



# Montana Cook Fresh Initiative Leads to Increases in Scratch Cooking Among School Nutrition Programs in Montana

## Program Overview

The Montana Cook Fresh Initiative was a comprehensive training program designed to assist school food authorities operating USDA Child Nutrition Programs in serving high quality, scratch cooked meals that appeal to Montana students. Statewide training interventions included trainings, peer education, and technical assistance related to school meal quality, farm to school, culinary skills, and program operation. Table 1 highlights the training reach of the entire program. In-person, virtual and hybrid trainings were offered. The timeline was from January 2020 - September 2022.

**TABLE 1: TARGETED AND ACTUAL TRAINING REACH FOR MONTANA COOK FRESH INITIATIVE, 2020-2022**

Training Reach	Target	Actual
Number of school districts impacted	130	184
Number of hours of training offered	75	243
Total number trained	300	493
Directors trained	-	213
Managers trained	-	18
Frontline staff trained	-	131
Other (non-school food service staff, parents, students, community members, etc) trained	-	131

*Values are cumulative and unduplicated*

## Evaluation Methods

The Initiative began in early 2020 with 19 school nutrition programs that were sorted into two Cohorts (C1=9; C2=10); and asked to complete a pre and post evaluation. Statistical analysis included Chi Square testing for categorical variables, significant when  $p < 0.05$ . Cohort 1 pre-assessments were collected between March – July 2021 (n=8) and (n=8) post evaluations were collected from November 2021–January 2022. Pre-assessments for Cohort 2 (n=6) were collected between March – June 2021, with post evaluations collected from February to June 2022 (n=6). Table 2 summarizes the various training interventions and reach of the Initiative.

## Learn More

### WEB

[www.montana.edu/teamnutrition](http://www.montana.edu/teamnutrition)

### FACEBOOK

[www.facebook.com/MontanaTeamNutrition](https://www.facebook.com/MontanaTeamNutrition)

### CONTACT

Montana Team Nutrition  
Katie Bark  
Program Director  
[kbark@montana.edu](mailto:kbark@montana.edu)  
(406) 994-5641

325 Reid Hall  
PO Box 173370  
Montana State University  
Bozeman MT 59717-3370

Montana OPI SNP  
Chris Emerson  
OPI SNP Director  
[cemerson@mt.gov](mailto:cemerson@mt.gov)  
(406) 994 – 2502

The Montana Team Nutrition Program works in close collaboration with the Office of Public Instruction School Nutrition Programs and is funded by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), Team Nutrition Training Grant Program. This institution is an equal opportunity provider, employer, and lender.



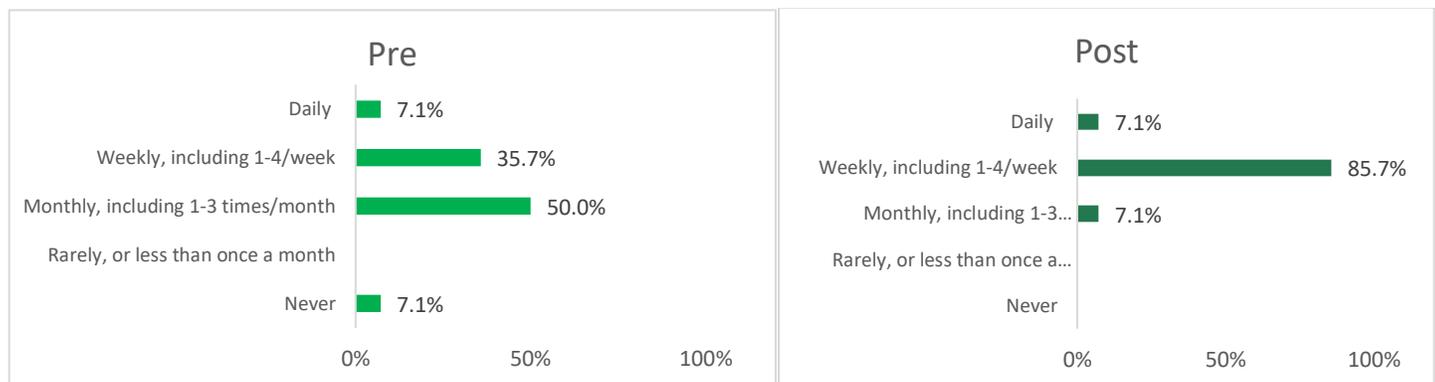
**TABLE 2: MONTANA COOK FRESH INITIATIVE TRAINING INTERVENTION SUMMARY, 2020-2022**

Training intervention	Number trained	Hours of training	Number of activities
Montana Cook Fresh Leadership Institute	41	60	2
Smarter Lunchrooms Webinars	18	1	1
Montana Farm to School Webinars	31	4	4
School or Regional Montana Cook Fresh Workshops	48	15.75	6
Peer Education, State Agency Trainings, and Cook Fresh Technical Assistance			
• Peer Education	160	90.5	56
• State Agency Trainings	369	26.5	26
• Cook Fresh Technical Assistance	84	51.75	101

## Evaluation Results

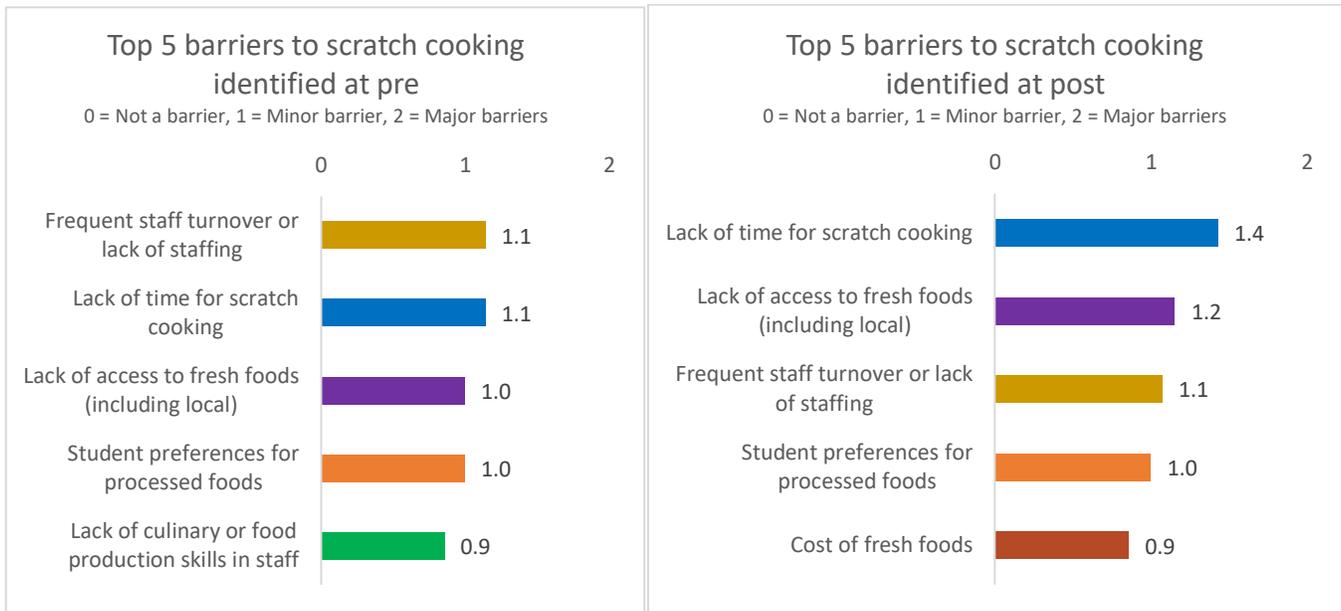
This Initiative was undertaken at a time when school nutrition programs were facing dramatic disruptions to typical program operations, putting a great deal of stress on individuals and systems across the country. Even through the challenges of staffing shortages, an unreliable supply chain, and greater meal demand, the programs that participated in this Initiative made statistically significant improvements to the frequency that they offered scratch cooked entrees from pre to post ( $p = 0.04$ ). The percentage of food service programs offering from scratch lunch entrees on a weekly basis increased from 35.7% at pre to 85.7% at post (Chart 1).

**CHART 1: CHANGE IN FREQUENCY OF LUNCH ENTREES PREPARED FROM SCRATCH FROM PRE TO POST MONTANA COOK FRESH INITIATIVE, N=14, 2020-2022**



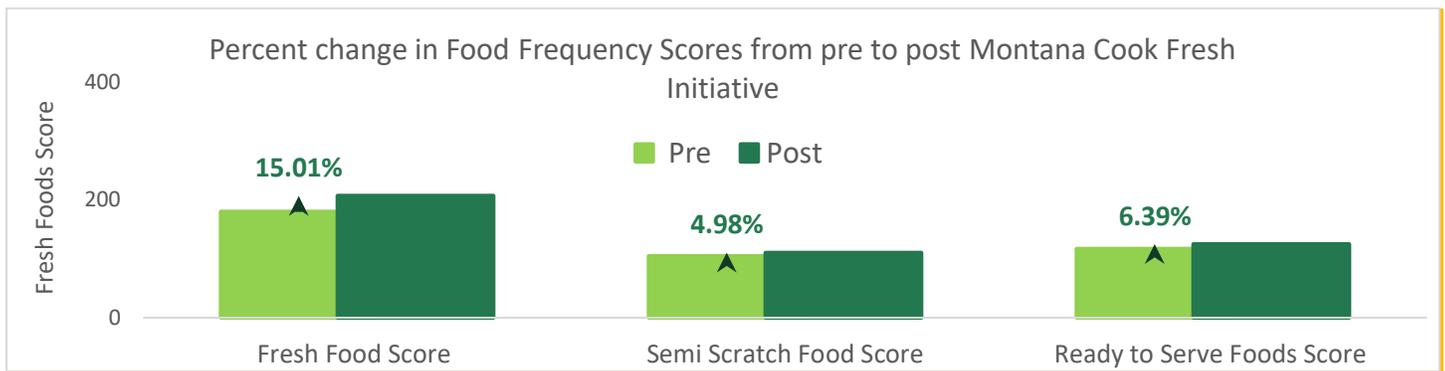
This Initiative may have also reduced barriers to scratch cooking through training interventions; lack of culinary or food production skills in staff was identified as top barrier to scratch cooking at pre but was no longer in the top five barriers to scratch cooking at post (Chart 2).

**CHART 2: TOP 5 BARRIERS TO SCRATCH COOKING FROM PRE TO POST MONTANA COOK FRESH INITIATIVE, N=14, 2020-2022**



COVID-19 made it challenging for schools to reduce the frequency that they served Ready to Serve Foods; pre-packaged foods were an important and useful tool for alternative meal service like grab-n-go and meals in the classroom. Supply chain issues also made it difficult for schools to reliably order and receive products, making some Ready to Serve foods a more convenient option. Despite this challenge, the evaluation results indicate that even if schools served more Ready to Serve Foods overall, they also served more fresh or whole foods. Across all of the programs that participated in this Initiative, Fresh Food Scores increased by 15.01%.

**CHART 3: PERCENT CHANGE IN FOOD FREQUENCY SCORES FROM PRE TO POST MONTANA COOK FRESH INITIATIVE, N=14, 2020-2022**



This training Initiative also focused on helping schools implement overall program best practices that support compliance with USDA Child Nutrition Program regulations and efficient program operation. From pre to post, the programs that participated in this Initiative had a statistically significant ( $p = 0.002$ ) increase in agreement with implementing these best practices.



## Challenges Encountered

Like all areas of life, COVID-19 impacted grant activities and data collection plans. Modifications to activities included the cancellation of 3 of the Smarter Lunchroom webinars, decreased number of regional workshops, modification of training delivery methods, decreased number of on-site peer education visits, and a new informal virtual technical assistance opportunity. It prohibited collection of student data to measure student perceptions of school meals and average daily participation. It also created major barriers to collecting the evaluation data. Of the 22 SFAs that participated in a Leadership Institute, we were only able to collect 14 fully completed pre and post initiative evaluation packages. Another challenge was high staff turnover in the multiple positions in the school nutrition programs. Increased stress from the challenges encountered by the school nutrition program staff impacted their ability to follow through and attend the planned training courses in the Initiative.

## Best Practices Learned

Montana Team Nutrition developed many best practices as a part of this training program, including:

- Offering a variety of trainings in a variety of formats
- Prioritizing engagement especially in virtual formats
- Simplified evaluation collected at the time of the training
- Offering virtual peer education in individual and group settings
- In person is best option for live culinary training

For a detailed exploration of best practices related to implementing the Montana Cook Fresh Initiative, refer to the Montana Cook Fresh Initiative Curriculum Guide, available on the Montana Team Nutrition Website:

<https://www.montana.edu/teamnutrition/cookfreshcurriculum.html>

## Next Steps

Montana Team Nutrition will build upon best practices learned in the Montana Cook Fresh Initiative in the future by offering the upcoming Montana School Meals Certificate (MSMC). Participating school nutrition professionals will receive a thorough foundation in meal pattern components, weekly dietary specifications, and strategies to achieve compliance with USDA rules through training on food preparation techniques, recipe standardization and crediting, school food forecasting, and procurement. Interested school nutrition programs can sign up for this program at the following website: insert website here

## Acknowledgements

This Montana Cook Fresh Initiative was developed using funds from the 2019 Team Nutrition Training Grant for Innovative State Training Programs awarded to the Montana Office of Public Instruction. Thank you to all of the school nutrition programs that participated in this program – your hard work and dedication over the last few years did not go unnoticed. Thank you to the Montana Office of Public Instruction School Nutrition Programs State Agency staff for their tireless work to support schools during a challenging time. For a full evaluation report on this project, please contact Molly Stenberg at [stenberg@montana.edu](mailto:stenberg@montana.edu).

## About Team Nutrition

To learn more about Team Nutrition visit: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/about-team-nutrition> or to access resources, visit: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/school>