



Organic Dairy in Schools: Nourishing the Next Generation

By Ella Lucabaugh

As schools nationwide increasingly seek to improve student nutrition and health, organic products in schools have emerged as a focal point in the movement towards healthier school meals. Carton milk is ubiquitous in any school lunch, and the switch to organic milk is a small but powerful step in improving options for students.

Switching to organic dairy creates cascading benefits: it supports local farmers, reduces environmental impact, and builds resilient food systems. Yet, this transition faces significant challenges, from policy barriers to distribution logistics. At the forefront of federal legislative efforts, Senator Cory Booker's [Safe School Meals Act \(SSMA\)](#), aims to address food quality in public schools and to protect children from harmful toxins in school meals.

Senator Booker's Agricultural Legislative Aide explained, "The idea behind the bill is limiting certain toxins that we know are pervasive in the food system, including certain pesticide residues that we know are harmful, PFAs, phthalates, packaging that leach into food, and heavy metals." Bills like the SSMA will not only protect students from harmful additives found in lunches but also create significant new market opportunities for local organic farmers. Investing in school food initiatives is the first step to support schools in their mission to provide healthier meals to students. Booker's Office currently is looking for a Republican sign-on, and plans to reintroduce it to Congress in the new administration.

CURRENT EFFORTS AND INNOVATION: CALIFORNIA

While federal legislation like the SSMA works to create systemic change, innovative organic dairy farmers are taking matters into their own hands, and are partnering with school food directors to overcome traditional barriers. In California, [Straus Family Creamery](#) has pioneered a model for integrating their organic milk, yogurt, and other dairy products into local school districts. Albert Straus, organic dairy farmer and CEO and Founder of Straus Family Creamery, explains the inspiration for the program and its founding more than a decade ago. "The USDA requires 8oz of milk to go to each student, and noticeably many of these cartons were going to waste, up to 18 gallons a day from one school," Straus explained.

Innovatively, Straus Creamery envisioned the idea to supply milk in bags instead of cartons, allowing students from the Novato Unified School District to use a milk dispenser and get the amount of milk they actually wanted. Although organics often come at a premium, Straus Creamery was able to offset costs by diverting milk waste and creating a direct producer-to-consumer program model. Today, Straus, in collaboration with [Conscious Kitchen](#) and other generous partners, has integrated their products across the Bay Area in California. In the long term, Straus hopes to have organic food in all California public schools.

CALIFORNIA CONT.

Thomas Stratton, a regenerative farmer in California who provides milk to [Rumiano Cheese](#), explained another facet of the organic movement in schools. Offered to the entire state of California, Rumiano focuses not only on supplying local organic cheese but also offers comprehensive education and training to students, workers, and food directors. Rumiano has organized summits and organic best practices workshops for food service staff and farm tours that show school directors and students where their food comes from.

Through classroom engagements and cafeteria demonstrations, they help students connect with their organic food sources while simultaneously training food directors on the importance and implementation of organic options in school meals. Through the [USDA Local Food Promotion Program](#) grant, they have established a program to supply organic dairy products to a targeted 50 school districts across the state. Their organic cheeses appear in students' favorites across K-12 public schools—including pizzas, lasagnas, cheeseburgers, and cheese crisps.

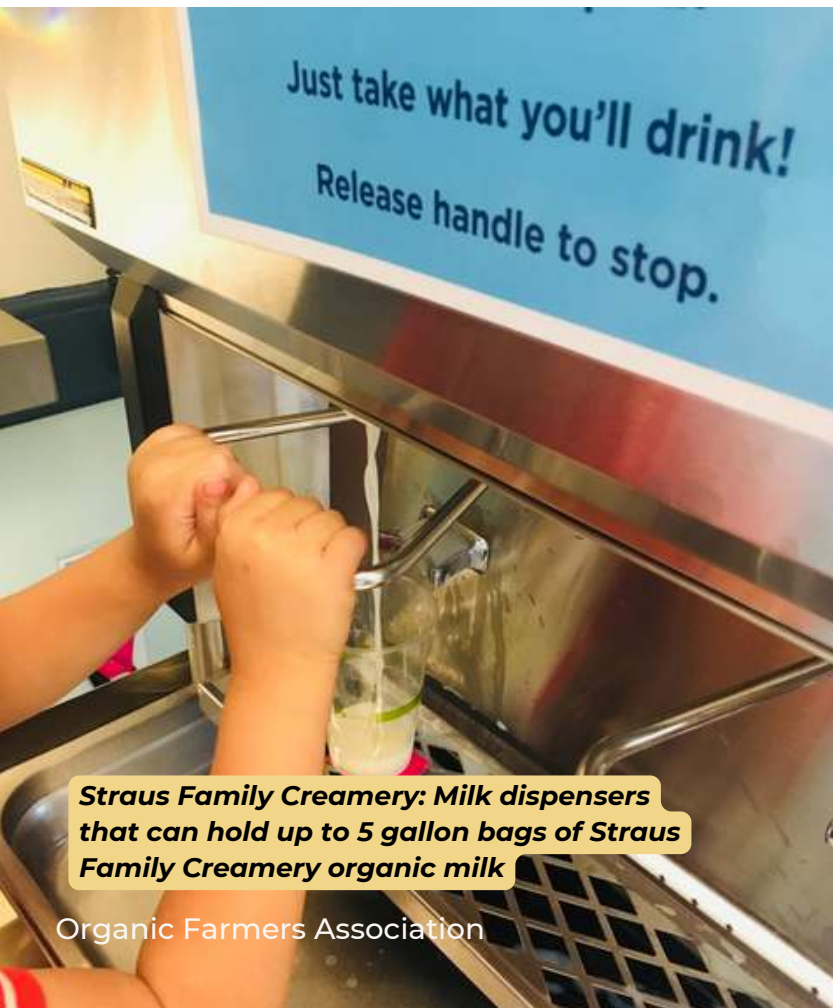
CURRENT EFFORTS AND INNOVATION: VERMONT

Vermont's landscape reflects the dairy industry's deep roots in the state's identity and its integral role in its economy. However, the past decade has brought significant challenges to Northeast organic dairy farmers, particularly due to global disruptions like the Russia-Ukraine war, which affected the supply of organic cow feed traditionally sourced from the region.

In response, organizations like the [Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont \(NOFA-VT\)](#) have stepped up their advocacy efforts, successfully securing approximately \$9 billion in organic dairy relief. This work has helped sustain local operations like [Miller Farm](#) in Vernon, Vermont, which has achieved a particularly meaningful success: providing organic milk for their local school districts.

Inspired by Straus Dairy, Miller Farm successfully expanded its current operations to include its own bulk milk bagging line, thanks to funding from the USDA Northeast Dairy Business Innovation Center. By focusing on bulk bagged milk instead of traditional milk cartons, Miller Farms and schools have been able to reduce their waste by 50%, similar to Straus, by utilizing bulk milk dispensers.

By transitioning milk cartons to bulk organic, both parties were able to create a cost-neutral process by offsetting the cost of organic with milk waste. Within the first week of the program running, there was interest in expansion.



Straus Family Creamery: Milk dispensers that can hold up to 5 gallon bags of Straus Family Creamery organic milk

Currently, Miller Farms supplies 13 schools, and they now work with a distributor. Lauren Griswold, Wholesale Market Foods Director of NOFA-VT, explained the program's roots and success. "The kids love it, it's delicious, the parents feel good!" This farm-to-school connection not only supports local agriculture but also provides students with access to high-quality, organic dairy products.

Last fall, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) launched the Organic Dairy Product Promotion (ODPP) program, allocating \$15 million to expand access to organic dairy products in educational institutions and youth programs. Fittingly, this program was launched in Vernon, Vermont, at Miller Farms.

This program will make organic dairy more accessible to institutional buyers, like school districts, by covering a portion or all of the purchase. "This program is truly groundbreaking because it expands access to organic dairy in public institutions, where household income typically dictates food access at home," explained Griswold. At schools students are offered the same meal options no matter their socio-economic background, which makes them a significant opportunity to expand universal food access and increase nutrition. In Vermont alone, where K-12 schools purchase 700,000 gallons of milk annually, the program's impact could be transformative for both students and the organic dairy sector.

Photo Credit NOFA-VT: WNESU Students posing with Farmer Peter Miller and Secretary of Agriculture, Food and Markets Anson Tebbetts during a field trip to Miller Farm to celebrate the school milk pilot project's success.



LOOKING AHEAD

The movement to integrate organic dairy into schools represents more than just a change in milk suppliers—it signals a fundamental shift in how schools approach nutrition, sustainability, and community support. The convergence of federal policy support through programs like the SSMA, innovative distribution models pioneered by farmers like Straus, Stratton, and Miller, and new funding through the ODP program has created unprecedented momentum. As more schools across the country adopt these models, they demonstrate that the switch to organic dairy can achieve multiple goals simultaneously: improving student health, supporting local farmers, reducing environmental impact, and building more resilient food systems.

The success of these early programs suggests that organic dairy in schools could become not just an alternative, but the new standard for school nutrition programs nationwide. This transformation offers a blueprint for how thoughtful policy changes, innovative farming practices, and community partnerships can work together to create lasting change in America's school food system. 🌱

Ella Lucabaugh is a senior at American University in Washington, DC, and serves as the Organic Farmers Association spring Organic Agriculture Policy Intern. She is passionate about advancing healthy food systems and driven by the belief that organic agriculture not only promotes human health but also nurtures soil vitality and biodiversity.



SAFE SCHOOL MEALS ACT (SSMA)

In September 2024, Senator Cory Booker introduced the [Safe School Meals Act \(SSMA\)](#), legislation to protect children from harmful toxins in school meals.

The bill would place limits on heavy metals, ban certain pesticide residues, trigger the safety reassessment of food additives including artificial food dyes that have been linked with health harms, and ban the use of PFAS, phthalates, and bisphenols in school meal food packaging.

The bill would also support organic and other regenerative farmers who have been growing safe, nutrient-dense food for decades by connecting them to the \$17 billion National School Lunch Program.

This would also provide grants to manufacturers to switch to toxic-free packaging and grants to producers to remediate their soil and water. The bill would also expand National Organic Cost Share Certification to all eligible farms and lift the cap to cover 100% of certification costs, up to \$3,000.

Along with OFA, the Safe School Meals Act is supported by the Environmental Working Group, the American Federation of Teachers, the Michael J. Fox Foundation, the Alliance of Nurses for Healthy Environments, the Center for Environmental Health, Healthy Schools Now, EAT Real, Unleaded Kids, and Food Fight.