



EPISODE 1

"It's Blame the Lunch Worker First and Foremost"

Less than \$2. That's how much the Santa Ana Unified school district can afford to spend on one student's lunch each day. The \$14 billion budget of the National School Lunch program stretches thin, and school nutrition workers are often the target of kids' complaints. Reporter Jessica Terrell explores the cultural figure of "the lunch lady," and how students and workers lose when bureaucrats focus on cost over care.

Jessica Terrell:

From LWC Studios and the Counter, this is Left Over: how corporations and politicians are milking the American school lunch. I'm Jessica Terrell. This is episode one of a six-part series about one of the country's largest anti-hunger programs and how it has been mired in politics and corporate greed to the detriment of millions of American children. I spent more than a year talking to people closest to the issues, food service workers, activists, professors, politicians, union leaders, parents, kids, and no one said our school lunch system is working the way it could or should be.

Valerie Segrest:

I think that the National School Lunch program says that America is very confused.

Terrell:

That's Valerie Segrest. She's a nutrition educator from the Muckleshoot Indian Tribe in Washington state.

Segrest:

We're very polarized and it shows. We have a system that is set up to look at our food through numbers and figures and we can do better.

Terrell:

In 2020, taxpayers spent [more than \\$14 billion feeding students](#), but school lunch programs are still largely [underfunded](#) and [understaffed](#). Many schools lacked the kitchen equipment needed to do anything other than reheat frozen entrees, shipped to them by corporations from across the country. Waves of people have tried to fix the problems. They've had congressional hearings, changed nutrition standards, even founded nonprofits to get kids to eat more veggies. But none of them have addressed the issue at the heart of the problem: how people think about caregiving in America, what it means to be cared for and nourished, who deserves that care, who provides that care, and what as a society we are willing to pay them to provide it.

Segrest:

Never in human history have we been this far removed from the source of our food.

Noel Bock:

In the school district, there's a huge amount of burnout.

Jose Oliva:

We don't know anything about where the food is coming from.

Carla Bankes:

What they get paid is shameful.

Segrest:

We need to do better for our kids.

Angel Gonzalez:

If nobody's going to give us a voice, we have to make our own voice. We got to scream louder until they hear us.

Terrell:

Those are some of the people from my reporting around the country that you'll hear from in coming episodes. But we'll begin by looking at how a low-cost school lunch is detrimental to the women serving that lunch, and how nickel and diming workers undermines efforts to truly nourish kids.

[CBS News Clip:](#)

Here in New York City, the nation's largest is closed. Starting today and in all 33 different states are closing public schools all to stop the spread of the Coronavirus. At least 32 and a half million students are affected.

Terrell:

It was [mid-afternoon on a Friday](#) when the Santa Ana Unified School Board voted to close down schools.

Josefina Mejia:

At the beginning I thought that it was a joke.

Terrell:

That's Josefina Mejia, [an operations manager](#) at the Central Kitchen. She's a petite woman, not much taller than five foot one, with dark hair, and when things aren't so serious, an incredibly wide smile.

Mejia:

But once I saw that everybody got in the conference room, I was like, this is real. This is happening and we need to be prepared.

Terrell:

With 45,000 students, Santa Ana Unified is [the second largest school district](#) in Orange County, California. It's also one of the poorest. School meals are the main source of nutrition for many children

here. Without notice, school lunch workers had just two days to figure out how to keep those kids fed at home on Monday.

Mejia:

It was a very tough weekend. I think none of us were ready for it.

Terrell:

Two years later, Josefina can still remember the menu they cobbled together. Cereal, milk, yogurt, bean burritos, potato smiles, beef sticks, orange juice.

Mejia:

Everybody was overwhelmed. It was a big amount of meals that we were putting together.

Terrell:

And people were worried.

Mejia:

Is it worth it to be here? Is it worth it to do the work that I do?

Terrell:

At the crack of dawn on Monday, the head of the nutrition department, Josh Goddard, a tall and slender man with glasses and neatly groomed dark brown hair, went to the district's largest high school, one of 13 sites where parents could pick up to go meals for their kids.

Josh Goddard:

We all put out our arms to show how we would keep six feet away from each other and six feet away from those we would be serving.

Terrell:

Workers didn't have masks yet, everyone was exhausted, but they all had a sense of purpose.

Goddard:

The energy in the room, the energy in the kitchen was tangible. I think the team felt the responsibility and they felt powerful in that moment. They were the reason people were coming that day.

Terrell:

Santa Ana Unified served [more than a million meals](#) in the first nine weeks. That's [less than](#) they would've dished up when everyone was eating in a cafeteria, but an extraordinary number under the circumstances. For a while, school lunch workers were some of the most important people in school districts. They were essential workers. They were heroes, until they weren't. By the fall of 2022, the federal government had [ended funding for universal free meals](#) for all public school students. The names of the women had faded from the wall and lunch workers returned to being the butt of jokes. An easy

scapegoat for everything that's wrong with the country's school lunch program, and there's a lot that's wrong.

Alonzo:

What's on? They have to handle some stuff. These are my coworkers. These are the ladies that make it happen. This place is literally ran by women. So for anybody out there that's wondering, lunch ladies are the ones that you see at the schools. Lunch ladies are the ones that also send the food out. Literally there's how many men in here? Like three or four men? Four men.

Terrell:

Mariela Alonzo is a [nutrition services worker](#) in the Santa Ana Unified School District. She works in the district's central kitchen, often bundled up in layers to keep warm. Long sleeve shirts under her uniform, a hairnet over her curly dark hair, a face mask that steams up her glasses. It's a huge, bustling space with a warehouse that resembles a section of Costco. Their giant walk-in freezers and multiple assembly lines where women take frozen components, combine them to make an entree, and then repack those into individual portions for workers at smaller school kitchens to heat and serve.

Mariela's Colleague:

Berries and milk.

Alonzo:

And you guys just ran the hamburger?

Colleague:

Yes.

Alonzo:

Yeah, it was very exciting because the patties are frozen, so the ladies have to wear double, triple gloves to be able to handle the patties, and then a person in the front puts the bottom of the bread, then the other ladies towards the back put the patties. Then the very last person puts the top and runs through the machine, and then you have two ladies catching here and it goes pretty fast because we needed to get that done.

Terrell:

Nearly [96% of students in the district are Latino](#), but the food in the district doesn't really reflect their cuisines. It's mostly the same frozen entrees served in schools from Oregon to Massachusetts.

Alonzo:

The bowl, this is mac and cheese, and this is a chicken sandwich. These are kind of like Hot Pockets, but they're government Hot Pockets. You know the government, USDA, and that's what they send. So that's what we serve. I'll tell you, my personal experience, this is supposed to be mac and cheese, my kids don't eat it.

Terrell:

Mariela says the problem with the mac and cheese is it's too salty. The Hot Pockets are just generic Hot Pockets, but they're all really processed foods. Hot dogs, cheese, frozen pizza, everything wrapped in plastic and then repackaged and heated. During the pandemic, when students were learning online, Santa Ana set up multiple spots around town for families to pick up to go meals. And that meant for the first time a lot of parents were actually seeing what their kids were eating in school. Every single entree served in Santa Ana was some kind of frozen meal, which is actually the case in a lot of districts today. These parents were grateful for the food, but they also didn't want their kids eating that every day when things got back to normal. They wrote letters, vented frustration at school board meetings, and the district listened.

Alonzo:

We were just told this morning that a lot of changes are coming, and we're going to be cooking more from scratch. So that's exciting.

Terrell:

The school district has [big ambitions](#) for changing the way it serves school lunch. It's hiring new chefs, working to source more of its food locally, testing new recipes inspired by the meals students eat at home, and moving away from this heat and serve model they've relied on for decades.

Josh Goddard, the head of the nutrition department, says he and his team had the work equivalent of a spiritual awakening during the pandemic. An undeniable call to shake up the status quo. But there's a catch. Most of the changes they want to make depend on having the staff to do it, and no amount of goodwill or ambition will change this basic fact. Most school districts set up their budgets so that their school lunch programs are [financially self-sustaining](#). That means the price that students pay for their meal or the amount the federal government pays for students who can't afford lunch needs to cover everything from nutritionists and cooks to kitchen equipment, plates, utensils, packaging, not to mention food.

And [the federal reimbursement rate](#), which varies, but at the very most is \$3.68 cents per meal, doesn't stretch very far. There was a private school in New York City that [made headlines](#) in 2015 for serving really delicious meals that cost about \$3 per serving. But all of that \$3 was spent on food. About half of what Santa Ana gets per meal needs to go to things like electricity, equipment, gas for trucks. They have less than \$2 per meal, and for high school, that needs to pay for milk, a cup of fruit, a cup of vegetables, a protein, and a grain. Here's Josh again.

Goddard:

I challenge anyone, and this is culinarian or non culinarian, to walk into a grocery store or get our pricing for that matter, and produce something that is consistently high quality, well-liked, nutritious, falls within the incredibly strict guidelines, and do it for two bucks. It's almost impossible. It really is almost

Terrell:

So districts stretch their dollar by paying school lunch workers the minimum possible, which means the hopes of Santa Ana Unified hinge on some of the lowest paid workers in the district. The first time Paulina Velasco, one of our producers, called Mariela, it was a Saturday afternoon and she was in the middle of a shift delivering groceries.

Paulina Velasco:

How are you?

Alonzo:

I'm doing okay. I'm sorry, I forgot. I started doing Instacart this morning.

Terrell:

She'd meant to call us from home, but she was trying to stretch her shift to earn a delivery bonus.

Alonzo:

You do six orders, you get \$14 extra.

Velasco:

Oh wow. And how many have you got so far?

Alonzo:

Five. I want to go home, but I really want to do this promo.

Terrell:

Mariela has worked at the school district for nearly seven years. She has two kids, thirteen and seven. She's not the lowest paid person in the central kitchen; she's worked her way up to a position that makes roughly \$21 an hour. That might not sound like a low wage job, but the cost of living in Santa Ana is [nearly 50% higher](#) than the national average, and her position is hourly, which means it's not a guaranteed 40 hours a week. In 2020 she made roughly \$25,000 plus benefits.

Alonzo:

If the month is longer, our check could be a little bit better, but if the month is short, I say, "Oh man, now I really have to budget, or I can't miss work this day," you know, you have to plan ahead.

Terrell:

But Mariela says she didn't really get into school nutrition because of the pay.

Alonzo:

Before here I was working housekeeping at the Disneyland Hotel. I was very unhappy there. Very unhappy because that's not what I wanted to do with my life. I don't know if that sounds bad, but to me I felt like I needed to do something more meaningful.

Terrell:

When Mariela was trying to figure out what she wanted to do with her life, she thought about how much lunch workers had meant to her when she was a kid. She started out serving in classroom cafeterias before applying for a better paying job in the district central kitchen. One day she got a call to sub at her old high school alongside some of the lunch workers who fed her as a teenager.

Alonzo:

And they remembered me and I got so emotional because it was like, oh my god, these ladies are amazing. They remember all these kids. And for me to come back with the uniform that they wear, I felt privileged.

Terrell:

At Santa Ana Unified, Mariela advocates for pay changes for herself and her coworkers through the local union, and she's trying to get more work hours. In the meantime, she's struggling financially after getting sick last winter and missing some days.

Alonzo:

Because I'm catching up, I dig a hole to cover another hole.

Terrell:

Working weekends delivering groceries means missing out on time with her kids. But it's what she needs to do to take care of them and do special things like splurge on a birthday dinner.

Alonzo:

My daughter, for her 13th birthday, it's such a big deal, right? Well she wanted wings, and those are the things, because she knows mom's on a budget. I'm blessed to have kids that don't ask me for super expensive things too because they've grown up with knowing that mom works hard.

Terrell:

The grocery delivery bonus she was trying to make when we first talked to her helped her make her earning goal for the weekend, but she needs to make that money every weekend to stay on track.

Alonzo:

But everything's so expensive. Some of my coworkers here, they're thinking about maybe becoming parents soon, but it's like can they really afford it? And those are really hard choices and heartbreaking choices that you either choose to grow your family or are you even going to be able to afford it.

Terrell:

Mariela says she believes in Santa Ana's vision for school lunch: tossing out frozen burger patties in favor of fresh cooked meals that reflect the culture of Santa Ana students, trying to make sure that foods are sourced in ways that address climate change. She says it's exciting, but she also doesn't think she should have to work weekends to help make that happen.

Alonzo:

It's hard and I don't think anybody should live like that, especially when you work so hard.

Terrell:

The image of the hardworking lunch lady—the woman who toils until her fingers feel numb from handling so many frozen burger patties, who shows up because she cares about the kids, who remembers those kids 20 years later—that's not the image of cafeteria workers that shows up in pop culture.

Adam Sandler:

This is a song about the high school experience, a song through the eyes...

Terrell:

Here's Adam Sandler in a [Saturday Night Live sketch](#) that school nutrition workers like Mariela still talk about.

Sandler:

I'm talking about a person we call the lunch lady. (singing) Woke up in the morning, put on my new plastic glove. Served some reheated Salisbury steak with a little slice of love. I got no clue what the chicken pot pie is made of, just know everything's doing fine down here in Lunch Lady Land.

Terrell:

While Adam Sandler sings, the actor Chris Farley dances around, dressed up as a cafeteria worker in garish makeup and a hairnet. The song gets more and more ridiculous with eventually the lunch lady being so in love with sloppy joes that she marries the sandwich and has six kids.

Alonzo:

I feel like in our culture that's what comes to mind. I feel like that's what people think when they think of lunch ladies.

Terrell:

Or maybe, Mariela says, they think about [the lunch lady from the Simpsons](#). Here's lunch lady Doris receiving a truckload of beef hearts.

Delivery man:

Where do you want these beef hearts?

Doris:

On the floor.

Delivery man:

It doesn't look very clean.

Doris:

Just do your job, heart boy.

Terrell:

So why is the work that these women do so often derided by the public, and continually devalued by the institutions they serve? Part of it is that the general public has very little understanding of the enormous systemic challenges involved in the school lunch program. When their kids come home complaining about rubbery pizza or another day of corn dogs, parents get upset with the person most visible in school lunch: the person cooking, or reheating, and serving the food. Here's Josh Goddard again.

Goddard:

Oh, it's blame the lunch worker first and foremost, it's blame the person in front of you. It's who gave this to you, well, blame that person. The lunch lady has been stereotyped to a point where it's an easy target because we've continued to ridicule, underfund, and over-regulate their work.

Terrell:

Jennifer Gaddis, a [professor](#) at the University of Wisconsin Madison and the author of the book [Labor of Lunch](#) has another theory.

Terrell:

Hi.

Jennifer Gaddis:

Come on in. Welcome, welcome.

Terrell:

I met Jen Gaddis at her office last summer in Madison. She's a tall and slender woman in her thirties with shoulder length brown hair who had just finished pumping breast milk for her baby when I arrived. On the wall of the office is a giant brown poster covered with sticky notes shaped like fruits and vegetables. Each paper pineapple, pear, and avocado contained a handwritten note from a school nutrition worker about the best or hardest things about their jobs. Gaddis started looking into the national school lunch program in graduate school. She was initially interested in the environmental impact of the program, but then she really became passionate about trying to understand why school lunch labor functions the way it does.

Gaddis:

These are really fantastic people who aren't being treated fairly.

Terrell:

The first thing Gaddis wants people to know about school lunch workers is that what they do is a lot more important and complicated than dishing up the precise portions of milk and vegetables and proteins that schools have to serve to meet federal standards.

Gaddis:

I think even sometimes the administration of schools think, oh, you can just get anyone off the street. It actually takes a lot of effort and training to work in their programs.

Terrell:

And that's really misunderstood. [Research has shown](#) that it's critical for kids to have at least one adult on campus that they have a strong connection with. And a lot of times for kids that adult isn't a teacher, it's the person feeding them every day.

Gaddis:

Workers may actually be growing with the child in a way that a teacher isn't. They're seeing them over time. They're also getting to know siblings, other kind of family members, and really understanding the constellation of these students' lives. And oftentimes the workers are from the communities that they're serving, and sometimes they're the ones who are really able to recognize, like, "hey, last year that student seemed like they were smiling and interacting with their peers and they just seem really off this year."

Terrell:

I got to see a little of this at the [Academy for Global Citizenship](#), a dual language charter school on the south side of Chicago.

Julia O'Grady:

You going to eat, mijo? You want some butter jelly sandwich or you want a taco? You going to eat it? Okay.

Terrell:

Julia O'Grady, the school's [kitchen manager](#), stands behind a large tray full of scratch-cooked chicken tacos, greeting most students in line by name. She's a middle-aged woman dressed with a black hairnet and black apron who is cheery and attentive. That's because she says how you serve the food, how you make kids feel when they come in the cafeteria, can make a big difference in whether students actually eat. She admonishes some of them, notices small changes in others.

O'Grady:

What happened to your hair?

Student:

Oh, I let it down.

O'Grady:

You look so pretty this morning.

Terrell:

The job descriptions for cafeteria workers often talk about needing to have customer service skills, but that's not a great job description for what they actually do.

Gaddis:

If you talk with people who are doing the daily work of feeding kids, a lot of them really will talk about how much they care about the kids and they'll describe things that I would consider to be like emotional labor.

Terrell:

Emotional labor. So much more of the [emotional labor of a household](#) falls on women. And this is why Jen Gaddis says the work of school lunch workers can be so undervalued.

Gaddis:

One of the reasons why these jobs look the way that they do in terms of their payment and compensation is that they resemble mothering. And mothering is something that in patriarchal capitalist societies—which the U.S. is one of those—tends to be something that policymakers really expect to be accomplished for free or cheaply.

Terrell:

In a 2010 survey of school nutrition workers published by the Journal of School Health, [93% of school cafeteria workers were women](#).

Gaddis:

People literally used to refer to these as “mom jobs.”

Terrell:

Back in the seventies and eighties. Gaddis says there was an assumption that these jobs didn't need to pay a living wage because they were supplemental income, something moms did during school hours to make a little extra cash.

Gaddis:

It is very much a sexist assumption, and I remember interviewing some older women for my book who would say that they had been able to stay in the job because they were married and had benefits through their husbands and that they had seen lots of other women cycle through the jobs because they just couldn't stay in them because of the lack of benefits.

Terrell:

Even today, people who hire nutrition workers target primary caregivers, often moms, by talking about how the hours align with school. It's a job you can do while your kids are in class.

Gaddis:

So that's actually something that people during recruitment will talk about as a real positive, that those hours work for them. But I think that it is a real challenge when people aren't having access to benefits through their jobs to keep them in those positions.

Terrell:

Jen Gaddis says that a lot of school nutrition workers have seen a big jump in hourly wages during the pandemic as school districts found they had to actually compete to keep workers, but she points out that many school lunch workers are still [living below the federal poverty line](#), and they're [often the lowest paid positions](#) in the district, lower paid than custodial staff who are predominantly men, and they're often not full-time jobs.

Gaddis:

It's really one of those things where you will find that whatever the threshold is for benefits, and in some districts it might be four hours per day, in others it might be six hours per day or even higher, but you'll find that there are a ton of employees who will be 15 minutes short, of whatever that threshold is, for benefits.

Terrell:

Not having to provide benefits makes labor that much cheaper for the district.

Mejia:

Nobody realize how hard these people work and how underpaid they are. So I think these people deserve double the amount that what they're making.

Terrell:

That's Josefina Mejia from Santa Ana again. She says the pandemic truly revealed how dedicated lunch workers are and what they're willing to do to keep kids fed.

Mejia:

They were going home exhausted. They were going home sweating. They were going home thinking about tomorrow, but thinking about their families, thinking about their children, and thinking about the meals for the community. We are here for one purpose, and our purpose is to feed the students.

Terrell:

This undervaluing and underpaying of staff, it doesn't just impact lunch workers, it also has a real world impact on what school districts are able to do with their meal programs.

Gaddis:

It's widely accepted that there's a lot of turnover. Turnover means that you're always in this mode of recruitment where you may be working very short staffed, and this is something that was always a problem, but became hyper, hyper visible and exacerbated during the pandemic.

Terrell:

Being understaffed means offering fewer lunch options to students, relying more on prepackaged menus, leaning more heavily on workers who then don't have the time to connect with students, time to do the emotional labor that isn't in the official job description but is such an important part of what they do.

Gaddis:

And certainly none of those things are going to happen if people are just frantically trying to get food on the line and on students' lunch trays.

Terrell:

There's also a real [national emphasis](#) right now on improving the quality of school meals, which is not something a lot of districts are going to be able to do if they're constantly understaffed or struggling to retain workers.

Gaddis:

And there's so much untapped potential in terms of what a lot of these workers could be doing if they were better supported in their job.

Terrell:

So what exactly is the untapped potential of school lunch? To get a closer look, I spent some time at Pacific Elementary School, a small public school about 400 miles north of Santa Ana.

Emelia Miguel:

Jerry, is first grade seated? Are they out there? No. There are artichokes, and they can have another tostada if they want.

Terrell:

It's lunchtime at Pacific Elementary School, and the kitchen is bustling. The space is not much bigger than a very nice suburban single family home kitchen, but somehow there's enough room for half a dozen fifth and sixth graders and two adults. The kids are coating tortillas with oil to make tostadas, washing dishes and making the filling for blueberry pies.

Student:

So I'm working on bean tostadas. I'm going to have sheets and then I'm going to have oil and then just flop them and then put them on the plate.

Terrell:

Kids have been cooking lunches at the school for [almost 40 years](#), ever since a local mom got fed up with their kids eating processed pizzas and sloppy joes. Noel Bock worked at the school for more than two decades. She recalls why Stephanie Raugust started the program.

Noel Bock:

Her kids were going to school here, and she thought, I'm not going to have those kind of already made packaged foods. That's not what I want for my children at all. I want, y'know, freshly made foods. And how am I going to do this? Who are going to be my labor force?

Terrell:

Noel says the principal at the time had a background in Montessori education, and agreed that maybe kids could benefit from getting a hands-on education cooking food. Having students do a lot of the cooking also helped take care of the labor force problem, needing fewer paid workers made scratch cooking a more affordable proposition. It also helped that Stephanie was a professional baker and stepped up to run the program.

Bock:

And sure enough, the older kids learned how to be safe in the kitchen. They're excellent cooks. They're so good. They just know what umami is. They know the right stuff and we always cook fresh and local.

Miguel:

You guys want to just wash your hands after touching that?

Terrell:

Students work under the careful supervision of two adults who operate as both cooks and teachers. But the kids are really cooking and serving food to fellow students and staff who all eat together.

Miguel:

You are an amazing person. You're being a tostada factory right now.

Student:

Can I help serve plates too?

Miguel:

You may, as long as you do it kindly and gracefully.

Terrell:

Emelia Miguel runs the school nutrition program and works with kids in the kitchen. In 2021, she earned [roughly \\$43,000 plus benefits](#). That's not a lot of money here, yet it's more than several teachers at the school earn. And her position comes with a lot of respect—from kids, teachers, parents.

Miguel:

We chose this school for my daughter because of this program. I was tired of the food that was being served in larger school districts.

Terrell:

That's Emelia. She started volunteering as a parent, then got a job assisting Stephanie in the kitchen. She loved it so much that she stayed and took over the program.

Miguel:

I will not be a regular food service director that does not cook with kids. I couldn't do it. I just love these kids. That's why I do it. They are so capable, and it empowers them. They know they can go home and make dinner if they really have to. They can take care of themselves. And that's what this is all about.

Terrell:

The food Emelia and these kids serve is the pride of this small town. It's actually helped keep the school alive by drawing students from other communities who want to go here because the lunch is that good.

Student:

It's so good. I can feel like my taste buds saying thank you for the yummy food.

I also love everything. I can't wait until I'm in sixth grade and fifth grade because then I can help make the food.

Terrell:

In addition to the community respect and pay parity with other professionals at the school, there's something else that Emelia gets for the program that school nutrition workers in most other districts don't get: the ability to spend more money than she brings in. Even with the added help of student labor and regular food donations from local farms, the lunch program is not self-sustaining. The school spends [about \\$40,000 a year](#) from its general fund to maintain the program. Every dollar spent on food means less money for something else in the school, but school leaders say it's worth it. Here's [superintendent](#) and principal Eric Gross.

Eric Gross:

Every district I've ever worked in, the policy has been that the cafeteria fund has to break even. It's on its own as a budget and it has to work within its budget. And that's been a hard and fast line that I've never seen crossed before. So I was a bit surprised that the school board here had decided to subsidize the lunch program.

Terrell:

I interviewed Eric out behind the school on a picnic bench with a stunning view of the Pacific Ocean. The setting of the school makes it easy to dismiss this as a class issue. Of course this school has better food. It's a place for rich kids, right? But looks can be deceiving. More than two thirds of kids in the school are low income and qualify for free or reduced-price lunch.

Gross:

A lot of people here spend a significant amount of their income on housing, which means they might look like they live in a rich place, but they are cash poor.

Terrell:

And there's a strategic reason the district subsidizes the nutrition program. The surrounding town is small. Lots of young families can't afford to buy property and enrollment was dwindling. [More than two thirds](#) of students at the school are now transfer students from other districts. Parents come from all around the region. The school doesn't advertise; it's all word of mouth. And the main draw is the food program.

Gross:

They've all gone to school and experienced food and they have these memories of what they didn't like. And they get here and they see an entirely different vision of what it can be and they see it in action. It's not just a theory.

Terrell:

It's a total shift from what Eric has seen in other districts over the course of his career. Where public school lunch wasn't something to really be proud of.

Gross:

In a lot of places it's treated as a service for poor kids. There's not an investment in it. I think most people would agree that school lunches in general are not something we should be especially proud of. I think public schools have a lot to be proud of, but that is an area where we don't claim a lot of credit and we tend to not talk about it.

Terrell:

And this ultimately is part of that untapped potential that Jen Gaddis is talking about. What might be possible if more school nutrition leaders and workers, more women like Stephanie Ragas and Emelia Miguel were empowered to feed their communities well. Perhaps there would be more lunch programs that are a school's crown jewel, that don't just provide basic nutrition, but truly nourish students...that engage kids in food and what it truly means to eat well; make them feel connected to their community, to their culture.

Santa Ana doesn't aspire to have a program like Pacific Elementary. What works for a rural school district with a single elementary school isn't going to work for an urban district with 45,000 students. But Santa Ana does want to create a lunch menu that is a source of community pride. Meals that reflect the students and the district. Because that kind of school lunch can be transformational.

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This episode was edited by Monica Lopez. Juleyka Lantigua is the executive producer and series editor. Our sound designer is Erica Huang. Our fact checker is Kate Gallagher.

This episode was reported and produced by Jessica Terrell, with additional reporting by Paulina Velasco. Kori Doran designed our cover art. Emma Forbes is our digital designer. Our theme music was composed and performed by Blue Dot Sessions. Recording assistance in Santa Ana was provided by Cecily Meza-Martinez. A special thanks to Jennifer Gaddis.

I'm Jessica Terrell. Thank you for listening.

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