

High School Students' Insights on School Meal Reform

Background



School meals have the potential to impact student health at a population level. In 2012, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) issued a final rule updating meal patterns and nutrition standards for the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs for the first time in 15 years (hereafter referred to as school meal reform).¹ Research has pointed to emerging successes of school meal reform^{2,3} nationwide; however, high schools continue to have

poorer food environments compared to elementary and middle schools.⁴ This disparity suggests that high schools may have challenges with fully implementing school meal reform. Thus, it is important to better understand the perspectives and experiences of high school students who are directly impacted by changes to school food environments in order to obtain useful insights for supporting healthier school meal environments.

What Is This Brief About?

This brief highlights experiences and perspectives about school meal reform from a critical stakeholder group: high school students. Based upon students' experiences and insights, we also provide practice-relevant strategies that may be considered by local decision makers and school practitioners. Such strategies are outlined in a [Full Report](#) and a companion brief, "[Student Recommendations for Improving the School Food Environment: Insights Following School Meal Reform.](#)"

What did High School Students Say about School Meal Reform?

STUDENTS SUPPORT HEALTHIER SCHOOL MEALS

Students asserted their support for school meal reform efforts, yet were frustrated that youth were portrayed in popular media as preferring junk foods and the old school meals. In fact, most students reported that they liked the increase in fruits and vegetables in their school meals. In describing their support for school meal reform, many students stated appreciation for the First Lady Michelle Obama's broad efforts to address children and adolescents' health:

REVISED NUTRITION STANDARDS FOR SCHOOL MEALS



The revised nutrition standards required schools to offer more fruits and vegetables and whole grain-rich products; reduce levels of sodium, saturated fat, and trans fat in school meals; and offer meals within calorie ranges established for three grade groups. School districts were required to comply with the revised federal meal standards beginning July 1, 2012, with provisions phased in through school year 2022–2023.

If she [Michelle Obama] didn't push for it [healthy school environments], it wouldn't have been a topic in the first place. So, I'm thankful for that. I think that whole healthy movement was very beneficial.

Further, students advocated for healthy school meals that were also appealing and gave examples of after-school programs and off-campus food options that offered food and beverage choices that are both tasty and healthy. Students added that these healthful options were popular amongst their peers, describing:

SCHOOL MEALS ARE AN IMPORTANT SAFETY NET

High school students recognized the critical role of school meals in their communities since the meals provide nourishment and are sometimes the only daily meal for some students. Several students reminded us of their ongoing concerns about hunger and food insecurity amongst peers, highlighting the need for successful implementation of the revised school meal standards in their communities.

STUDENTS WANT TO BE ENGAGED WITH SCHOOL MEAL REFORM



Students expressed an interest in school meal reform and about nutrition and its connection to their health. Yet, most students recalled that implementation at their high schools occurred with limited communications to students:

High school students observed that school meal reform was initially met with poor acceptance due to the limited engagement and communications the school staff had with the student body. Students

recommended examples such as school assemblies to discuss changes, taste testing activities, and more formal nutrition education as some of the ways which they would like to be more engaged with improving the school food environment.

Methods Summary

This policy brief summarizes findings from a qualitative study of 15 high school students who were affiliated with the [Youth for Healthy Schools](#) that is part of the [Funders' Collaborative On Youth Organizing](#) (FCYO). FCYO primarily works with youth of color who attend predominantly low-income schools and advocate for social justice issues through their respective local organizations. Students participated in focus groups during a Healthy Schools meeting in Los Angeles, California in July 2015, followed by individual telephone interviews; lastly, a 'member checking' call to review preliminary findings was conducted. Detailed information about study methodology can be found [here](#).

Instead of going to Jack-in-the-box, we all run over there [off campus healthy food vendor].



Well, in my community, there's a lot of poverty...at least more than 50% of the people around my community depend on food stamps to get food....and I feel like that's not really enough so we depend on school meals to eat those fruits and vegetables that we need to grow up.

I don't think it was ever explained to us. I think it was mostly like, kind of like forced, like 'You have to take the milk. You have to take two fruits' and that's kind of like how we all learned...it was never, we were never really taught.



Resources

- USDA Team Nutrition (<http://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/team-nutrition>)
- USDA Healthy Meals Resource System (<https://healthymeals.fns.usda.gov/local-wellness-policy-resources>)
- What's Cooking? USDA Mixing Bowl (<http://www.whatscooking.fns.usda.gov/>)
- CDC Healthy Schools Tools and Resources (<http://www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/npao/resources.htm>)
- Institute of Child Nutrition (<http://www.theicn.org>)
- Chefs Move to Schools (<http://www.chefsmovetoschools.org>)
- Cornell Center for Behavioral Economics in Child Nutrition Programs (<http://ben.cornell.edu>)
- Kids' Safe & Healthful Foods Project – Serving Healthy School Meals (<http://www.pewtrusts.org/~/media/assets/2014/11/kitscaliforniareport-111214final.pdf>)

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