



Bird's the word: Cooking better chicken for Chicago's kids

By Meredith Modzelewski

When I last wrote, [School Food FOCUS](#) – a collaborative that leverages knowledge and buying power of large school districts to make school food nationwide more healthful, regional, and sustainable – had worked closely with Saint Paul Public Schools and Denver Public Schools as part of our Learning Lab program to transform meals served in their cafeterias. These two districts have made major progress and continue to grow.

As we begin 2012, FOCUS has accomplished a lot in a year. We held our biggest-yet National Gathering in Denver, energizing our movement and forging new, important relationships; made real progress in deepening our work with the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) on the national level; took the first steps toward a new regional, seven-state-wide model of our Learning Lab in the Upper Midwest; and grew to a whopping 33 member districts, representing *nearly 4.3 million children across the country*.

One of the achievements we're most excited about is the purchase of approximately two million pounds of fresh, whole-muscle chicken by Chartwells-Thompson Hospitality on behalf of Chicago Public Schools (CPS), the third largest district in the nation. Beginning in October 2011, Chicago students in 473 schools now enjoy meals featuring fresh chicken three times per month – with no changes in staffing, and no increase in daily costs.

The Learning Lab, a signature FOCUS program, approaches a school district's specific food goals in a collaborative way, forging the will to try new methods with open minds that “learn by doing,” and reaching practical innovations with local, regional, and national impact. As part of the Chicago Learning Lab, among other priorities, CPS and its food service management company Chartwells-Thompson Hospitality set out to serve lower sodium, cleaner label chicken: a welcome improvement on nuggets and patties found in cafeterias across the country. Beyond this already laudable aim, the Learning Lab team was also asked to investigate the potential for sourcing chicken raised without the non-therapeutic use of antibiotics.

Even if you're unsure of the details, you've probably heard some concerns about antibiotics in animal production. The routine feeding of antibiotics to livestock that are not sick – using them unnecessarily for growth promotion and preventing illness – can cause harmful bacteria to develop resistance to drugs, undermining the effectiveness of life-saving antibiotic medications and leaving children especially vulnerable. FOCUS consulted the [Pew Campaign on Human Health and Industrial Farming](#) to better understand the complex issue of antibiotics in

agriculture, and with their help, developed [poultry purchasing guidelines for institutions and a Request for Proposals \(RFP\) template that any school district can adapt for its own use.](#)

Antibiotics in foods is an increasingly hot topic these days. In a recent positive development that nonetheless leaves room for improvement, on January 4 the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) [announced that it will begin restricting the use of cephalosporins](#), a class of antibiotics, in animal production. FOCUS supports this move, though we consider it only a starting place that we hope will lead to further, much-needed regulation.

Given these concerns, over time the larger goal is for schools to have chicken that is both *healthier on the plate* – whole muscle, lower sodium, fewer additives – and *in the environment*, in which antibiotics are used minimally, safely, and sustainably on the farm.



Now, a little background on how food actually gets into schools. CPS, like most school districts, has long relied on economical choices like nuggets and patties, made from chopped and formed “commodity” chicken and bound with processed proteins and additives. Commodity chicken is bought with “entitlement funds” – about 20 cents per lunch – spent only on items available through USDA Foods, the federal

purchasing and distribution agency for participants in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP). Buying chicken this way provides more bang for your buck than on the open market.

With the help of a broker, districts often arrange for their commodity chicken to be diverted to commercial processors, whom they pay to make a range of “heat-and-serve” entrees and precooked items ready to be used in recipes in districts’ central kitchens. The system is efficient and leaves little to chance: the chicken is processed to districts’ specifications in USDA-inspected facilities, and the expected quantities arrive on time.

But this arrangement was not designed for a raw chicken product. When ordering directly from USDA, just-in-time delivery is not always an option, so schools may end up with too much product to store in warehouses, or not enough to feed all students – especially in a district as large as CPS.

After months of research and conversation, CPS decided to make a revolutionary shift to scratch-cooked chicken in all schools equipped with full kitchens. With so many mouths to feed and logistical hurdles to leap over, CPS sought the Learning Lab’s help in facilitating a very large purchase of fresh-frozen chicken leg quarters from USDA Foods. Though the agency typically

requires school districts to purchase whole chickens, USDA put Chicago's order out to bid with its approved suppliers.

Unfortunately, and perhaps unsurprisingly, there were a few problems. First, the bid went unnoticed by producers – its unconventional nature made them less likely to respond. And when producers did fill the request, the first truckloads did not arrive on schedule. But when 80,000 pounds of commodity chicken leg quarters – a scale



previously unheard of in the world of school food – arrived in late October 2011, they were just in time for the [launch of “Windy City Chicken,”](#) developed by celebrity chef Rachael Ray in honor of the district's and USDA's pioneering effort.

With an eye on ramping up regional purchasing and a hunger for more progress in fresh chicken, the Learning Lab introduced CPS and Chartwells to the meat buyer for the Upper Midwest division of Whole Foods Market, who in turn led CPS to a family-owned Indiana-based processor that buys from small Amish farms that do not use antibiotics. Learning Lab partners and Staff members from CPS and Chartwells were invited to tour hatcheries and processing plants where company representatives were present to answer questions about feed, safety, environmental concerns, worker rights, and animal welfare. This company was pleased to find a local buyer for its drumsticks, and an open-market sale of 1.2 million pounds of raw chicken was negotiated for the 2011-2012 school year.

Because chicken from both sources was delivered frozen, staff needed to learn not just how to thaw safely, but to thaw huge volumes of chicken the right way. CPS already had some experience preparing raw chicken in a small number of high schools, so the district created an instructional video for its 425 cooks with protocols for thawing, cleaning, trimming, and sanitizing.

Fresh chicken fits in well with “real food” agendas that emphasize whole grains, low-fat dairy, locally sourced fruits and vegetables, and as much scratch cooking and baking as resources allow. “The school dining center should be an extension of the classroom, a place where students learn to eat – and enjoy – the kind of food that will help them thrive and succeed in school and the rest of their lives,” says Bob Bloomer, Regional Vice President for Chartwells-Thompson.

And that's really what it's all about. Chicago Public Schools enrolls over 400,000 students; nearly 85 percent of them qualify for free or reduced school meals. These children – and all children – deserve healthful, wholesome food. With support from FOCUS and others, CPS has taken a huge step forward, and we hope you'll join us in congratulating their exciting accomplishments.

Meredith Modzelewski is Communications Manager of School Food FOCUS. She may be contacted at mmodzelewski@schoolfoodfocus.org.

Resources:

- [Purchasing guidelines and sample RFP for buying poultry raised with the judicious use of antibiotics](#) [PDF]
- [Webinar: Antibiotic Use in Poultry Production](#) presented by FOCUS, Pew, and the C.S. Mott Group for Sustainable Agriculture

Further Reading:

- [Amish-raised chicken on CPS lunch menu](#) (*Chicago Tribune*)
- [Big Move: Chicago Public Schools to Buy Antibiotic-Free Chicken](#) (*Wired*)
- [More on Antibiotic-Free Chicken in Chicago Public Schools](#) (*The Lunch Tray*)

