

Bellingham Public Schools Food Service Department prepared the following proposal for the Facilities Planning Task Force to consider.



A Central Kitchen for Bellingham Public Schools

The Vision: The Bellingham Promise reads: “We, as a community, make a collective commitment to Bellingham’s children.” For the Food Service Department, that commitment begins with offering the healthiest meals possible to all children. When children are well-nourished, they are better able to learn. On a daily basis, the Food Service Department plays an integral role in the health, well-being and academic success for our students.

The Opportunity: We have heard loudly from parents, students, and the broad community about their desire for school food to be fresh, nutritious, locally grown, and free of unnecessary and unhealthy ingredients. The proposed rebuilding of Sehome High School offers a unique opportunity to dramatically improve the quality of the meals offered to students by incorporating in the building design a single, centralized production kitchen able to prepare meals for the whole district. A large, well-equipped and well-staffed central kitchen with employees trained to cook from scratch, and supervised by a culinary school graduate, would enable Bellingham Public Schools to produce and serve the kind of healthy, freshly prepared, locally grown meals our students need for optimal health and learning, and it would be able to do this at a lower cost per meal than our current food service structure allows.

Current Barriers: The Food Service Department currently relies on four smaller “production” kitchens to produce and transport the 6,000 meals served in the district each day. These kitchens were designed and are equipped for the “heat and serve” model of meal preparation that relies heavily on highly processed, prepared frozen foods that can be cooked quickly and held hot for a long period of time (e.g., chicken nuggets, pizza). The ability of these kitchens to produce healthier, fresh, less processed meals is limited by their design, small size, and the type of cooking equipment they have available to use.

The Benefits: Over the past decade, school districts around the country and the state have made the shift to central kitchens with the capacity for scratch cooking. There is an initial cost outlay for building and equipping the facility and for staff retraining. These expenses are quickly offset, however, by large savings on food costs, staffing efficiencies, reduced transportation and packaging. In addition, meal participation, and thus food service revenues, also have been shown to increase due to the improved quality and variety of meals offered. We expect this will be the case in Bellingham as we already know that students and parents desire school meals featuring healthy, fresh, and local food.

Placement of a central kitchen in a high school has an added potential advantage of offering a site for some vocational education opportunities for students. It would be a valuable addition to the district’s academic offerings, and more convenient for students if such training were provided in-house.

These are just some of the many benefits a central kitchen can provide the district. We encourage the Facilities Planning Task Force to include school food service as a major consideration in all district rebuilding projects, and to envision a central kitchen for the district as a cornerstone of a newly rebuilt Sehome High School.