

Speaking from Experience: Food Service Directors' Perspectives and Lessons From Implementing the Revised School Meal Standards

Background

School meals offer strong potential for widespread impact on students' 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: *Nutrition Standards in the National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs*.¹

What Is This Brief About?



Food Service Directors (FSDs) play a critical role in the implementation of the revised school meal standards. This brief shares FSDs' perspectives on the implementation and perceived outcomes and impacts of the revised meal standards. Further, this brief shares how FSDs communicated about school meal reform and their potential impacts to the wider school community.

This brief highlights the perspectives of FSDs in districts where high schools have been awarded USDA recognition for exhibiting strong nutrition practices in schools. Through these insights, we aim to provide an understanding of strategies that some districts have used to facilitate implementation of the school meal standards and to understand likely implementation challenges. Such strategies are outlined in the companion brief, [“What Works? Strategies Used by Food Service Directors to Implement the Revised School Meal Standards.”](#)

Outcomes of School Meal Reform: What Did Food Service Directors Say?

ENHANCED NUTRITION AWARENESS

FSDs perceived that the school meal revisions are influencing students' awareness about healthier eating. As one FSD notes, the standards now align with what students are learning about healthy eating in the classroom. FSDs stated that this has been a positive and promising impact with the potential for long-term change.

REVISED NUTRITION STANDARDS FOR SCHOOL MEALS



The revised nutrition standards required schools to increase healthy food offerings, including fruits and vegetables and whole grain-rich products, as well as reduce levels of sodium, saturated fat, and trans fat in school meals and set grade level-specific calorie requirements. 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.

It's something kids see in health or a classroom now, they see also in the school cafeteria where it all matches. It finally comes together and makes sense.
– VA FSD

INCREASED INTAKE OF FRUITS AND VEGETABLES



As a revised requirement, students must take a fruit or vegetable (F&V) as part of their reimbursable meal. FSDs reported that students are consuming more F&Vs.

The revised F&V requirement was also associated with an increase

in perceived plate waste; however, FSDs reported that plate waste has decreased over time. The FSDs' reports are consistent with other studies that found increased fruit selection and vegetable consumption following implementation of school meal standards.^{2,3,4}

“WE’RE LOOKING FOR PROGRESS, NOT PERFECTION”

FSDs stated that the standards are in the “*right direction*” but they will be most successful if implemented as part of a community-wide, comprehensive approach to improving children’s health. No FSD felt the standards presented a perfect solution to combatting childhood obesity or poor nutrition, nor did they feel that the standards were perfect. However, they reported that as students adjust to and accept the changes over time, and nutritional changes in the schools are met by family and community efforts, there will be progress.

PLATFORM FOR CHILD NUTRITION SERVICES



FSDs reported that school meal reform created an unprecedented platform for the Child Nutrition Services department. Specifically, the standards highlighted the important role that Child Nutrition Services plays in the students’ overall health and well-being.

Part of the critical role that Child Nutrition Services plays in students’ lives is providing nourishment that students may not receive at home. FSDs reported that many students do not have opportunities to eat adequately and/or nutritiously outside the school campus.

In this way, FSDs identified school meal reform as a critical initiative to the ongoing support for children’s health. These perspectives about the important role of their work were included when communicating about school meal reform to school and surrounding communities. The next section further outlines the FSDs’ experiences with communicating about school meal reform.

I’m thrilled to death when I stand over here at the high school and I see the kids pile up on strawberries or blueberries and they eat it all.
– IA FSD



There’s an old adage that we’re looking for progress, not perfection. There’s no golden arrow, silver bullet, it’s going to take time, and it’s going to take community and outside efforts. – TX FSD

What I really appreciate is the amount of attention that’s been focused on the role that Child Nutrition plays in our children’s life. Until someone’s basic needs are met, they cannot develop self-esteem, they cannot become self-actualized. And so we are helping to meet those basic needs, and we can’t do much about shelter, but we can certainly do something about the food... it’s our responsibility to safeguard the health and wellbeing of the nation’s children. – CA FSD

The kids coming up to me saying – high school kids – “I really do appreciate it, ‘cause when I go home, I’m really not sure what I’m going to eat for dinner, so I know if I stay for tutoring, I’m always going to get a hot meal.” – TX FSD

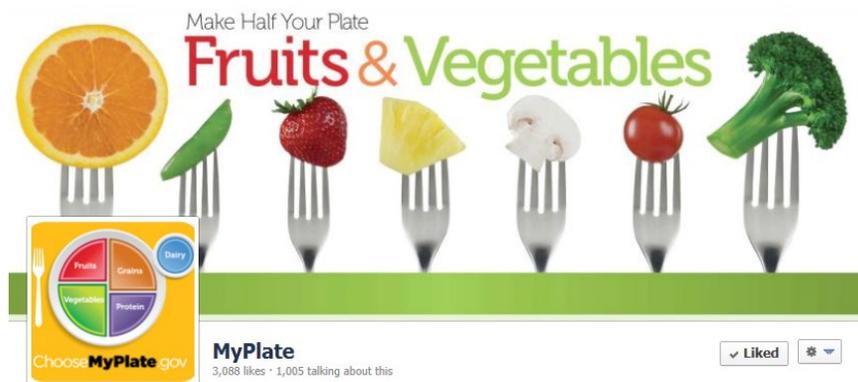
Communicating About School Meal Reform



FSDs actively communicated their perspectives about the role of Child Nutrition Services and school meal reform with proactive messaging through various platforms, including social media (e.g., Facebook)

and traditional media (e.g., local newspapers). FSDs stated that active communications worked to engage students and the school community and helped frame a more positive outlook on meal reform. When asked what advice she would give to other FSDs, one FSD responded:

Another FSD also shared the importance of engagement with stakeholders with active communication, especially his student body. As he states here, student engagement helps to support school meal participation:



Methods Summary

This policy brief summarizes findings from a qualitative study of nine FSDs from districts with at least one exemplary HealthierUS Schools Challenge: Smarter Lunchrooms (HUSC: SL)-certified high school. Detailed information about study methodology can be found [here](#). HUSC provides awards for schools that have met specific criteria for school meal and other wellness categories. More information about HUSC can be found [here](#).



I think to not be afraid to get your voice out there, because parents read a lot of things, they see things on the news, and they have a preconceived idea of what these changes are, and it may not be correct. So, to put out your own story and to communicate what it is you are doing to include the students and so that they know, and to share, share, share your successes with the community. – KS FSD

You know, you start communicating those things [school meal changes], you start talking to the kids – and I'm one to sit down with students, then your participation comes up. People start to see different things...You have to engage the student. – TX FSD



Resources

- Professional Standards for School Nutrition Professionals (<http://www.fns.usda.gov/school-meals/professional-standards>) & School and Community Communications (<http://professionalstandards.nal.usda.gov/communications-and-marketing-communication-and-marketing-training/community-communication>)
- USDA Team Nutrition (<http://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/team-nutrition>)
- USDA Healthy Meals Resource System (<https://healthymeals.nal.usda.gov/>)
- What's Cooking? USDA Mixing Bowl (<http://www.whatscooking.fns.usda.gov/>)
- What's Shaking? Creative Ways to Boost Flavor with Less Sodium (<http://healthymeals.nal.usda.gov/whatsshaking>)
- CDC Healthy Schools Tools and Resources (<http://www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/npao/resources.htm>)
- Institute of Child Nutrition (<http://www.nfsmi.org>)
- Chefs Move to Schools (<http://www.chefsmovetoschools.org>)
- Cornell Center for Behavioral Economics in Child Nutrition Programs (<http://ben.cornell.edu>)

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