Photo by Ari Snider

Culturally Important Menu Development

Integrating Central African Dishes Into School Lunch at Portland, Maine Public Schools

June 2022

Report written by Kristina Kalolo and Zoe Grodsky

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PROJECT BACKGROUND

During the Spring of 2022, Portland Public Schools (PPS) launched a new culturally important menu development project with funding from Full Plates, Full Potential. This project is led by PPS Food Service Director, Jane McLucas and local food justice nonprofit, Cultivating Community and has been implemented by several community partners including FoodCorps, Cumberland County Food Security Council (CCFSC), Good Shepherd Food Bank, the University of Southern Maine (USM), Khadija Ahmed, and Chef Samantha Cowens-Gasbarro.

This initiative was born from Food Fuels Learning, a network of school and community partners working to build food security in PPS, and is possible due to the recipe development work done by Ahmed and Cowens-Gasbarro with Westbrook Public Schools' Nutrition Director, Mary Emerson. Ahmed is the owner-operator of Food For All African Mobile Market and the Community Impact Manager for Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) at Good Shepherd Food Bank and Cowens-Gasbarro is the Executive Chef for Healthy School Recipes and a school nutrition consultant. Together, Ahmed and Cowens-Gasbarro adapted traditional Central African cuisine into meals that meet federal nutrition guidelines and trained food service staff on cooking techniques while educating on the importance of cultural representation in school food. Replicating the recipie's developed in Westbrook, Ahmed and Cowens-Gasbarro worked with PPS high school cafeteria staff to cook and test similar recipes in Portland.

The project focuses on engagement and feedback with Portland's three high schools: Portland, Deering, and Casco Bay. Once during the month of March, April, and May project partners led trainings with food service staff on how to cook these new dishes and taste tests that gave every high school student in the district the opportunity to try and provide feedback on each potential menu item. This work aims for students to see more familiar dishes offered at school and encourage higher participation in school meals - a proven strategy for increasing food security and reducing stigma around accessing these nutritious foods.

The three taste tests took place on March 24, April 12, and May 19. In March, students sampled smashed kidney beans, spiced beef, and cabbage slaw. In April, a smaller selection of students participated in a focus group taste testing chicken and chickpeas in vegetable sauce over yellow rice. The final taste test in May included North African chicken and kale stew over rice, with a vegetarian alternative available.

In addition to voting and short-form feedback on the day of the taste tests, students were able to sign up to participate in one hour focus groups. These sessions aimed to gather more in-depth insights on cultural representation in school meals and how to better create an inclusive cafeteria environment that is reflective of the diverse student body here in Portland. The three focus groups are coordinated by Kristina Kalolo (CCFSC) along with facilitation training and support for the FFL interns so they can lead their peers in these conversations. Professor Picardy's USM students will

conduct data analysis of the feedback to help inform the next stages of the project. Youth leadership and youth voice are centered in each step as an important part of the long-term success of this work. Last year, FFL interns conducted a survey on school meals that received feedback from over 800 students. A main take away was that there is a strong desire for more culturally representative and culturally important foods in school meals. This project is an extension of the findings that emerged from this student-led research.

From left to right: Zoe Grodsky, Samantha Crowens-Gasbarro, Lily Chaleff, Mercia Ckaba Thomas, Kristina Kalolo, Leah Hurley, Jane McLucas. Photo by Kelsey Kobik.

Chef Samantha Cowens-Gasbarro and Khadija Ahmed. Photo by Kelsey Kobik.

DATA SUMMARY

At the heart of this work was centering student's voices. This project itself emerged from student feedback during the 2021 FFL High School Intern Survey where there were multiple requests for more culturally diverse food in the school meals.

During this project, we wanted to collect as much student feedback about these recipes as possible with the goals to:

- Foster sense of belonging by incorporating school meals that reflect the student population and their cultures
- Increase school meal participation
- Increase communication and understanding between students of Food Service
- Empower students to help shape the food culture and food choices that they have at school

DATA COLLECTION

We collected data through three different methods:

1) **Taste Test Voting** - *After trying the meal sample, students put a sticker on the board to indicate how they felt about it*
    - "I loved it"
    - "I was okay"
    - "Not for me"
    - There were 486 total votes cast

2) **Taste Test Written Feedback** - *After trying the sample, students could choose to answer additional questions by writing anonymous responses to the follow questions:*
    - Did you enjoy the meal today during the taste testing. Why or why not?
    - If this was on the school lunch menu, would this make you more invested in eating school lunch?
    - Any other feedback you would like to leave?
    - There were 61 total pieces of written feedback given.
3) **Focus Groups** - *Students could participate in an hour long conversation with fellow high schoolers about the taste test and school meals. These were facilitated by a member of the project team and the following questions were asked:*

A) If this was offered as a part of the school lunch menu, would you get it?
    - If yes, why would you get it?
    - If no, why not? Is there anything that would change your mind?

B) How important is it for you for meat to be halal? Do you think it would affect your classmates and teachers' likelihood to choose it? Can you explain why or why not?

C) Were there any specific spices or ingredients in the meal that you or the other students liked or disliked? Is there anything about the meal that you would like to be different?

D) Beyond more representative meals, what else could be done to make the cafeteria and school meals more inclusive and inviting?

E) Do you think it is important to have culturally diverse food in school meals? Why? Do you think a lot of students agree?

F) Do you feel like the foods that you eat at home are represented in the school meals? What do you eat at home that you would like to see at school?

G) How did you feel about the taste test and voting process? Is there anything that could be done differently next time?

- We received in-depth feedback from 18 students (March = 5, April = 8, May = 5) who participated in focus groups. We had representatives from all three high schools.

DATA ANALYSIS

Taste Test Voting Analysis

We counted the total votes from each school per taste test and generated graphs based on the percentage for each voting option.

Taste Test Written Feedback and Focus Group Analysis

Cheverus High School interns, Grace Turner and John Herman, went through the collated written feedback from each taste test and the focus group notes and coded them with the following themes:

Flavor (this might include feedback on seasoning)

Cultural importance/connection (Sentimental)

Food quality (includes feedback on texture, temperature)

Dietary Needs (Halal, vegetarian, etc)

Participation (if this would affect student willingness to choose school lunch)

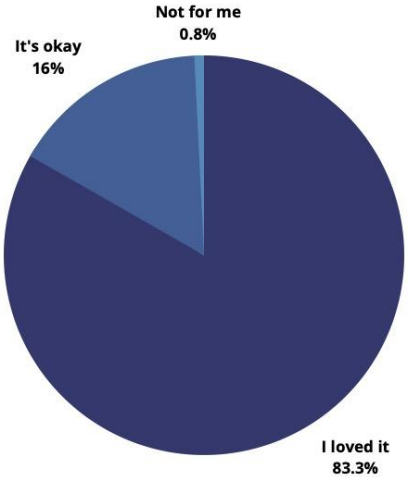
Youth Engagement (how students want to be included in decisions about school food)

Suggestions (about future foods or ways the cafeteria/ school meals experience could be better beyond this recipe)

The coded feedback and notes can be found in Appendices A-C.

KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM DATA

March: Smashed Kidney Beans, Spiced, Beef, and Cabbage Slaw



FLAVOR

- 11 students thought it was delicious and enjoyed the flavor
- 14 students shared that they would like there to be more salt and more spice to increase the overall flavor
- 6 students mentioned that they liked the balance of the different meal components together → generally agreed upon that the meat had the most flavored

CULTURAL IMPORTANCE/CONNECTION

- 9 students mentioned appreciating that this was an African dish and/or wanting more culturally diverse meal options
  "If more cultural items were added to the menu 100% of people would try it."

- 4 students mentioned that it reminded them of food they would eat at home, comfort food, or food their family would make

DIETARY NEEDS

- 2 students wondered what the vegetarian or vegan alternative for this would be
- 2 students voiced that it would be important for this dish to be halal:
  "It would impact a lot [students choosing this] if it was halal, because a lot of people can't have food that's not halal. If it was halal it would make them try it because they know it's halal."
  "There are a lot of Muslim students, so having halal is important."

PARTICIPATION

- 2 students mentioned that they, and other students, would be more likely to choose school lunch if it looked more appetizing
  "If the students weren't as familiar with the food and we're introducing something new, we need to nail the presentation to try and get people to try it for the first time. Once they try it for the first time then they'll eat it and know it's good."
- 17 students said that they enjoyed it and would choose it again if it was an option for school lunch

MAIN TAKEAWAYS FOR MARCH:

- Students enjoyed the meal, would choose it for school lunch, and would prefer it even more if there were more salt and seasoning
- Many students were excited and appreciative to see African dishes being offered by Food Service and several mentioned that it reminded them of home
- Multiple students brought up that appearance and presentation of the meals was important and would affect whether students would try it or not
- Multiple students brought up that it was important for this dish to be halal to be inclusive of Muslim students

April: Chickpeas and Chicken over Yellow Rice

No voting for April - we did not do school wide taste tests due to Ramandan

FLAVOR

- 6 students said they would like there to be more salt (2 said more seasoning as well)
- The students all agreed that the chicken was their favorite part of the dish

CULTURAL IMPORTANCE/CONNECTION

"Immigrant students would like to see food from their own culture"

DIETARY NEEDS

"It is important to be inclusive of students who are halal and making sure that they are able to eat the foods available"

YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

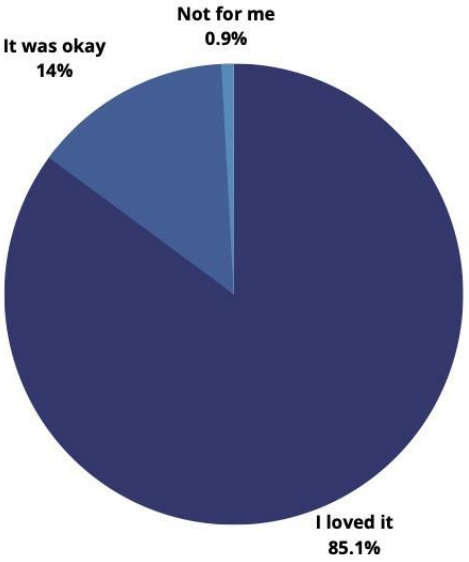
"I didn't realize there were opportunities to try new foods that could be a part of lunch. I'm glad that I get to be a part of this and that I get to be a part of getting news to be a part of schools"

"In the other schools we didn't get to do this. I would definitely choose this over pizza or hamburger any time of the day. It is exciting to try this."

MAIN TAKEAWAYS FOR APRIL:

- Students enjoyed the dish and would prefer it with more salt
- Students emphasized that it was important for the meals to be halal so that Muslim students could eat them
- Students were enthusiastic in trying these new items and being a part of the menu development process

May: Chicken and Kale Stew



FLAVOR

- 11 students mentioned that they would like there to be more salt (2 also said more spice and seasoning)

CULTURAL IMPORTANCE/CONNECTION

- 4 students mentioned that it reminded them of food they would eat at home
  "I enjoyed it because it tastes like my homemade food and its not just basic American food"
  "I enjoyed it and it's definitely a necessity to have cultural food at school. Reminding students of their home food makes them feel welcome"
  "I would eat it for lunch. It was like my mom's cooking"

FOOD QUALITY

- 25 students mentioned how much they liked or loved this dish
  "10/10. Pardon my bluntness: THIS IS INCREDIBLE. We NEED more diverse things like this. Thank you for this blessing - My Taste Buds"
  "Good job to the person who cooked this"
  "The smell is appealing and everything blends well together"

DIETARY NEEDS

- 4 students mentioned that it would be important and respectful to Muslim students for there to be halal options
  "Deering has a lot of Muslim kids, it would affect my classmates ability to eat the meals"

PARTICIPATION

- 27 students mentioned that they would get school lunch more often if this was on the menu
  "If there is culturally important food students will get their friends to try it because they will be excited and they will explain it to their other friends"
  "I was excited for this for two weeks because I like food and trying new things"
  "It would make me stay and eat lunch if there were new recipes"
- 3 students mentioned that they would get school lunch more if they knew what was on the menu. They included the following suggestions for distributing menus:
  - Make an announcement with what is being served and the ingredients
  - Pass out a menu in the morning, put it on the whiteboard, or in the newsletter
  - Post it on the school's instagram

SUGGESTIONS

- 1 student suggested adding more tomatoes
- 1 student suggested using spinach instead of kale

MAIN TAKEAWAYS FOR MAY:

- Students loved this dish, would get school lunch more often if it was on the menu and would prefer it with more salt and seasoning
- Several students said that it reminded them of food they would eat at home and or that their family would make
- Multiple students said that if the meals were not halal many of their classmates would not be able to eat it

- Many students were excited for new menu items and said that they would eat lunch more if there were different options, especially ones that featured different culturally important foods
- Multiple students mentioned that they would participate in school lunch more if they knew what was on the menu (and provided suggestions for how to increase menu visibility to students)

Mercia Ckaba Thomas, FoodCorps Service Member. Photo by Kelsey Kobik.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Feedback for Food Service

- Students provided overwhelmingly positive feedback for each dish, sharing that it would encourage them to eat school lunch more often
    - The main change that students would like to see with each recipe was more salt and seasoning
    - There were questions/interest about vegetarian and vegan versions of these items
- Strong desire for new and culturally important menu items
    - Many students expressed excitement that new menu items were being introduced and that they really wanted to see new options available
    - Students were enthusiastic to see Central and North African recipes being offered in the schools - for many it reminded them of food that they would eat at home and several mentioned that it made them feel excited to share this with their friends and more welcome
    - Many students were excited to see other cultures represented in school meals in the future (see list of suggestions below)
- Consistent feedback each month that offering halal meals is important to be respectful and inclusive of Muslim students (and as a way to make it possible for them to eat school lunch)
- Teachers and students expressed a desire for larger meal portions at the high school level, stating that it was not enough food to keep them full for the remainder of the school day

Recommendations:

- ☐ **Add all three menu items to the school menu rotation (with consideration to vegan/vegetarian options)**
- ☐ **Adjust recipes to include more salt and seasoning**
- ☐ **Continue developing more culturally important menu items to reflect other cultures within PPS' student body**
- ☐ **Transition and adapt menu so that it is halal-friendly and accessible for Muslim students**
- ☐ **Continue to find opportunities to engage with student participation in menu development to build interest and investment in school meals**

- ☐ **Consider increasing portion sizes for high school students**

Potential Future Projects

- Survey of where everyone is from and what foods they like to eat so everyone's cultures can be included
- Survey of how students would be able to access and see the school breakfast and lunch menu daily

STUDENT SUGGESTIONS FOR LUNCH DISHES

- Rice and beans (mentioned ~8 times)
- African food (mentioned multiple times)
    - Congolese (x2)
- Latino food
- Brazilian food
- Tacos
- Empanadas
- Quesadillas
- Fish (x4)
    - Tilapia mentioned multiple times
    - Salmon
    - Red fish
    - Shrimp
- Jerk chicken
- Coconut rice
- Boiled potatoes
- Beef stew
- Vegetable rice
- Orange chicken
- Spaghetti
- Tofu stir-fry
- Plantains (x4)
- Fufu (x2)
- Saka madesu
- Fresh fruit salad

STUDENT SUGGESTIONS FOR BREAKFAST DISHES

- Poptarts
- Oatmeal
- Parfaits
- Smoothie
- Eggs
- Orange juice
- Savory oatmeal with vegetables (spinach)

Three students discussed the desire for a **Seasoning Station** that would include:

- Hot sauce
- Ranch
- Parmesan cheese
- Salt
- Pepper
- Tabasco

APPENDIX A: Consolidated March Data

Including information from focus groups, written feedback, and taste test voting

Taste Test Voting by School

Deering High School

Loved It = 80,
It Was Ok = 8,
Did Not Like It = 0
Samples served: Unfortunately unknown, not recorded

TOTAL Votes: 88

Portland High School

I LOVE IT = 100
IT'S OKAY = 27
NOT FOR ME = 2
Samples served: Unfortunately unknown, not recorded

TOTAL Votes: 129

Casco Bay High School

Loved It = 34
It Was Ok = 6
Did Not Like It = 0
Samples served: ~75

TOTAL Votes: 40

TOTAL VOTES: 257

Loved It: 83% (214)
It was OK: 16% (41)
Not for me: less than 1% (2)

Flavor

Culturally Important Menu Development

(this might include feedback on seasoning)

March Focus Groups:

- F: yes I would get it, the meat had the most flavor and it's much better than the other stuff they serve at school lunch 9/10 I would eat again
- H: I didn't think it needed more salt
- H: they should flavor the rice to make it not plain (agreement), would like to see Sambusa (sp?)

March Written Feedback:

- I enjoyed the meal because it was a lot of flavors
- Loved it, good flavors.
- I liked the flavor it needs more spice.
- Yes but it needs more salt. Yes if you allowed rice with it.
- There's no flavor
- The food just need more salt and seasoning! But I loved it.
- It was good! It was a lot more flavorful than school meals usually are!
- It has a lot of flavor!
- Loved it, good flavor-mild but interesting.
- Yes! So tasty!
- Tasted different but nice.
- I liked the new menu items. They were cooked very well. I liked the seasoning.
- It tasted delicious.
- It was fine but not much flavor.
- I really liked it. It reminds me of meatloaf mixed with chili.
- I didn't really enjoy the beans but I did like the meat and the lettuce. I don't think that those 3 things mix together, I also think that more seasoning could be added to make it more enjoyable.

Cultural importance/connection

(Sentimental)

March Focus Groups:

- H: I really liked the food and some of my classmates did and we liked that it was an African dish
- H: we have pizza every day, but we should have more cultures of food so people can try new things during school lunch
- F: foods from different cultures are the best ones, i'm sick of american food

Culturally Important Menu Development

- H: school food is usually just american food like pizza, burgers, chickens nuggets, people want different stuff so cultural food would be better
- F: if more cultural items were added to the menu 100% people will try it
- F: our lunch line is always clogged and there's always a good option and a bad option, and the good option is always gone first and that's usually cultural food like empanadas
- F: school lunch is fine, but would like more cultural food
- H: I live in an African home, the dishes at school lunch are totally different but I really prefer African food → maboke it's a dish from the DRC, onions (Leaticia will follow up on it) – students at CBHS don't know what fufu is but they want to try it, tacos
- F: would like to see latino food: empanadas, quesadillas, rice and beans, fried plantains

March Written Feedback:

- It was good, reminded me of my mom's food.
- Yes, it taste like something I would eat at home.
- Classic comfort food.

Food quality

(includes feedback on texture, temperature)

March Focus Groups:

- F: yes I would get it, the meat had the most flavor and it's much better than the other stuff they serve at school lunch 9/10 I would eat again
- H: the meat was the best part, and I would eat it would more be rated 6.5/10 I didn't like the beans so much
- N: I liked the food, I thought the beans were very good
- H: my friends said it was actually good, i didn't hear anyone say they wouldn't like it
- H: the pizzas seem like they are from a week ago

March Written Feedback:

- Yes because it had the perfect amount of beans and slaw and they were good together and so tasty!
- The food is better than what we eat at school
- Rice was dry
- It was a little cold, would be better hot.
- I liked the coleslaw.
- Coleslaw was good and not soupy, liked that it wasn't too salty unsure of other components.
- Yes I would enjoy it looks good taste good. It melts in my mouth so good! Preferred chicken, more veggies, slaw isn't good, not much flavor.
- It was really good, reminded me of tacos.
- Yes because it had the perfect amount of beans and slaw and they were good together.

- Yes the taste and texture stood out
- It was great, I loved that it wasn't just beef, and the beans helped a lot. The slaw is super good and goes well with the beef.
- The meat was great. The beans sort of muted the flavor, but that's minor. Love the cabbage. 7/10
- The beans were a bit tasteless, however the meat complimented it very well. The greens balanced the meat well. 8/10 it is very good.
- I enjoyed everything, the taste was unique.
- Definitely better than most anything we typically have. Thank you!
- The slaw set the dish off. Very good.

Dietary Needs

(Halal, vegetarian, etc)

March Focus Groups:

- H: It would impact a lot if it was a halal food, because a lot of people can't have food that's not halal, if it was halal it would make them try it because they know it's halal
- H: there are a lot of Muslim students, so having halal is important

March Written Feedback:

- YES! Healthier, no gluten, and flavorful. Exposure to new foods.
- I did enjoy the taste. As a vegetarian it needed something else to compliment.
- Vegan/ vegetarian option?

Participation

(if this would affect student willingness to choose school lunch)

March Focus Groups:

- F: the coleslaw was meh, most of the people I know don't like coleslaw I would prefer an actual salad over coleslaw
- F: food needs to look more appetizing, no one will want to eat school lunch if it doesn't look good, the mac and cheese always looks gross and also isn't good
- H: the presentation of the taste test dish looked good, on regular days school lunch looks bad
- H: I usually get stuck with salad and pizza and I don't want that
- F: he liked the first taste test, so many people from different backgrounds tasted the food so he thinks they will eat it in school lunch

- F: if the students weren't as familiar with the food and we're introducing something new, we need to nail the presentation to try and get people to try it for the first time, once they try it for the first time then they'll eat when they know it's good
-

March Written Feedback:

- I liked it, it is different
- I would eat it if it was in school lunch 100%. I would rate it a three.
- I would eat it again.
- Yes very much! And yes!
- It's great and eat it at lunch.
- I would definitely eat this as a school meal. I loved it!
- Yes it should be on the menu!
- I liked it! I would definitely get this if it were on the menu.
- Oh my goodness please make again more!!!
- I think it was OK! :-)
- Yes, I would eat it every time would be very tasteful and clear for if there was more sauce.
- It was delicious. I would eat it if it was a school lunch.
- I would pick this as a meal for lunch.
- Yes, absolutely. Yummy surprise
- I enjoyed it
- I would definitely eat this if it was offered.
- I would absolutely be more interested in school lunch, especially if this dish was served.

Youth Engagement-largely included in "Suggestions"

(how students want to be included in decisions about school food)

Suggestions

(about future foods or ways the cafeteria/ school meals experience could be better beyond this recipe)

March Focus Groups:

- H: if it was served with rice it would be even better, rice and meat is the best combo
- H: it would be important to get new cultural ideas for the food
- Need bigger portions
- F: would like to see latino food: empanadas, quesadillas, rice and beans, fried plantains
- F: fufu, rice and beans, saka madesu
- N: rice and beans
- H: we need some changes in the school lunch

March Written Feedback:

- Beans need more spices, but I love the mashed idea! So yummy
- Needs more salt
- More salt
- More spice.
- Yes I would maybe less beans more meat.
- I loved it the only thing I would change is more ground beef.
- Needs more sauce.
- Less beans or no beans.
- The beef and beans are great, go a little less on the coleslaw but definitely add a side with the beef and beans and coleslaw.
- Yes! I love it. Maybe try fresh tomatoes.
- I feel like it needs a little more sauce and cheese. But yes it's really good.
- It needs a little bit more salt.
- More coleslaw

APPENDIX B: Consolidated April Data

Including information from focus groups (there were no school-wide taste tests due to Ramadan)

Flavor

(this might include feedback on seasoning)

- Would like more salt in the rice
- The chicken has a lot of flavor which adds to the rest of the dish
- the chickpeas are ok but need more seasoning
- In general the food is good, but didn't like the rice and chickpeas because they need more salt
- I would eat this in school lunch but would like it to have more salt
- Prefer the white rice, think the brown rice has a weird flavor
- Brown rice tastes like it has less flavor and seasoning
- Prefer brown rice over white rice, but both still need more salt added
- The food at home is a lot more flavorful , people who don't get that at home should be able to try that at school

Cultural importance/connection

(Sentimental)

- Need food from around the world, not just bringing in meals from one region
- Immigrant students would like to see food from their own culture
- A lot of my friends bring in different kinds of cultural food (like Brazilian food), it would be great for the school to make that
- We eat a lot of salad, beans, chicken, shrimp, tilapia, fish filet
- At home i eat a lot of spaghetti, chicken, beans, fufu
- At home I eat fish and like it (x3)
-

Food quality

(includes feedback on texture, temperature)

- Really good
- I like the chicken best (x4)
- I like the textures, they fit together
- You can feel all the ingredients on the chicken
- The rice was a bit mushy and could use more seasoning/salt (x3)
- The chicken is so good

- In general they like chickpeas and just don't love these ones
- Need it to be fresher
- The orange chicken doesn't taste like orange chicken

Dietary Needs

(Halal, vegetarian, etc)

Participation

(if this would affect student willingness to choose school lunch)

- Yes because it's different than other school meals
- Yes, we need more options and flavors in high school meals – not everyone wants a burger every day for lunch
- I would eat this in school lunch but would like it to have more salt
- I would take this because we don't see it a lot in school meals and this feels a lot healthier than getting a burger or pizza
- I would only take the chicken if it was in school meals because the beans and rice taste weird, but if they added more spices I would take all of it

Youth Engagement

(how students want to be included in decisions about school food)

- I didn't know there was an opportunity to try new foods that might be part of school lunches and I'm glad to know I can help with this

Suggestions

(about future foods or ways the cafeteria/ school meals experience could be better beyond this recipe)

- The rice was a bit mushy and could use more seasoning/salt (x3)
- Different kinds of sides besides canned fruit and caesar salad, more diverse like rice
- Have more fruit like fresh fruit salad
- Favorite thing family eats at home that you'd be excited to see: rice, beans, chicken

APPENDIX C: Consolidated May Data

Including information from focus groups, written feedback, and taste test voting

Taste Test Voting by School

Deering High School

Loved It = 28
It Was Ok = 8
Did Not Like It = 0
TOTAL: 36

Portland High School

I LOVE IT = 98
IT'S OKAY = 21
NOT FOR ME = 2
TOTAL: 121

Casco Bay High School

Loved It = 68
It Was Ok = 3
Did Not Like It = 1
TOTAL: 72

Overall Votes: 229
85% loved it (194)
14% It's Okay (32)
1% Not for me (3)

Teacher Comment- "Interested in getting more meals like this - let me know how to help!! Amanda Vickerson-teacher vickea@portlandschools.org"

Flavor

(this might include feedback on seasoning)

May Written Feedback:

- More spice please!
- Loved it cuz it tasted good

- Deve aumentar sal(“needs more salt”)
- More salt
- More salt
- Liked the rice
- The food test so good and I recommend to put a little bit of salt.
- I I really enjoyed it had a lot of falvor was not dry and cooked very well.
- Well seasoned
- The chicken just need more seasoning but it all good I loved it!
- More salt
- More salt for vegan version
- More salt
- I enjoyed it! Very flavorful compared to the other food we have. But isn’t overbearing.
- Add a tiny bit more salt but still really good!
- Lots of spices were so good! The vegetarian option was amazing <3
- Yes it was great! I loved the combo of all the flavors.
- Very good nice flavor tast like homemade
- I did it was very tasty
- Yes
- I like the spices, I just didn’t like the type of rice.
- Yes I love it , and it tests so good
- Ye
- I enjoyed it. It was different than the normal lunch and I thought the kale was good.

Focus Group Questions:

- Any flavors you like or dislike?
    - I can taste garlic I like it
    - It’s missing tomato sauce
    - The sauce is tasty
    - The rice should be cooked a little bit longer
    - I love the sauce
    - I like rice in general, brown rice is ok
    - Spinach instead of kale

Cultural importance/connection

(Sentimental)

May Written Feedback:

- I want there to be rice and beans on the school lunch menu. This is a 10/10. You should serve plantains.

- Yes I enjoyed it because it tastes like my homemade food and its not just basic american food.
- I enjoyed it's definitely a necessity to have cultural food at school reminding students of their home food makes them feel welcome
- I would eat it for lunch. It was like my mom's cooking

Focus Group Questions:

- Do you feel like the meals you eat at home are represented in the school meals?
    - No
- What do you eat at home that you'd want to see in school?
    - Fried Plantains
    - Jerk chicken
    - Coconut rice
    - Spaghetti
    - We eat pizza every day and it is not good, we don't want to spend money
    - Boiled potatoes
    - Beef stew
    - Vegetable rice
    - Stir fry
    - Orange chicken
    - Cooking class where we make food for the cafeteria
    - Fish (red fish, salmon, tilapia) – most immigrant students grew up eating fish so they like it
    - Breakfast sandwich is really good already
    - They like the breakfast chocolate muffins (generally school breakfast is better than school lunch)
    - Sweets at the end of lunch that you get after you eat lunch (maybe once a week)
- Do you think it's important to have culturally diverse food in school meals? Why?
    - You can't have a diverse school and only serve bland american food for school lunch
    - If there is culturally important food, students will get their friends to try it because they will be excited and they will explain it to their other friends
    - It is really important for younger kids in middle and elementary schools since they don't have the open campus

Food quality

(includes feedback on texture, temperature)

May Written Feedback:

- I like the chicken but the rice need more cooking.
- I like chicken and rice but veseleh not

- I liked the soupy part.
- I liked it so I came back for more!
- Big fan of the kale
- I I really enjoyed it had a lot of falvor was not dry and cooked very well.
- I don't like soup but I like this
- I did enjoy the food because everything was well made.
- It was really amazing
- 10/10 Pardon my bluntness. THIS IS INCREDIBLE. We NEED more diverse things like this. Thank you for this blessing-my tastebuds.
- It was great! I love that there's every element of a meal that you need - starch, protein, veggie!
- Yes. It was very good...
- Wonderful! Make sure there is enough of the vegetarian optionIt was really good
- I think both versions are fantastic, but I don't think it's for me. It should 100% be on the menu, I would take it if it's there, but I don't think kale if for me, is all.
- Yes it is really good!
- Yes! It felt fresh and was tasty!
- Yes. It's a lot higher quality than other meals.
- Yes. The containers were a good top to it as well. I think the food was also very tasty!
- Good
- It was good
- It's was not bad
- Yes
- It's not good. Not bad either
- Very very good !
- Good job for the person who cooked
- Nah
- No
- No

Focus Group Questions:

- Impressions of food
    - Smell is appealing
    - Everything blends well together

Dietary Needs

(Halal, vegetarian, etc)

May Written Feedback:

- More food without dairy is great!
- More salt for vegan version
- Lots of spices were so good! The vegetarian option was amazing <3

Culturally Important Menu Development

- More vegetarian options! Yes! More!

Focus Group Questions:

- How important is it for you for school meals to be halal?
    - It is respectful of people to have it be halal, no pork
    - It is respectful of religion
    - Deering has a lot of Muslim kids, it would affect classmates ability to eat the meals
    - It is an important respect thing for Muslim students

Participation

(if this would affect student willingness to choose school lunch)

May Written Feedback:

- I was excited for this for two weeks because I like food and trying new things
- It feels like a home cooked meal
- It was so yummy! I wish I could have this every day.
- I enjoyed it's definitely a necessity to have cultural food at school reminding students of their home food makes them feel welcome
- I liked it something new
- I enjoyed it because it reminds me of my food @ home!
- Yes! Great flavor! Healthy! Yummy!
- Based :)
- Usual school food is lame. Love something different.
- Yes I would probably only get this if it was an option.
- I'd love this on school lunch menu!
- I would eat it if it was on the menu
- If I get school lunch and they have this I might get it. It was good
- I would eat it everyday
- Yes for sure.
- Yes
- i would get school lunch more if this was served
- I'd love it on the school lunch menu
- I would always eat school lunch if this was on the menu.
- It should 100% be on the menu, I would take it if it's there, but I don't think kale if for me, is all.
- If this was on the menu I would definitely by excited for school lunch.
- Definitely! More like this!
- Yes, I would eat more school lunch and it's also healthy\
- It would be great on the menu!
- Yes
- Once a week
- Yea

- Yes i would it's delicious
- Sure....
- Ye
- Of course
- Bring it more often

Focus Group Questions:

- What cuisine would you like to see in school meals?
    - African food
    - African cuisine
    - More diverse foods
    - Congolese – plantains
    - Congolese
- How would it impact your teachers and other students?
    - Teachers have to pay for meals so they don't usually eat it, only if they left their lunch at home
    - Everyone deserves a choice on what they want to eat, so we should provide different choices
- What could be done to make school meals more respectful and inclusive?
    - Taste test samples to try new foods
    - Everyone will want to try new recipes
    - Anyone can leave for lunch, but the people who stay are inclusive
    - It would make me stay and eat lunch if there were new recipes
    - We've had the same food since elementary, so we want new items
    - Survey of where everyone is from and what foods they like to eat so different cultures can be included
    - Taco tuesdays
    - Make an announcement with what is being served for lunch and the ingredients – we don't find out what's happening in advance
    - It would be helpful to pass out a menu in the morning, they could put it on the whiteboard or on the newsletter (students get their email on their phone), advisory (but it's on Mondays so they would have already missed lunch)
    - If students knew what the menu was they would be more likely to eat lunch at school
    - Follow deering on instagram, could post menus there
- Why do students prefer breakfast to lunch?
    - Lunch food doesn't have a lot of seasoning
    - For breakfast people have cereal and milk, so there is no way to add seasoning to that
    - People don't eat breakfast at home so they're already
- If this was on the school lunch menu would you get it? Why?
    - Yes
    - I like the chicken

    - It's different from what we usually get
    - It looks familiar, something I would eat at home
    - Yes it is good
- Did you try the taste test in March?
    - Everyone wanted to try it because it was new
    - The food was a little cold
- What are good ways for us to communicate with high schoolers?
    - The taste was effective because a lot of people showed up
    - Announcements in the morning
    - Did not notice posters around school
    - Notice posters on the door, at guidance, on the front door where the white board is – but it is better to hear it than see it

Youth Engagement-largely included in "Suggestions"

(how students want to be included in decisions about school food)

May Written Feedback:

- Teacher note: "Interested in getting more meals like this - let me know how to help‼ Amanda Vickerson-teacher vickea@portlandschools.org"

Suggestions

(about future foods or ways the cafeteria/ school meals experience could be better beyond this recipe)

March Written Feedback:

- You should serve plantains.
- and share the recipe. P.S. High school students, esp. Boys, need larger portions and side.

Focus Group Questions:

- What would you be excited to see for school breakfast?
    - Poptarts
    - Oatmeal
    - Parfaits – would be better for breakfast than lunch
    - Smoothie
    - Eggs
    - Orange juice
    - Savory oatmeal with vegetables (spinach)

- Do you have a seasoning station? Would you use a station with hot sauce? What do you want on a flavor station?
    - There is only ketchup and mustard
    - Hot sauce
    - Ranch
    - Parmesan cheese
    - Salt
    - Pepper
    - Tabasco
    - Napkins at each table would be nice

APPENDIX D: Recipes

March Recipes

Spiced Beef

Seasoned and spiced beef is simmered in a vegetable puree.

One portion provides:2.5 ounces is 2 oz mma

Ingredients	25 servings	50 servings	100 servings	Directions
Beef, ground, raw 85/15	4.25 pounds	8.5 pounds	17 pounds	1. Brown beef in a tilt skillet.
Green pepper	0.75 pound	1.5 pounds	3 pounds	2. Puree green pepper, onion, tomato, and red peppers. Add to browned beef. 4. Stir well and simmer for 30 minutes to blend flavors. 5. Remove from tilt skillet and place in (2) 4-inch steam table pans and cover. 6. Hold warm for service, above 135 degrees.
Onion, yellow	1.25 pounds	2.5 pounds	5 pounds	
Tomato diced, unsalted, canned	0.75 pounds	1.5 pounds	3 pounds	
Red pepper	0.75 pounds	1.5 pounds	3 pounds	
Tomato paste, unsalted	¼ cup	½ cup	1 cup	
Pepper, black, ground	2 teaspoons	1.5 tablespoons	3 tablespoons	
Nutmeg, ground	1 tablespoon	2 tablespoons	4 tablespoons	
Salt, kosher	1.5 teaspoon	1 tablespoon	2 tablespoons	

Smashed Kidney Beans

Kidney beans are simmer in a flavorful spiced tomato-based sauce and smashed for the perfect African side dish.

One portion provides: ½ cup beans/legumes

Ingredients	25 servings	50 servings	100 servings	Directions for 100 servings
Oil, vegetable or canola	¼ cup	¾ cup	1 ½ cups	1. Heat oil in large pot or tilt skillet medium high heat. Add tomato paste and sauté until cooked and looks slightly clumpy.
Tomato paste, unsalted	1 cup	2 cups	4 cups	
Kidney beans, canned, drained rinsed	1.37 #10 cans	2.75 #10 cans	5 ¼ - #10 cans	2. Add beans, salt, nutmeg, garlic and onion. Stir well to combine. 3. Cook of medium low heat, stirring often. Mashing slightly as they cook. 4. Place in 4-inch steam table pan and cover. CCP: hold hot for service, above 135 degrees.
Salt, kosher	1.5 teaspoons	1 tablespoon	2 tablespoons	
Nutmeg, ground	1.5 teaspoons	1 tablespoon	2 tablespoons	
Garlic, granulated	1.5 teaspoons	1 tablespoon	3 tablespoons	
Onion, granulated	1.5 tablespoons	3 tablespoons	6 tablespoons	

Cabbage slaw

This quick and crunchy cabbage salad is the perfect addition to this flavor East African infused meal.

One portion provides:
1/4 cup other vegetable

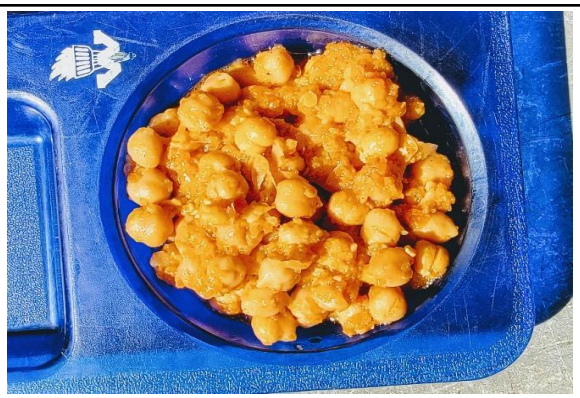
Ingredients	25 servings	50 servings	100 servings	Directions
Cabbage, green, shredded	31 ounces	62 ounces	7 ¾ pounds	1. Toss cabbage with salt and vinegar. 2. Let sit for up to 6 hours. Hold cold below 41 degrees.
Vinegar, white	¾ cups	1 ¼ cups	2 ½ cups	
Salt, kosher	2 teaspoons	1.5 tablespoons	3 tablespoons	

April Recipes

Chickpeas with Vegetable Sauce

Chickpeas flavors with vegetable sauce is a perfect bean based dish for any African inspired meal.

One portion provides:2/3 cup serving size
Meal pattern crediting: ½ cup legume



Ingredients	75 servings	150 servings	Directions
Celery, chopped	2 quarts	4 quarts	1. Puree celery, red pepper, tomato and green pepper. 2. Set aside. *can be made ahead and held cold, below 41 degrees, until ready to use.
Red pepper, chopped	1.5 quart	3 quarts	
Tomato, diced	2 quarts	4 quarts	
Green pepper, diced	1 quart	2 quarts	
Oil	2 cups	4 cups	3. Heat a large pot on the stove over medium heat and add oil and vegetable puree. Simmer for 15-20 minutes until mixture is cooked and looks like it is about the separate.
Chickpeas, drained, rinsed	3.5 #10 cans	7 #10 cans	4. Add chickpeas, water and spices. 5. Simmer for 30-40 minutes until flavors develop and liquid has slightly reduced. Beans should be cooked and look like they are beginning to break down.
Water	8 cups	16 cups	
Cumin, ground	2 tablespoons	4 tablespoons	
Nutmeg, ground	2 tablespoons	4 tablespoons	
Garlic powder	2 tablespoons	4 tablespoons	
Salt, kosher	3 tablespoons	6 tablespoons	
Paprika, ground	2 teaspoons	4 teaspoons	6. Hold warm for service, above 135 degrees.

Chicken with Vegetable Sauce

Chickpeas flavors with vegetable sauce is a perfect bean based dish for any African inspired meal.

One portion provides: 2.5 oz serving size
Meal pattern crediting: 2 oz mma

Ingredients	25 portions	Directions
Celery, chopped, pureed	20 ounces	1. Puree celery, onion, garlic and tomato paste.
Onion, chopped, pureed	20 ounces	3. In a kettle or pot, add 1 cup of oil and heat. Add vegetable mix. Cook for 15 to 20 minutes, stirring often.
Garlic, diced, pureed	1.25 cups	4. Add spices and stir.
Tomato paste	5 ounces	5. Place chicken on a sheet pan. Coat with oil and spices. Bake in a 375-degree oven until slightly browned. Stirring one or twice to create even browning.
Oil, canola	1 cup	6. Remove chicken oven and toss with sauce. Cook an additional 10 minutes in oven or on stove top to blend flavors.
Onion, granulated	1 tablespoon	
Garlic, granulated	1 Tablespoon	
Nutmeg, ground	1 tablespoon	
Salt, kosher	2 teaspoons	
Chicken, raw, diced	3 pounds	

Yellow Rice

This simple yellow rice is flavored with vegetable broth and colored with turmeric for a mild yet delicious side dish.

One portion provides:1/2 cup serving is 1 oz grain (NWG)

Ingredients	50 servings	100 servings	Directions for 100 servings
Rice, white, jasmine	3.75 pounds	7.5 pounds	Rinse rice under cold running water to remove starch.
Onion, yellow	5 each	10 each onion	Rough chop the onions and puree.
Oil, canola	1 cups	2 cups	3. Add oil to large pot. Heat and caramelize onions for 15-20 minutes. Stirring often.
Turmeric	1 tablespoon	2 tablespoons	4. Add turmeric to rice and stir.
Vegetable stock	5 quarts	10 quarts	5. Prepare 2 (4inch hotel pans). Divide rinsed rinse into two hotel pans. Add rice and turmeric between the two pans (2.5 quarts rice per pan and 1 tablespoon turmeric per pan) 6. Divide oil and onion between the two pans evenly. 7. Add 5 quarts of veg stock per hotel pan. Cover and bake for 60-90 minutes. 8. Slowly add broth and stir. Once all broth is added. Cover and cook for 20 minutes or until rice is done and broth is all absorbed. 9. Hold hot for service, above 135 degrees.

May Recipes

African Chicken and Kale Stew

Description

One portion provides:
100, 1 cup servings
2 oz mma, ¼ cup dark leafy green, 1/8 cup r/o and 1/4 cup other

Ingredients	50 SERVINGS	100 servings	200 servings	Directions
Peppers and onions, frozen, thawed	6.5 pounds	13 pounds	26 pounds	1. Puree peppers and onions.

Tomatoes, diced, canned	0.75 #10 can (115 oz)	1.5 #10 can 230 oz)	3 #10 cans	2. Puree tomatoes.
Oil, divided	1.5 cups	3 cups	6 cups	3. Add 2 cups of oil to kettle. Add pureed vegetables and 4. simmer for 10-15 minutes. Stirring occasionally.
Nutmeg, ground	1/4 cup	1/2 cup	1 cup	5. Add nutmeg, garlic and salt. Simmer for another 10 minutes. 6. Add water and simmer for 20 minutes.
Garlic, granulated	1/4 cup	1/2 cup	1 cup	
salt	2 tablespoons	1/2 cup	1 cup	
Chicken, tenders, raw, boneless	9 pounds	18 pounds	36 pounds	7. For chicken: Preheat oven to 350 degrees. 8. Lay chicken in an even layer on parchment lined sheet pan. 9. Drizzle with remaining ½ cup of oil and sprinkle with cumin, nutmeg and garlic. 10. Bake for 25-30 minutes or until internal temperature reaches 165 degrees.
Cumin, ground	2 tablespoons	4 tablespoons	½ cup	
Nutmeg, ground	2 tablespoons	4 tablespoons	½ cup	
Garlic, granulated	2 tablespoons	4 tablespoons	½ cup	
water	2 quart	2 quarts	4 quarts	
Kale, fresh	3 pounds	6 pounds	12 pounds	11. Squeeze spinach of any excess water and add stew. Add cooked chicken. 12. Simmer for 20 minutes and hold hot for service. Above 135 degrees.

APPENDIX E: Media Coverage

"Portland schools serving African-inspired dishes to boost participation in school meals," by Ari Snider, Maine Public Radio, May 25, 2022.

"PPS Developing Culturally Important Menu," by Portland Public Schools, April 1, 2022.

News Center Maine

Amjambo Africa

Wall Street Journal