



ANIMAL LAW &
POLICY CLINIC
HARVARD LAW SCHOOL

Increasing Access to Plant-Based Meals in School Cafeterias : A Best Practices Toolkit for Students & Families



In collaboration with JAINA's Long Range Planning Committee





TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Executive Summary	3
2. The Problem	4
3. Schools Getting It Right	6
◦ Brookline Public Schools Brookline, MA	
◦ Oakland Unified School District Oakland, CA	
◦ Oak Park Schools Oak Park, MI	
4. Five Steps to Inclusive School Meals	12
◦ Step 1: Understand Your School's Situation	
◦ Step 2: Build Your Team	
◦ Step 3: Prepare Your Case	
◦ Step 4: Make the Ask	
◦ Step 5: Follow Through	
5. Resources & Partners	16
6. Appendix: Additional School District Profiles	17
◦ Ithaca City School District Ithaca, NY	
◦ New York City Public Schools New York, NY	
◦ West Bloomfield School District West Bloomfield, MI	
7. Addendum	
◦ White Paper on Food Labeling and Cross-Contamination Prevention in Massachusetts K-12 School Meals	20
8. Impact Statement	25



I. Executive Summary

Across the United States, students from Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, Muslim, Jewish, Seventh-day Adventist, and other faith backgrounds sit down in school cafeterias and struggle to find nutritious meals that align with their religious, cultural, or ethical dietary practices. Not because the food has run out, but because the menu wasn't designed with their needs and values in mind. This toolkit is for students and their families who want to bring change to their schools' cafeterias.

Inside, you will find:

- The case for plant-based school meals as a matter of religious accommodation, cultural inclusion, equity, and nutrition
- Profiles of school districts already taking steps to increase student access to plant-based meals, with real menus and concrete results from Brookline, MA; Oakland, CA and the Plant-Based Pilot Program initiated by Oak Park, MI
- A step-by-step action plan you can follow to bring plant-based options to your school, from assessing your cafeteria's current offerings to meeting with your principal and food service director
- Resources and partner organizations that provide free training, recipes, and technical support to school districts

Some may worry that offering more plant-based meals means taking away foods students already enjoy. In reality, plant-based options are

designed to expand choice, not restrict it. In reality, plant-based options are designed to expand choice, not restrict it. They provide additional meals that can accommodate a wider range of religious, cultural, ethical, and dietary needs, while allowing students who prefer existing menu items to continue selecting them. The goal is not to replace anyone's lunch, but to ensure that more students can participate in the school meal program with dignity and inclusion.

This toolkit was developed through two years of research, interviews, site visits, and student surveys conducted by the [Harvard Law School Animal Law & Policy Clinic](#) in partnership with the [Jain Center of Greater Boston](#) and the [JAINA Long-Range Planning Committee](#). It draws on lessons from pioneering school districts, expert guidance from national organizations working to increase access to plant-based school meals, and the lived experiences of students and families.

II. The Problem

For many students, plant-based eating is not a preference; it is a religious and ethical commitment. Jain students do not consume meat, eggs, and often dairy because of their commitment to Ahimsa, the Jain principle of non-violence. Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, Jewish, Seventh-day Adventist, and Sikh students also hold dietary commitments rooted in their own faith traditions. These commitments are deeply personal and non-negotiable.

Yet in school cafeterias across the country, these students routinely find that their only options are a cold sandwich, a side salad, or nothing at all. When plant-based options are unavailable, students must choose between skipping meals, bringing their own food, or compromising their beliefs.

When access is limited, consequences can be considerable. In surveys conducted by the Harvard Animal Law & Policy Clinic with the Jain Center of Greater Boston, 96% of surveyed Jain student respondents from Massachusetts reported that their schools had never provided meals aligned with their religious dietary needs. These students described:

- Decreased energy and attention during class
- Difficulty concentrating, especially in afternoon periods and during after-school sports
- Exclusion from the communal experience of eating lunch with their peers

This is not a problem unique to a single community or state. Families surveyed across Michigan, California, and New York described the same experience. Students who cannot participate in school lunch miss out on a daily experience that fosters community and connection.

Addressing this problem requires school districts to both increase access to plant-based foods and improve the labeling of food options on school menus. Fortunately, the federal National School Lunch Program already permits schools to meet protein requirements through plant-based sources. Legumes, tofu, lentils, and grains all qualify under current USDA regulations. Massachusetts has recommended clearly labeling and promoting vegetarian and vegan entrees, increasing the frequency of plant-based proteins, and improving accommodations for religious and cultural dietary needs in school meals. The tools are already available.



What is missing is implementation. Some districts have made great strides to increase their students' access to plant-based meals, including:

The Public Schools of Brookline, Massachusetts, has committed to making 50% of its school meals plant-based by 2027.

Brookline Public Schools has pledged to make 50% of meals be plant-based meals. Their local wellness policy and sustainability policy outlines vegan options. PSB Food Services' objective is to make 50% of all meals served in each school plant-based. Source: Public Schools of Brookline, Policy Manual (approved June 12, 2025), Wellness Policy, § B.4(b)

The Oak Park School District, Michigan received a \$250,000 state grant to pilot plant-based recipes.

Oak Park School District developed plant-based recipes that elementary school students taste-tested. The winning recipes were introduced on Meatless Mondays and featured in the district's Soy Superheroes comic book.

Source: Soy Superheroes <https://heyzine.com/flip-book/3ac7a21374.html>

Documentary on Plant-based Pilot Program

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1RMM0xFRSdaWY4RpKlZ_Tgu-qKv8ozSxt/view

These examples represent working programs in real schools, and their lessons are the foundation of this toolkit.





III. Schools Getting It Right

Each profile includes a snapshot of the district, what it has done, and a sample of its lunch menus. These are not perfect models, but they demonstrate that expanding plant-based access is feasible across different school sizes, budgets, and regions.

Brookline Public Schools | Massachusetts

Students	7,039
Median Household Income	\$142,101
Racial Composition	48% White, 22% Asian, 12% Hispanic, 11% two or more races, 6% Black
Current Plant-Based Entree Share	~45% of entrees, targeting 50% by 2027
Labeling	Color-coded icons distinguish vegan, vegetarian, dairy-free, egg-free, and allergen-free options; ingredient transparency on digital and printed menus

What happened here: In 2021, a group of 9th graders at Brookline High School formed the Warriors for Animal Rights Club and petitioned their school for more inclusive meal options. That student campaign led to a Meatless Mondays pilot. From there, the Food Services Director partnered with *Humane World for Animals* to develop and test plant-based recipes, gathering feedback from students and staff before expanding.

Rather than overhauling the menu overnight, Brookline took an iterative approach; piloting recipes at one school, refining them based on student response, and gradually rolling out changes districtwide.

The district now uses a **modular menu** model: meals share the same base (a grain and vegetables) with multiple protein options, so plant-based entrees sit alongside meat-based offerings as equally valid daily choices.

Brookline codified a 50% plant-based meal target in its district wellness policy, which ensures the policy survives any changes in staff or leadership.

Key takeaway: Brookline's success started with students and grew through gradual implementation, not top-down mandates. By normalizing plant-based options and presenting them alongside meat options, higher lunch participation was achieved.

Sample Menu:

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
9-12 Plant-Based Pasta Bar - Tomato Basil Salad - Salad Bar Entree - Sun Butter & Jelly Sandwich - Grilled Cheese - Tomato Soup	2 - Chicken Fajita - Vegan Fajita - Black Beans - Salad Bar Entree - Sun Butter & Jelly Sandwich - Turkey Sandwich - Bean & Cheese Pupusa	3 - General Tso Chicken - Gen Tso Tofu - Rice, WG, brown - Mixed Vegetables - Salad Bar Entree - Sun Butter & Jelly Sandwich - Turkey Ham and Cheese Sandwich 4 Cheese Pizza/	4 - GF Meatballs & Marinara Sauce - GF Plant-Based Meatballs Marinara Pasta - French fries, straight cut - Salad Bar Entree - Sun Butter & Jelly Sandwich - Turkey Sandwich - Cheese Burger/	5 4 Cheese Pizza/ - Vegan Sausage Pizza - Garlic Knot - Caesar Salad - Salad Bar Entree - Sun Butter & Jelly Sandwich - Oven Roasted Glazed Chicken Wings/
8 - Mac & Cheese/ - Vegan Mac & Cheese with Kickin' Nuggets - WG Garlic Breadstick - Roasted Carrots Sticks with Oregano - Salad Bar Entree - Sun Butter & Jelly Sandwich - Sweet Curry Chickpea Sandwich	9 - Premium Beef Chili with Beans - Three Bean Vegetable Chili - Whole Grain Round Tortilla Chips - Beans, pinto, Texas Ranchero - Salad Bar Entree - Sun Butter & Jelly Sandwich - Turkey Sandwich - Cheese and Crackers Bento - Chicken Enchilada Empanada	10 - Chicken Lo Mein - Tofu Lo Mein - Cucumber Salad - Salad Bar Entree - Sun Butter & Jelly Sandwich - Turkey Ham and Cheese Sandwich 4 Cheese Pizza/	11 - GF Chicken Tenders, Halal - Kickin' Tenders, Plant-Based - Garlic Knot - Corn Salad - Salad Bar Entree - Sun Butter & Jelly Sandwich - Turkey Sandwich - Cheese and Crackers Bento - Philly Cheesesteak	12 4 Cheese Pizza/ - Vegan Sausage Pizza - Garlic Knot - Spinach & Garlic Sauté - Salad Bar Entree - Sun Butter & Jelly Sandwich - Meatball Sub

Source:

<https://www.schoolnutritionandfitness.com/webmenus2/#/viewid=6a16ec1c741a9470f72976f9&siteCode=6181>





Oakland Unified School District | California

Students	33,838
Median Household Income	\$97,147
Racial Composition	47 % Hispanic, 20 % Black, 11% White, 10.5 % Asian, 9.5 % two or more races
Current Plant-Based Entree Share	~25% of monthly entrees are plant-based
Labeling	Menus identify vegetarian and vegan options; digital menus provide ingredient and allergen information, with nutrition details available to families online

What happened here: Over a decade ago, Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) teamed up with Friends of the Earth to track and reduce the carbon and water footprint of its school meal program. The district's reductions centered around shifts towards more plant-forward menus, which saved the district money. OUSD started by implementing "Lean and Green Wednesdays," a take on Meatless Mondays that prioritized scratch cooking.

See *Shrinking the Carbon and Water Footprint of School Food: A Recipe for Combating Climate Change*.

https://foe.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/FOE_FoodPrintReport_7E.pdf.



While not every week, OUSD does offer plant-based meals 60% of the week in our sample menu below. OUSD occasionally offers additional meal options to accommodate religious practices and dietary restrictions.



See OUSD Menus, <https://linqconnect.com/public/menu/YXHUX4?buildingId=7919e443-9548-ec11-8b1b-8088dee6ff75>.

Key takeaway: Know your district. OUSD was highly motivated to make substantial changes to its school meals program by a desire to reduce the environmental impacts of its food procurement. School districts in states and cities that have made public commitments to reduce their carbon or water footprint may be persuaded by a climate-centric argument for reducing animal products or increasing access to plant-based options.

Sample Menu:

Week 1 - Monday	Week 1 - Tuesday	Week 1 - Wednesday	Week 1 - Thursday	Week 1 - Friday
MEAL KIT Ramadan Meal Sunflower Meal Kit (Shelf Stable)	MAIN ENTREE Crispy Chicken Sandwich Veggie Chicken Burger (Vegan)	MAIN ENTREE Penne with Meat Sauce Mac & Cheese with Garlic Toast (Vegetarian)	MAIN ENTREE Honey Sriracha Wings w/ Dinner Roll Veggie Chix Tenders + Dinner Roll (Vegetarian)	MAIN ENTREE Chicken & Rice Burrito Chicken Teriyaki Fried Rice Bowl
MAIN ENTREE Beef Hot Dog Bean and Green Chile Burrito (Vegan) BBQ Wings + Dinner Roll Turkey and Cheese Sandwich Chef Salad with Romaine	Wild Mike Pepperoni Pizza Slice Wild Mike Cheese Pizza Slice Chicken Club Wrap w/ Turkey Bacon Chicken Club Salad w/ Turkey Bacon	Honey Sriracha Wings w/ Dinner Roll Chicken Caesar Wrap Chicken Caesar Salad	Wild Mike Pepperoni Pizza Slice Wild Mike Cheese Pizza Slice Buffalo Chicken Wrap Buffalo Chicken Salad	Edamame Fried Rice Bowl (Vegan) Chicken Caesar Wrap Chicken Caesar Salad
	MEAL KIT Ramadan Meal Hummus Meal Kit (Shelf Stable)	MEAL KIT Ramadan Meal Sunflower Meal Kit (Shelf Stable)	MEAL KIT Ramadan Meal Hummus Meal Kit (Shelf Stable)	





Oak Park Schools | Michigan

Students	3,020
Median Household Income	\$65,882
Racial Composition	94% Black, 3% White, 1% two or more races, 1% Hispanic
Current Plant-Based Entree Share	At least 20% (dedicated Vegan Day every Monday); 7 new plant-based recipes developed through \$250,000 state pilot
Labeling	Menus hosted on Nutrislice with allergen filtering (not currently active); Vegan Day designated weekly; MDE pilot recipes include full allergen and USDA component

What happened here: Michigan funded a statewide Plant-Based Meal Pilot in 2024-25, awarding \$250,000 each to Oak Park Schools and Kentwood Public Schools to develop new plant-based recipes for their cafeterias.

See Oak Park PBSL Program <https://youtu.be/ecnzHMGY-Z0?si=ilop0hrv2A3hHO56>.

By January 2026, the Michigan Department of Education confirmed that both districts had completed their new recipes, which were posted on the state's resources page for other districts to use.



Oak Park paired its menu changes with educational materials for students, connecting what was being served to broader themes of wellness and sustainability. The district also offers universal free meals and provides unlimited fruits and vegetables at lunch.

Michigan's statewide policy environment supports this work. The state's Department of Education guidance explicitly permits vegetarian meal modifications for personal, religious, moral, ethnic, or family reasons, as long as modified meals meet federal meal-pattern requirements. The guidance identifies tofu, tempeh, beans, legumes, soy yogurt, and qualifying non-dairy soy beverages as plant-based food items available to districts.

Key takeaway: State-level support matters. Michigan's \$250,000 Plant-Based Meal Pilot grant enabled Oak Park Schools to develop and test student-approved plant-based recipes. The Michigan Department of Education now makes those recipes available statewide through its Plant-Based School Menu Pilot Resources page, allowing other districts to adapt and use them.

Sample Recipes:

The seven plant-based recipes developed through Oak Park's pilot are available on the Michigan

Department of Education's resources page:

<https://www.michigan.gov/mde/-/media/Project/Websites/mde/Food-and-Nutrition-Programs/2025/12/Oak-Park-Schools---Plant-Based-Meal-Recipes-2.pdf?rev=19db0b8d16b6433cb2656b91b9af15e1&hash=15E7A9D94F7D088A1C01F3A996F616B6>



IV. Five Steps to Inclusive School Meals

You do not need permission to start. You do not need a perfect plan. What follows is a practical five-step sequence that students and families across the country can use to bring plant-based meals to their schools. Each step builds on the one before it.

Step 1: Understand Your School's Situation

Before you can advocate for change, you need to know what your school is currently doing. Spend some time gathering information:

- How many plant-based entrees appear on the weekly menu? Count hot, protein-rich options (tofu stir fry, bean chili, lentil bolognese) separately from sides and cold items (PB&J, side salads, fruit cups). How often are you limited to the salad bar or peanut or sunflower butter sandwich?
- Are plant-based items labeled? Can you tell from the menu or the serving line which items are vegan, vegetarian, or allergen-free? Or do you have to ask?
- How are plant-based options presented? Are they on the main serving line alongside other entrees, set apart in a separate area with a less appealing presentation, or available only on request?



Use the school profiles in this toolkit as benchmarks. If Brookline can reach 45% plant-based entrees with a modular menu model, and Ithaca can offer vegan options five days a month plus additional vegetarian options on a tighter budget, what is realistic for your school?

Write down your findings. They will become the foundation of your case.



Step 2: Build Your Team

Advocacy works better with a coalition. Start by identifying people who share your concerns and people who bring different strengths to the effort:

At your school: Friends and classmates who would benefit from or support expanded options; Student clubs, cultural, religious, environmental, or food-related groups; Parent associations and family networks; and Faculty advisors who might champion the effort.

Beyond your school: Religious and cultural organizations in your community (Jain, Hindu, Jewish, Buddhist, Muslim, Sikh communities) have members who have navigated these issues before - Local farms or food programs, especially farm-to-school initiatives in your area.

National organizations that offer free support: ***Humane World for Animals*** provides guidance on plant-based recipe development, staff training, and district-level advocacy. They helped Brookline build its program. ***Balanced*** works directly with K-12 districts on culinary training, menu development, and behavioral strategies to make plant-based meals appealing.

They also offer an advocacy chatbot that can help you plan your approach. **Chef Ann Foundation** supports scratch cooking and nutrition-focused food service in schools. **Urban School Food Alliance** is a coalition of large urban district food service professionals who share best practices in procurement, sustainability, and menu planning.

You do not need a large coalition to start. Even two or three students and a supportive parent can make a credible case. But the more voices you bring, the harder it is to dismiss you.

Step 3: Prepare Your Case

This is where your research, your team, and your personal experience come together. A strong case rests on three elements:

1. Personal experience. Your story matters. If you have skipped meals because there was nothing you could eat, if you have felt excluded during lunch, if your energy/academic performance/participation has suffered in afternoon classes because you went hungry, say so.

2. Evidence from other schools. Reference the districts profiled in this toolkit. Brookline started with a student petition and built to 45% plant-based in five years. Oak Park received state funding to pilot new recipes that they now include on the menu at least once per week. Oakland Unified teamed up with a national organization to reduce the environmental impact of its food procurement and now provides hot vegetarian or vegan entrees on most days.

3. A concrete proposal. Do not just describe the problem. Bring a specific, achievable ask. National organizations like Humane World for Animals can help you develop a plan that sets your school district up for success. Depending on your school's starting point, here are some potential requests:

We are requesting that our school district: Offer at least one hot, protein-rich plant-based entree daily - Label all menu items clearly (vegan, vegetarian, allergen information) - Present plant-based options on the main serving line alongside other entrees

The Brookline modular menu model which incorporates shared bases with different proteins, is a practical template to reference. A simple version:

Day	Meat Entree	Plant-Based Entree	Shared Base
Monday	Chicken stir fry	Tofu stir fry	Rice + vegetables
Tuesday	Beef tacos	Black bean tacos	Tortillas + salsa
Wednesday	Pasta with meat sauce	Lentil bolognese	Pasta + marinara
Thursday	Turkey chili	Three-bean chili	Peppers, onions, beans
Friday	Meatball sub	Kelp meatball sub	Bread + marinara



This model keeps costs down (shared bases), reduces staff burden (one prep line with different proteins), and normalizes plant-based options by placing them alongside meat-based meals. Anticipate pushback. When you bring your proposal to school officials, you may hear concerns. Here is how to respond:

- “It will cost too much.” Plant-based proteins such as beans, lentils, tofu, chickpeas are among the least expensive protein sources available. They are generally cheaper than animal proteins, and whole-food plant-based ingredients cost less than processed plant-based meat substitutes. The modular menu model also keeps costs down because both the meat and plant-based entrees share the same base ingredients.
- “Students won’t eat it.” The key is appealing preparation and presentation. “Smoky black bean tacos” will draw more interest than “vegan bean dish.” Districts that name plant-based items with the same care they give other entrees see stronger uptake.
- “Our staff can’t handle the extra work.” The modular menu model actually reduces complexity: staff prepare shared bases and swap proteins. Organizations like Humane World for Animals and Balanced offer free staff training on plant-based cooking techniques, cross-contamination prevention, and USDA compliance. Brookline built its program with this kind of external support.
- “Parents will object.” This is about adding options, not removing them. No one is proposing that meat be taken off the menu. Plant-based entrees expand what is available so that more students can participate in school lunch. Framing the change as more choice for all families is both accurate and effective.



Step 4: Make the Ask

You have your research, your team, and a clear proposal. Now it's time to bring it to the decision-makers.

Who to contact, in order of priority:

Your school’s Food Service Director. This is the most important person to reach. They oversee menu planning, procurement, and compliance with federal and state nutrition standards. They have the authority to add items to the menu and the operational knowledge to tell you what is feasible.

Your Principal, Assistant Principal, or District Superintendent. They can champion the effort within the school and connect you with the food service team if you do not have a direct contact.

School nurses, district wellness coordinators, district dietitians, or school board members. These are policy-level contacts who can support embedding plant-based commitments in the district’s wellness and sustainability policies. This kind of structural change survives staff turnover.

Cafeteria managers and school nutrition staff. The people preparing and serving the food every day. Their buy-in matters for implementation.

How to reach out:

- Start with a brief, respectful email requesting a 20-30 minute meeting. State your purpose clearly: you want to discuss expanding plant-based meal options at your school.

- When you meet, bring your research, your personal experiences, and your concrete proposal. Offer to help through taste-test events, student surveys, or connecting the school with partner organizations.

Step 5: Follow Through

Advocacy does not end with a meeting. After your initial outreach:

- Submit a formal written request to your school or district to expand access to daily plant-based options.
- Track what happens. Did the school add a new menu item? Improve labeling? Agree to a pilot program? Document both progress and obstacles.
- Report back. Share your outcomes with your coalition, your community, and the organizations that supported you. Your experience helps others learn what works.



The Student Collaborative

The YJA-Harvard Law School-JAINA Student Collaborative invites motivated students to join a structured initiative. Each participant will:

1. Bring the “Best Practices” message to their own high school or local school district
2. Meet with the principal or school nutrition designee to discuss plant-based meal options
3. Submit a formal written request to the school asking that they expand plant-based options.
4. Meet with the HLS team to discuss strategy and next steps.
5. Receive a Harvard Law School Animal Law & Policy Clinic Letter of Collaboration upon completing the outreach process (the change must be initiated, though not necessarily completed, to qualify)

This is an opportunity for Jain youth to combine their values with real civic action by practicing ahimsa at the institutional level. Meaningful change does not require perfect conditions. It can start with you.

Sign-up here



Read Info doc



Resources & Partners

Organizations

The following organizations provide free resources, training, and technical assistance to school districts working on plant-based meal implementation:

- **Humane World for Animals:** Works directly with K-12 school districts on recipe development, staff training, and district advocacy support. Partnered with Brookline to build its plant-based program. Districts can independently sign on to the Humane World pledge, committing to expand plant-based options.
- **Balanced** (balanced.org): Works directly with K-12 districts on culinary training, menu development, and behavioral design strategies. Offers an advocacy chatbot that helps students and families plan outreach, generate talking points, and prepare for meetings.
- **Greener by Default** (greenerbydefault.com): Focuses on making plant-based meals the default option in institutional settings through choice architecture and menu design, while preserving student choice.
- **Chef Ann Foundation** (www.chefannfoundation.org): Supports scratch cooking and nutrition-focused food service in schools.
- **Urban School Food Alliance** (urbanschoolfoodalliance.org): A coalition of food service professionals from major urban school districts (NYC, Chicago, LA, Miami, Dallas, and others) sharing best practices on procurement, sustainability, and menu planning.
- **Massachusetts Farm to School** (massfarmtoschool.org): Helps districts source local produce, legumes, grains, and minimally processed ingredients.

Additional Resources Provided in the Addendum

- **White Paper on Food Labeling and Cross-Contamination Prevention:** A detailed framework for implementing standardized labeling in K-12 school meal programs, developed by the Harvard Animal Law & Policy Clinic.
- **ALPC Impact Statement to Massachusetts DESE:** The Clinic's formal request that Massachusetts commit to at least 30% plant-based school meals by 2031, with supporting evidence on religious accommodation, nutrition, and implementation feasibility. The statement may be used as a framework for a state-level request in other states.

Share Your Experience

We want to hear from you. If you use this toolkit to advocate for plant-based options at your school, please reach out and tell us what happened, what worked, what was difficult, and what you have learned. Your experience will help us improve this toolkit and support other students.

Contact: Nirva Patel, nirvaboston@gmail.com

Appendix: Additional School District Profiles

The districts below were reviewed as part of our research. They are included here as additional reference points for students and families exploring what other schools are doing. Each demonstrates a different aspect of plant-based meal implementation.

Ithaca City School District | Ithaca, NY

Students	5,103
Median Household Income	\$48,784 (reflects large college student population in the city)
Racial Composition	62% White, 12% two or more races, 10% Asian, 9% Hispanic, 7% Black
Current Plant-Based Entree Share	Plant-based meals are offered 25% of days per month
Labeling	Items marked with “(V)” for vegan on printed menus; daily sandwiches and salad bar listed separately

What happened here: Ithaca operates under the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), meaning every student receives free breakfast and lunch regardless of family income. An analysis of Ithaca’s lunch menus found on average five warm vegan entrees across twenty school days as well as additional vegetarian offerings. See [Ithaca School Meals 25-26](#). In May, the vegan options included veggie chili with Fritos, sweet and sour local tofu, Bombay potato and beans with naan, and a bean burrito. Students also have daily access to a salad bar with assorted fruits, vegetables, and grains (available as a full entree option) and daily sandwich alternatives.

At 25% plant-based entrees, Ithaca has room to grow, but the foundation is there. The district’s use of local sourcing (the “local tofu” item) and its universal free meals program make it an instructive model for smaller districts that may not have Brookline’s budget.

New York City Public Schools | New York, NY

Students	906,248 across ~1,500 school buildings
Median Household Income	\$79,713
Racial Composition	42% Hispanic, 19% Black, 19% Asian, 16% White, 2% Multi-Racial
Current Plant-Based Entree Share	Plant-based entrees offered under “Plant Powered” initiative throughout the week; warm protein-rich vegan entrees remain limited relative to total menu
Labeling	Systemwide menus label items “(VE)” for vegan and “(V)” for vegetarian; PreK-8 provided a separate “Vegetarian Lunch Menu”

What happened here: New York City operates one of the largest school meal programs in the country, serving over half a million lunches daily through the Office of Food and Nutrition Services. All NYC public schools follow the same centralized menu, regardless of individual school facilities.

NYC initially designated Mondays and then, additionally, Fridays as “Plant Powered” days. NYC recently shifted to offering plant-based entrees throughout the week. By May 2026, menu options included three bean chili, fajita black bean burger, and chickpea shawarma. The city has also created a Nutrition Collaborative Program that trains school food managers to introduce new plant-based items and has established a \$10,000 food education grant program.

The challenge in NYC is scale and infrastructure. About 80% of school buildings have fully operational kitchens, but 10% have limited kitchen capacity, and 11% have no kitchen at all. Schools without kitchens, which are disproportionately located in lower-income neighborhoods, depend on pre-prepared or reheated meals and face distinct constraints around plant-based options. Some plant-powered offerings, such as sweet potato waffle fries have generated discussion regarding protein content and nutritional adequacy.

NYC’s experience shows both the power of centralized menu planning and also its limits. When the system adds a strong plant-based entree, over a million students gain access. But the label “Plant Powered” can outpace the nutritional substance of what is actually on the tray.

Key takeaway: Scale creates both opportunity and risk. The strength of NYC’s centralized model is its ability to scale change across hundreds of schools. Yet plant-based initiatives should be measured by the availability of nutritious, protein-rich entrees, rather than by counting any meatless item as a plant-based meal.

West Bloomfield School District | West Bloomfield, MI

Students	4,830
Median Household Income	\$127,162
Racial Composition	44% White, 37% Black, 7% Hispanic, 6% two or more races, 6% Asian
Current Plant-Based Entree Share	Plant-based entrees offered 80% of the week
Labeling	N/A

West Bloomfield stands out among Michigan districts for its explicit online signaling of vegan options. The district posts a vegan options section header on its nutrition website, links families to detailed nutritional data through Nutrislice, and offers physician-prescribed substitutions at no extra charge for students with documented dietary needs. The lunch menu appears to offer Monday through Thursday a plant-based burrito, pasta, veggie burger, and hummus bento box.

MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY
Daily Grill Selections: Beef Burgers, Chicken Sandwiches, Garden Burgers, Potato Wedges, Baked Fries or Baked Tots along w/ Specialty LTO's (Limited Time Offers) Daily Deli Selections: Made To Order Sandwiches, Subs & Pitas w/ Turkey, Turkey Ham, Roast Beef, Assorted Cheese, Lettuce, Tomatoes, Spinach, Peppers, Onions, Jalapenos and Assorted Sauces Daily Pizzeria Selection: Cheese, Pepperoni or LTO Pizza Slices, Bosco Sticks with Marinara Daily Grab & Go: Grilled Chicken Salad, Garden Salad, Chef Salad, Hummus Bento Box, Yogurt Parfaits, Vegetable Crudit� with Ranch Dip				Jets Pizza Day 1 Cheese Pizza Vegetable Pizza Pepperoni Pizza Garden Salad Deli Subs
Home Zone Feature: Hot-Honey Stung Chicken w/ Mashed Sweet Potato Tortilla Feature: Burritos - Chicken, Beef or Bean w/ Rice & Custom Toppings Test Kitchen Feature: Pasta Bowl Chicken, Beef, Vegetable Bar & Choice of Marinara or Alfredo Sauces 4	Home Zone Feature: Spicy Beef & Rice Bowl w/ Cucumber Salad Tortilla Feature: Soft Tacos - Chicken, Beef or Bean w/ Rice & Custom Toppings Test Kitchen Feature: Pasta Bowl Chicken, Beef, Vegetable Bar & Choice of Marinara or Alfredo Sauces 5	Home Zone Feature: Sloppy Joes w/ Potato Wedges Tortilla Feature: Doritos Walking Tacos - Chicken, Beef or Bean w/ Rice & Custom Toppings Test Kitchen Feature: Pasta Bowl Chicken, Beef, Vegetable Bar & Choice of Marinara or Alfredo Sauces 6	Home Zone Feature: Nacho Fries Tortilla Feature: Crunchy Tacos - Chicken, Beef or Bean w/ Rice & Custom Toppings Test Kitchen Feature: Pasta Bowl Chicken, Beef, Vegetable Bar & Choice of Marinara or Alfredo Sauces 7	Jets Pizza Day 8 Cheese Pizza Vegetable Pizza Pepperoni Pizza Garden Salad Deli Subs



ADDENDUM

White Paper on Food Labeling and Cross-Contamination Prevention in Massachusetts K-12 School Meals

On Behalf of the Jain Center of Greater Boston

I. Introduction

Food labeling within school meal programs is more than a matter of transparency; it is a matter of trust, inclusion, and respect for the diverse dietary and faith-based practices of Massachusetts families. For the Jain community, whose principles emphasize non-violence (ahimsa) and the avoidance of harm to all living beings, the assurance that food served in public institutions is accurately labeled and uncontaminated is essential.

Recent initiatives such as the Massachusetts Nutrition Commission's recommendations, Senate Bill 922 ("The Bean New Deal"), and Humane World's 30% Plant-Based Pledge have made important strides toward expanding access to plant-based meals. Yet, none of these efforts establish a uniform labeling system that allows districts to clearly identify, communicate, and maintain standards around vegetarian, vegan, and contamination-free meals. This White Paper therefore outlines a labeling framework designed to advance Massachusetts statewide goals of health, sustainability, and food equity together with inclusivity for students who follow plant-based diets.

II. The Importance of Clear Food Labeling

A. Building Trust and Accessibility

Accurate and visible labeling helps families make informed decisions aligned with their beliefs and health needs. For many Jains, unclear labeling creates daily uncertainty and emotional stress when selecting school meals. A standardized, icon-based labeling system would resolve this uncertainty by giving immediate visual assurance that a meal meets the needs of students who follow a plant-based diet, thereby restoring trust and encouraging broader participation in school meal programs.

B. Cross Contamination

Cross-contamination occurs when trace animal products or allergens unintentionally transfer to plant-based meals through shared cooking surfaces, utensils, or storage. For Jain families, even traces of egg, meat, or fish render food inedible, and similar sensitivity applies to those with dairy or egg allergies. The harm caused by cross-contamination extends beyond dietary discomfort; it erodes trust and alienates families from public meal programs. In previous engagements with the Jain Center, students emphasized that in the absence of accurate labels, they are left assuming cross-contamination because schools have not affirmatively confirmed that adequate precautions are being taken. For Jain students, consuming or even risking contamination from animal products carries deep moral and emotional implications that directly affect participation in school meals. Clear and affirmative labeling relieves families from risk-averse guesswork and instead provides reliable guidance that supports consistent, student-centered meal selection.

C. Promoting Inclusion and Equity

Labeling is not simply logistical; it is an act of equitable inclusion. Embedding inclusive labels across menus, signage, and digital ordering platforms signal that diverse dietary practices are recognized and respected within public institutions, transforming meal access into an expression of equity rather than exception.

D. Supporting Massachusetts' Broader Policy Goals

Massachusetts' policy direction already recognizes that clear, consistent food labeling is both essential and highly feasible. The School Meal Nutrition Standards Commission explicitly recommended that all districts "clearly label and promote vegetarian and vegan entrées and prepared sides" as part of its broadly feasible statewide actions. This recommendation, one of the few categorized as broadly feasible, signals that labeling is not only operationally realistic for districts but also central to meeting the Commonwealth's goals around cultural inclusion, dietary accommodation, and improved meal participation.

However, the Commission's recommendation does not specify how labeling should be implemented in a way that reflects the diverse interpretations of plant-based meals across cultural, religious, and ethical traditions. As the Commission also noted, terms like "vegetarian" and "vegan" vary in meaning and may not adequately accommodate families with stricter plant-based practices or concerns about dairy and egg ingredients.

Our proposed labeling framework operationalizes and strengthens the Commission's recommendation by offering an inclusive, icon-based, and granular approach that accounts for the full range of plant-based dietary needs across Massachusetts communities. By distinguishing between vegetarian, vegan, dairy-containing, and egg-containing foods, while also indicating potential cross-contamination risks, the framework provides the clarity that families, students, and school nutrition staff require. In doing so, it fulfills the Commission's intent while ensuring that labeling serves all students equitably, including those for whom even small deviations carry ethical, religious, or medical significance.

III. Recommended Labeling System

The proposed system relies on simple, color-coded, intuitive icons. These symbols can be placed on menus, serving lines, and digital ordering systems to guide students and staff alike.

Label	Icon Description	Meaning
 Vegetarian	Green sprouting leaf	Contains no meat, seafood, or poultry
 Vegan	Black "V" in circle	Contains no animal products or by-products
 Dairy	Yellow cheese block	Contains milk or milk derivatives (liquid or solid)
 Egg	Cracked egg symbol	Contains or may contain eggs
 Soy	Green soybean pod	Contains soy ingredients
 Wheat	Brown wheat stalks	Contains gluten or wheat
 Fish	Blue fish icon	Contains fish or shellfish
 Milk	Blue pouring glass	Contains milk or milk solids

IV. Best Practices for Implementation

The following best practices translate the proposed framework into daily operational reality, allowing school districts to uphold both the letter and spirit of Massachusetts' equity and sustainability goals.

- **Dedicated Preparation Zones:** Establish separate preparation areas, utensils, and serving tools for plant-based meals to avoid contact with animal ingredients. This physical separation reinforces the integrity of labeling by ensuring that food icons reflect actual kitchen practice.
- **Staff Training:** Provide cafeteria staff with joint cultural sensitivity and food safety training, emphasizing cross-contamination prevention, understanding of dietary laws, and respect for student needs. Well-trained personnel are the first line of trust in maintaining consistent labeling accuracy. Humane World and other organizations provide accessible resources for training.
- **Standardized Labeling Protocols:** Use USDA-compliant definitions for “vegetarian” and “vegan,” but also provide additional, more granular labels, such as “contains egg” and “contains dairy” because the term “vegetarian” alone is insufficient. As students and families at the Jain Center have repeatedly emphasized, “vegetarian” can mean different things in different contexts: some definitions permit eggs, others do not, and many families avoid dairy for religious, ethical, or allergy-related reasons. Without clear sub labels, families must guess what version of “vegetarian” a school is using. Integrating consistent icons (e.g., contains egg, contains dairy) into menus, cafeteria signage, and digital ordering platforms ensures clarity, minimizes confusion, and allows families to trust the labeling system. Uniform application across schools guarantees that families can rely on the same standards statewide.
- **Community Consultation:** Include parents, students, Jain Center representatives, and similarly impacted communities in district food advisory committees to review menus and provide feedback. Ongoing community participation transforms the labeling framework into a collaborative practice of transparency and respect.
- **Compliance Audits and Feedback Channels:** Conduct biannual reviews of labeling and preparation practices and maintain open feedback channels for families to report concerns or suggestions. Regular assessment keeps districts accountable and promotes continuous improvement.

Together, these practices operationalize the labeling framework's goals, turning policy ideals of trust, inclusion, and sustainability into consistent, verifiable action across Massachusetts schools.

V. Linking Framework to Key Objectives and Why it Matters for Families

This proposed labeling framework directly advances the guiding objectives outlined in Section II:

- **Alignment with Policy Goals:** The system operationalizes statewide efforts such as the Nutrition Commission's findings, S.B. 922 (“The Bean New Deal”), and Humane World's 30 Percent Plant-Based Pledge, enabling districts to track compliance, share data, and model sustainable procurement.

- **Trust and Accessibility:** Consistent iconography and standardized procedures reassure families that meals meet declared ethical and dietary standards, rebuilding public confidence in school food programs.
- **Inclusion and Equity:** Uniform labeling embeds recognition of cultural and faith-based diversity within everyday institutional practices, ensuring that all students, regardless of dietary restrictions, can participate fully and without fear of exclusion.

Together, these linkages position the labeling initiative not as an isolated reform but as the connective infrastructure uniting Massachusetts's health, sustainability, and equity agendas. For Jain and other families following a plant-based diet, accurate food labeling is an ethical safeguard and an affirmation of belonging. Children who currently bring meals from home due to uncertainty would be able to participate confidently in school meal programs, thus, improving their academic performance and mental health while reducing stress for families.



HARVARD LAW SCHOOL ANIMAL LAW & POLICY CLINIC



Letter in Support of a Massachusetts School Food Equity & Inclusion Pledge

I. Introduction

The Harvard Animal Law & Policy Clinic submits this letter on behalf of the Jain Center of Greater Boston in support of the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) adopting a statewide commitment to ensure that **at least 30 percent of K-12 public school meals served in every school in every Massachusetts school district are plant-based by 2031**. This goal is grounded in principles of religious freedom, inclusion, and nutritional equity – within the state’s broader commitment to ensuring access to healthy food for all students.

Throughout the commonwealth, students from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds observe dietary practices that restrict or prohibit the consumption of animal products. Yet, for many, school cafeterias remain spaces where these beliefs cannot be fully realized. Students are often faced with limited or nutritionally inadequate options, forcing them to choose between their faith and participation in school meal programming.

Ensuring a consistent, nutritious selection of hot plant-based meals is not just a matter of dietary preference and wellness; it is a matter of religious accommodation, equity, and belonging. Massachusetts has the unique opportunity to lead the nation by demonstrating that inclusive school meals are possible. Where school meal programming systematically excludes students whose dietary practices are rooted in sincerely held religious beliefs, districts risk creating disparate access to state and federally funded nutrition programs.

II. The Case for Religious Accommodation in School Cafeterias

In Massachusetts – a state with vibrant communities of Jewish, Seventh-day Adventist, Muslim, Hindu, Jain, Buddhist, and Sikh families– religious diversity is reflected in the lunch line as much as it is in the classroom. For these students, food is not just nourishment, but a sacred expression of a larger belief system. Providing appropriate meal options is essential to the Commonwealth’s broader commitment to educational equity.

While the federal National School Lunch Program (NSLP) establishes minimum nutritional standards, it also provides districts with the flexibility to accommodate religious and cultural dietary needs. In practice, however, the absence of clear mandates or guidance has led to uneven implementation. Some districts excel in offering inclusive meal options, while others lack the knowledge and resources to make meaningful accommodations. The result is an inequitable system in which students' access to meals consistent with their faith largely depends on students advocating for themselves. The result is an inequitable system that places the burden on students. To access meals consistent with their faith, they are often left to advocate for themselves, by themselves.

III. Background: Jainism and the Spiritual Foundations of Plant-Based Living

Among the many religions that call for plant-based eating, Jainism stands out as one of the most rigorous and philosophically consistent. Understanding Jain dietary practices offers important insight into why expanding plant-based options in schools is not only an act of compassion but is also necessary for religious equity.

Jainism, one of the oldest living religious traditions originating in India¹, is grounded in a comprehensive ethical framework centered on strict vegetarianism. While there are subtle variations in Jain dietary practice, including lacto-vegetarian and vegan approaches - the unifying principle is the reduction and minimization of harm to animals and avoidance of animal products due to the suffering inherently associated with their production. These practices reflect the foundational Jain principle of Ahimsa, or non-violence, which requires followers to minimize harm to all living beings, regardless of size or sentience - or whether their exploitation has been normalized. Consequently, Jain dietary rules extend beyond the mere avoidance of meat and instead constitute a deeply integrated spiritual discipline shaping daily food choices. For Jain students, adherence to these practices is therefore not a matter of personal preference but a sacred religious obligation. When schools provide limited or no plant-based meal options, Jain children are frequently unable to participate fully in school lunch programs and may be forced to bring food from home or forgo meals altogether.

A series of spring 2025 surveys conducted by the Harvard Animal Law & Policy Clinic found that many Jain students have trouble focusing in school due to hunger and lack of adequate food options. In one survey distributed on February 19, 2025, 27 out of 28 survey participants reported that their schools never provided meals that met their religious needs, with many saying that they “bring [their] own food” or “just skip meals.” In a different survey conducted on February 18, 2025, one student reported that they struggle with their “energy level all day and especially during after school sports activities” because of a lack of access to adequate meal options. The surveys yielded responses from Jain students in the Commonwealth and throughout the country. In Massachusetts, specifically, Jain students from Weston Public Schools, Canton Public Schools, and Andover Public Schools participated in the surveys.

¹ Dating back to 2,500 B.C.

These survey results were presented to the USDA as part of a petition submitted by the Harvard Animal Law & Policy Clinic on behalf of Jain communities throughout the United States, requesting that USDA's Food and Nutrition Service reintroduce the religious needs language into the NSLP regulations. On July 29, 2025, the USDA responded to our petition and, without taking a clear position on our request, "encourag[ed] community members to continue working with their respective State and local agencies" to address students' religious dietary needs.

IV. Other Faith Traditions Supporting Plant-Based Eating

While Jainism represents one of the most stringent forms of religious vegetarianism, many other traditions share its ethical and spiritual foundations.

Hinduism similarly upholds Ahimsa, teaching that violence toward living beings produces negative karma and perpetuates suffering. Many Hindus choose vegetarian or vegan diets as an expression of compassion and self-discipline.² Buddhism teaches compassion (Karuna) and non-harming (Ahimsa) as essential virtues, leading many followers of the faith to abstain from meat. In Buddhist philosophy, all life is interconnected; consuming animals contributes to cycles of suffering that hinder spiritual progress.³

Within Judaism, the commandment of *tsa'ar ba'alei chayim* – the prevention of animal suffering – encourages some Jewish families to adopt plant-based diets. For others, kosher observance naturally aligns with plant-based eating, which avoids concerns about cross-contamination and compliance with kashrut laws.⁴

Seventh-day Adventists, a Christian denomination with a strong presence in Massachusetts, often follow divine instruction that humans should largely follow a vegetarian diet. Between 40 and 50 percent of Adventists in the United States identify as vegetarian or vegan, often viewing plant-based diets as expressions of health, stewardship, and reverence for creation.⁵

Islam provides its own framework for mindful eating through halal dietary laws. While halal does not require vegetarianism, it emphasizes compassion and humane treatment of animals, as well as avoidance of cross-contamination with non-halal foods.⁶ We have heard from some local schools that, when they are unable to provide halal meat, the schools rely on plant-based meal offerings to meet the needs of their Muslim students.

Providing reliable plant-based options thus serves not only individual religious requirements but also the Massachusetts Department of Education's broader goal of fostering mutual understanding, respect, and inclusion across communities.⁷

V. Legal and Regulatory Context: NSLP Operational Requirements

² [https://www.jandonline.org/article/S0002-8223\(02\)90212-9/fulltext](https://www.jandonline.org/article/S0002-8223(02)90212-9/fulltext).

³ [https://www.jandonline.org/article/S0002-8223\(02\)90212-9/fulltext](https://www.jandonline.org/article/S0002-8223(02)90212-9/fulltext).

⁴ <https://ift.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1541-4337.2003.tb00018.x>.

⁵ <https://www.healthministries.com/vegetarian-diets/>.

⁶ <https://ift.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1541-4337.2003.tb00018.x>.

⁷ <https://www.doe.mass.edu/csi/dei.html>.

The National School Lunch Act authorizes the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to establish nutritional standards for school meals that reflect the latest scientific knowledge on a healthy diet while ensuring that students receive adequate nourishment.⁸ The NSLP's meal pattern outlines creditable servings of meal subgroups, including fruits, vegetables, grains, meat and meat alternates (M/MA), and fluid milk.⁹ Recent 2024 USDA regulatory updates have expanded schools' flexibility to meet meal pattern requirements for the meat and meat alternate category by using plant-based alternatives. With appropriate menu planning, schools may now satisfy the meat/meat alternates requirement by offering additional servings of beans, peas, or lentils.¹⁰

The NSLP regulations also encourage schools to consider students' preferences when developing menus – a broader phrasing that could encompass religious, ethnic, and economic factors. Though not legally binding, this language affirms that religious considerations fall squarely within the scope of USDA's intent to promote inclusion and flexibility.

The USDA, however, maintains a distinction between disability-related and non-disability-related dietary accommodations. Schools are legally required to accommodate medical needs but are merely encouraged to accommodate religious or ethical diets.¹¹ As a result, religiously motivated and mandated plant-based diets often fall into a gray area: acknowledged but not guaranteed through the NSLP. By committing to provide 30 percent plant-based meals at public K-12 schools statewide, Massachusetts can help fill this gap through state-level leadership. Doing so would harmonize the flexibility reflected in the NSLP regulations with state values of equality and nondiscrimination, thus positioning Massachusetts as a model for affirmative religious accommodation in public education.

VI. Importance of Clear Labeling and Compliance with HACCP Food Safety Standards

Ensuring that Massachusetts school meal programs are inclusive and transparent necessitates that school districts adopt a clear food labeling regimen. Labeling is essential not only for nutritional transparency but also for enabling students from diverse cultural, religious, and ethical backgrounds to participate meaningfully in school meal programs. For families whose dietary practices avoid consumption of specific animal products or even trace cross-contamination, unclear or inconsistent labeling can create uncertainty and often results in students skipping meals or opting out of school lunch programming entirely. A consistent, icon-based labeling

⁸ <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/COMPS-10333/pdf/COMPS-10333.pdf>.

⁹ <https://www.fns.usda.gov/school-meals/nutrition-standards/nslp-meal-pattern>.

¹⁰ See Summary of Provisions in the *Child Nutrition Programs: Meal Patterns Consistent with the 2020-2025 Dietary Guidelines for Americans* Final Rule, <https://fns-prod.azureedge.us/sites/default/files/resource-files/DGARuleFinalSummary5.2.24.pdf>. USDA requires schools to provide beans, peas, or lentils to meet the vegetable meal component requirement. Schools that provide additional servings of beans, peas, or lentils on days when those items are not meeting the vegetable requirement may count those items towards the meats/meat alternates requirement. See *id.* at 12.

¹¹ <https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/accommodating-disabilities-school-meal-programs-guidance-qas>.

framework would allow schools to clearly communicate whether meals contain dairy, eggs, meat, as well as allergens. Indeed, this level of transparency is aligned with the Massachusetts School Meal Nutrition Standards Commission's findings that vegetarian and vegan labeling across districts is often imprecise and inconsistent.¹² In response to the Commission's findings, the Animal Law & Policy Clinic together with Jain leadership have prepared a white paper on labeling and cross-contamination that we urge DESE to consider for implementation throughout the Commonwealth.¹³

Not only does clear labeling provide students with the information they need to make informed choices, but it is also consistent with the goals of Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP)-based food safety programs. HACCP offers a systematic method for identifying and controlling food safety hazards, including microbiological, chemical, and physical hazards.¹⁴ The USDA requires all school food authorities to implement a written food safety program that reflects HACCP principles and reduces these hazards.¹⁵ Clear labeling may help school food authorities identify potentially hazardous food while also preventing cross-contamination.

The integration of labeling and HACCP compliance therefore forms a comprehensive system of both transparency and safety. Labeling communicates the contents of a meal, while HACCP protocols ensure that the preparation environment protects the integrity of those labels. A rigorous food safety system is especially significant for communities whose dietary guidelines are not matters of preference but are deeply rooted expressions of faith and identity.

VII. Lessons from Public Schools of Brookline

The Public Schools of Brookline (PSB) serves as a model for incorporating daily plant-based options within school cafeterias. In 2021, a group of ninth graders organized under the Warriors for Animal Rights Club and petitioned for more inclusive lunch options. The first step was to have Meatless Mondays, which PSB Food Services implemented shortly thereafter.¹⁶

Recognizing the legitimacy of their concerns, Brookline's food services director, Sasha Palmer, and her team worked with both students and Humane World for Animals to pilot plant-based meals. Over time, the program expanded beyond just the high school setting and into Brookline elementary and middle schools.

After testing and refining menus through Meatless Mondays and plant-based pilot entrees, Brookline formalized its commitment to plant-based offerings into policy. The Brookline wellness policy establishes the district's aspiration to have 50 percent of all meals served be plant-based, and they are poised to meet this goal by the end of the 2025-2026 school year.¹⁷

¹² <https://www.doe.mass.edu/cnp/nutrition-standards/commission-report.pdf>.

¹³ See Attachment 1 (White Paper on Food Labeling and Cross-Contamination Prevention in Massachusetts K-12 School Meals).

¹⁴ <https://www.food.gov.uk/business-guidance/hazard-analysis-and-critical-control-point-haccp>.

¹⁵ https://fns-prod.azureedge.us/sites/default/files/Food_Safety_HACCPGuidance.pdf.

¹⁶ <https://thecypressonline.com/47900/news/warriors-for-animal-rights-club-introduces-more-inclusive-lunch-options-with-meatless-mondays/>.

¹⁷ [PSB_Wellness_Policy_FINAL_voted_2124.pdf](#).

Importantly, the policy does not treat a plant-based diet as an afterthought; it frames it as integral to the standard offering, on par with meals with animal products.

In addition to leveraging an existing environmental pledge and student led groups, the accelerated timeline of Brookline's goal can be attributed to several key factors:

- ❑ **Iterative expansion:** Brookline did not leap from zero to 50 percent in one step. The district tested small changes, collected feedback from students, and scaled gradually. This not only minimized disruption but also built buy-in among members of the community.
- ❑ **Policy anchoring:** Embedding the target goal into the district's formal wellness and sustainability policy ensured that the orientation toward plant-based meals endured beyond individual staff or leadership changes.
- ❑ **Resource alignment and training:** Brookline invested in staff training, recipe development, and vendor partnerships – namely through a sustained collaboration with Humane World for Animals.
- ❑ **Framing and messaging:** Rather than presenting plant-based meals as a concession or restriction (“no meat”), Brookline positioned them as simply another option. Brookline schools primarily provide meals with a similar base (grains, vegetables) but with different protein options.
- ❑ **Increase in Participation:** Brookline witnessed a rise in students who participated in the school lunch program.

VIII. Conclusion and Commitment

We respectfully request that DESE commit to the statewide plant-based school meal pledge and encourage all Massachusetts school districts, policymakers, and partner organizations to join this movement toward a more inclusive, compassionate, and forward-looking food system. Furthermore, we would appreciate the opportunity to meet with DESE and would readily provide our assistance, including helping to develop language to include in vendor contracts to ensure that school districts have the requisite information to provide accurate food labels. Food is a profound site of identity, community, and belonging. In public schools – where children learn not only academics but also values – what we serve in cafeterias reflects who we include. Ensuring that all students, regardless of religion, can enjoy nourishing meals consistent with their beliefs is both a moral duty and a civic imperative.¹⁸

Massachusetts has long been a leader in advancing civil rights and educational equity. By committing to ensuring that 30 percent of all school meals are plant-based within the next five years, our schools can extend that legacy to the cafeteria, creating environments where diversity is not merely accommodated but celebrated.

¹⁸ We acknowledge that there are many other reasons to adopt this pledge, ranging from environmental motivations to concerns about animal welfare. Each of these reasons serves as an independent justification to sign onto this pledge.

About Harvard Animal Law and Policy Clinic

The Harvard Animal Law & Policy Clinic works to advance the interests of animals through litigation, administrative rulemaking, policy initiatives, organizing, and other legal advocacy avenues. It also serves to train the next generation of animal law advocates by providing student clinicians direct experience with a broad range of laws that protect and impact animals and opportunities to advocate at the federal and state levels. The Clinic focuses on the following core areas: wildlife & biodiversity; the welfare of companion and captive wild animals; and food law and industrial animal agriculture.

About JAINA

The Federation of Jain Associations in North America (JAINA) is the umbrella organization representing Jain centers and communities across the United States and Canada. Founded to preserve, promote, and practice Jain principles, JAINA supports educational programs, youth development, interfaith outreach, humanitarian initiatives, and the dissemination of Jain philosophy, culture, and values throughout North America.

About JAINA Long Range Planning Committee (LRP)

The JAINA Long Range Planning Committee (LRP) is dedicated to shaping the future of the Jain community in North America through strategic planning, leadership development, and community engagement. LRP works on initiatives that strengthen Jain education, foster collaboration among organizations, support emerging leaders, and ensure the long-term sustainability and growth of Jain values and institutions.

About Young Jains of America (YJA)

Young Jains of America (YJA) is the youth and young adult affiliate of JAINA, serving Jain students and professionals across North America. YJA provides opportunities for leadership, networking, education, spiritual growth, and community service through conventions, workshops, discussions, and volunteer programs that help young Jains connect with their heritage while addressing contemporary challenges.



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