



Local NY kale Caesar salad with Greek yogurt dressing.

School District Profile

SCHOOL LUNCH DIRECTOR:	Emily Cullen
LOCATION:	Onondaga County, New York
BUILDINGS:	11 7 @ West Genesee Central School District 3 @ Onondaga Central School District Holy Family School
GRADES SERVED:	Pre-K – 12
NUMBER OF STUDENTS:	5,779
PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS ELIGIBLE FOR FREE OR REDUCED-PRICED MEALS:	27% district-wide
COMMUNITY ELIGIBILITY PROVISION (CEP):	10/11 schools

CEP allows schools, groups of schools, or districts to serve meals at no cost to all students if at least 25% of students are eligible for free or reduced-priced meals.

The nutritious and delicious meals and exciting student engagement opportunities offered at West Genesee Central School District

provide a snapshot of everything it takes to operate a successful school meal program that promotes local produce and trying new fruits and vegetables. Here's a closer look ▶

SCHOOL MEAL FEATURES

- Local New York produce served daily
 - Student taste tests during menu development
- Fresh fruits and vegetables at the center of each plate including a "harvest of the month"
- Baked-from-scratch breakfasts with protein and less added sugar
- New menu items appear in classroom nutrition and agriculture lessons at the middle school

What's on the menu?

MENU

- ✓ Local kale Caesar salad with homemade Greek yogurt dressing
- ✓ Local NY grassfed beef and bean chili
- ✓ Homemade breakfast pizza
- ✓ Yogurt parfaits



Staff preparing kale salad from local produce.

A student favorite are locally grown Brussels sprouts with New York maple syrup – students say they’re “low-key fire!”



New York maple syrup is used to glaze Brussels sprouts and carrots.

KEYS TO SUCCESS

- A combination of federal, state, and local funding to support purchasing a variety of fresh and local produce:
 - Local Food for Schools (a U.S. Department of Agriculture program cancelled in 2025) facilitated the purchase of over 25,000 pounds of New York State produce in SY 2024-2025
 - New York State’s \$5 million Regional School Food Infrastructure grant awarded to Onondaga County to build a new food processing hub, where fresh produce is broken down and prepared, will make it even easier to continue sourcing local food while saving staff time
 - The Harvest of the Month County School District partnership enables the district to feature one local menu item per month as part of a cooperative bid
- Training for foodservice staff to follow new recipes and prepare fresh ingredients provided by Brigaid, Chef Ann Foundation, Cornell Cooperative Extension’s Farm to School, and the New York State Education Department’s Farm to School Team
- Kitchen equipment and smallware (like food choppers) investments, thanks to budgeting flexibility via the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) and federal kitchen equipment grants (part of annual appropriations), to ensure whole, fresh products can be stored, peeled, cut, and served
- Partnerships with food processing hubs who can prep, peel, and cut fresh produce
- Establishing team buy-in through clear and frequent communication and the shared interest in supporting local farmers and producers

“IT’S NOT WELL-KNOWN THAT SCHOOL CAFETERIA BUDGETS ARE SEPARATE FROM THE REST OF A SCHOOL DISTRICT’S BUDGET. FOR ONLY \$4.75 A LUNCH, I HAVE TO PREPARE THE WHOLE MEAL AND PAY MY STAFF.”

A major key to success is the school’s partnership with Cornell Cooperative Extension’s Farm to School coordinators, located across the state. Benefits of this collaboration include training for West Genesee’s staff and a useful recipe database that helps the team feature fresh produce in dishes like glazed carrots.



Local NY grassfed beef and bean chili.

What do west genesee schools need for future success?

- More consistent, direct pathways for schools to buy local foods using government funding
 - Programs like Local Food for Schools must be reinstated

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“I WISH WE HAD MORE OPTIONS FOR HOW WE CAN USE FEDERAL FUNDS LOCALLY. IF THAT WERE THE CASE, I WOULD SPEND SO MUCH ON NEW YORK STATE PRODUCTS.”

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Preservation of CEP and its funding formula.

- CEP allows schools to spend less time on administrative work, utilize economies of scale, and stretch their dollars to put money back into the program to make improvements.
 - After West Genesee implemented CEP, participation in school breakfast increased by **87%**!



Fresh fruits and vegetables are featured at every meal.

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“HEALTHY SCHOOL MEALS FOR ALL IS A GAME CHANGER. THIS POLICY HAS TAKEN THE STIGMA AWAY FROM ENJOYING FREE SCHOOL MEALS AND IS SO HELPFUL FOR PARENTS AND GUARDIANS.”

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This resource was developed based on an interview and email correspondence with the district from November 2025-February 2026.

Photos: Emily Cullen.

District Website: westgenesee.org/dining
 For more information, contact policy@cspi.org
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