much larger market, we can work differently with suppliers, plan ahead and help create a more reliable pathway for organic products into schools.”

The Conscious Co-op works hand in hand with Conscious Kitchen’s Recipe Project and [Conscious Kitchen Recipe Collection](#), helping connect the meals districts want to serve with the ingredients they need to purchase.

The Conscious Co-op builds on Conscious Kitchen’s work with 136+ California school districts reaching more than 2.1 million students, alongside organic farmers, ranchers, food makers and distributors throughout the state. The goal is to make California schools a dependable market for organic food, and create a path for schools across the country to do the same.

Conscious Co-op Founding Member Districts: Alameda USD, Albany USD, Berkeley USD, Capistrano USD, Cupertino Union SD, Hayward USD, Laguna Beach USD, Lagunitas Elementary SD, Mt. Diablo USD, North Monterey County USD, Pajaro Valley USD, San Leandro USD, San Ramon Valley USD, Santa Clara USD, Sausalito Marin City SD, Tahoe-Truckee USD, West Contra Costa USD.

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#### ABOUT CONSCIOUS KITCHEN

Founded in 2013, Conscious Kitchen partners with school nutrition leaders, organic farmers, ranchers, food makers, distributors, chefs and educators to make fresh, local, organic meals accessible to every student. We build on what’s already working in schools, strengthening procurement, recipes, farmer partnerships, distribution and kitchen operations to make organic school food achievable and scalable. To learn more about Conscious Kitchen, visit [consciouskitchen.org](http://consciouskitchen.org).

Meredith Soden  
Conscious Kitchen  
[meredith@consciouskitchen.org](mailto:meredith@consciouskitchen.org)

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