



## PRESS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: Jan. 29, 2026    CONTACT: Maria Hernandez    PHONE: (909) 447-2406

### **El Monte Union Students to Help Shape Meal Plans Through Dietary Inclusion Council**

**EL MONTE** – El Monte Union High School District students who would like to see more vegetarian and vegan options for lunch will have an opportunity to shape their school's meal plan through the District's newly-formed Dietary Inclusion Council, a student-led coalition that will work directly with the Nutrition Services Department to advocate for healthy, plant-based items on daily lunch menus.

The council was spearheaded by Arroyo High School senior Emily Lin, who petitioned the Board of Trustees to pass a resolution to establish the Districtwide advisory body. The resolution was passed during the Jan. 7 Board meeting. Lin also helped secure a \$4,000 microgrant from the nonprofit advocacy group Friends of the Earth to support the promotion and marketing of plant-based options across the District.

"My main goal with the Dietary Inclusion Council is to make sure that every student is heard and has the ability to specifically implement changes within the cafeteria, especially when it comes to plant-based meals," Lin said. "I am emphasizing vegetarian meals for several reasons: student health, inclusivity, and environmental responsibility. By offering vegetarian options, our district is taking meaningful action on climate change while giving students a voice and making an impact on real-world decisions."

Lin's advocacy for expanded school menus quickly found supporters in El Monte Union Director of Nutrition Services Suzy Sayre and Nutrition Coordinator Toni Fu. Sayre and Fu, who are responsible for creating and maintaining healthy meal choices that meet all federal nutrition requirements, said they are excited to work with more students and hear their ideas for lunch meals.

"I love that Emily is so enthusiastic. She contacted Toni and me directly with her idea for the council, and we had an amazing talk," Sayre said. "We discussed a district meal program from several years ago, Meatless Mondays, which was 100% meatless for breakfast and lunch. This was also a student-led initiative and was in place for several years. With support from the Friends of the Earth grant, we can better showcase these options and expand taste-testing, a key step in the process."

Sayre was present at the annual California School Nutrition Association Conference, held last October in Pasadena, when Lin spoke to an audience of nutrition service directors and school foodservice industry members about her work interning with environmental agencies and hospitals, and the health benefits of plant-based meals. Lin then got a chance to tour the conference exhibit hall, with more than 1,200 vendors, and talk to organizations that provide vegetarian and vegan food for school meals.

"I'm very proud of the work Emily is doing and how she was able to get up in front of the conference to advocate for what she is so passionate about," Sayre said. "It left a lasting impression among those attending the conference."

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Lin's passion for advocacy sparked a trip to Washington, D.C. in the summer of 2025, where she met with U.S. Department of Agriculture representatives to advocate for an amendment to the Whole Milk for Healthy Kids Act that would enable students to have access to non-dairy beverage alternatives, like soy milk, at schools. The Whole Milk for Healthy Kids Act was passed on Jan. 14, allowing students more options beyond skim or 2% milk.

"The amended bill is a big win for students, especially students of color who experience higher rates of lactose intolerance and can't consume dairy milk," Lin said. "Students typically need to have a doctor's note in order to request any milk substitutes, and that can be difficult to obtain for a lot of people in my community. Now that the Whole Milk Act has been passed, school nutrition directors can offer soy milk and other options right on the menu."

The Friends of the Earth grant will support increased outreach for plant-based meals across the District and expanded taste-testing, a required step for any potential menu addition. As the Dietary Inclusion Council grows, Sayre and Fu will gather student feedback on new offerings and work to ensure popular meals are added to school menus.

Through Lin's advocacy, El Monte Union now offers a vegetarian option Monday through Friday at every school site, featuring entrées such as vegan buffalo nuggets, plant-based meatballs, and veggie dumplings. Fu, a native of South Korea, also works to introduce authentic Asian-inspired meals, sourcing ingredients from Asian specialty markets, like NTFoods in El Monte.

Lin has applied to a several UC universities and said she plans to major in public health or public policy.

"I hope to advance public health policy and remove barriers so my local community can more easily access the resources needed to stay healthy," Lin said.

### **PHOTO CAPTIONS:**

**EMUHSD DIETARY INCLUSION 1:** Arroyo High School senior Emily Lin speaks to nutrition service directors and school foodservice industry members during the annual California Nutrition Association Conference in October 2025, sharing her experience interning with environmental agencies and hospitals and highlighting the health benefits of plant-based meals.

**EMUHSD DIETARY INCLUSION 2:** One of El Monte Union's vegetarian options, prepared by Nutrition Services staff, features veggie dumplings and fried rice from the vegan menu.

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*The vision of the El Monte Union High School District is to empower and motivate our students to be resilient, college and career ready, lifelong learners and contributing members of our global society.*