

Student Recommendations for Improving the School Food Environment: Insights Following 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 strategies — identified by high school students — that local decision makers and school practitioners may implement to improve the school food environment. These strategies evolved from students' experiences and perspectives about school meal reform, which are described in the [Full Report](#) and companion brief, [“High School Students’ Insights on School Meal Reform.”](#)

Recommendations from High School Students for Improving the School Food Environment:



PROACTIVELY COMMUNICATE AND ENGAGE STUDENTS

Students asserted that efforts to communicate with and educate students about the importance and intentions of school meal reform would have improved the initial poor reactions to school meal reform.

Students' comments reflected their desires for inclusion surrounding school food environment reform. Students want to be engaged with school meal reform and are interested in learning about 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.

I feel like it [school meal changes] would be more strong if they let us know, “hey, we’re going to change this food because it does this to your body and it does this to your brain and when you’re here for 7 hours or more...” It would help students connect...and more students would act positively to the change, instead of just passing it [the standards] and not knowing why.

IMPROVE QUALITY AND PALATABILITY OF MEAL ITEMS

Students strongly advocated for an issue that existed prior to the revised school meal standards: quality and palatability of meals. As one student asserted, now that the updated standards are implemented, the “next step” should be to focus on the quality. Students reported a wide range of disconcerting experiences with rotten, unripe or moldy fruits and vegetables, undercooked meats and spoiled milk provided by their schools – all issues that existed prior to the revised standards and that were problems specific to the school building. Several recommendations related to quality and palatability were offered.



OBTAIN KITCHEN EQUIPMENT TO INCREASE SCRATCH COOKING

Students noted that their cafeteria kitchens did not have adequate equipment to prepare fresh, scratch-cooked items that they reported would taste better than the packaged entrées and salads that they found less appealing. As a result, students recommended that school districts and schools focus on obtaining kitchen equipment:

INSTALL SALAD BARS & INCREASE FRUIT & VEGETABLE OPTIONS

Students enjoyed a variety of options for fruit and vegetables and recommended that their schools install salad bars permanently instead of packaged salads. When asked what they would change about the school meals, one student replied:

Where they prepare all the food at—the whole area would have to be bigger. They would need space for a stove and everything, ‘cause then they would actually be back there preparing lunch, like actually cooking things, and you know, there would be more options for people to eat stuff, and there would be more fruits and vegetables, and the salads would be better.

Probably more fresh food – like fresh vegetables.

IMPROVE CAFETERIA INFRASTRUCTURE & LENGTHEN LUNCH TIME

Another issue that strongly impacted students’ ability to benefit from school meal reform was the structure of cafeterias and meal services, which were perceived as a deterrent to participation. Long lines and later lunch periods often meant the most desirable items (e.g. preferred entrée items or pieces of fruit) were not available:



Students recommended improving cafeteria infrastructure to open up more points of purchase and increase quantities of popular items to streamline time in the cafeteria.

Closely related to cafeteria infrastructure was students’ assertion that lunch periods did not provide adequate time to consume their meal. For many, this was due to challenging cafeteria infrastructure that took up time just to obtain a meal.

On the days I don’t feel like standing in line, because the lines can get really long, or sometimes they run out of food, or the food that I want, and so, I just don’t eat.

My lunch is 30 minutes long and usually I have to wait in line 20 minutes, so I only have ten minutes to eat, so that’s not a long time.

Other students recommended longer lunch times because they experienced that healthier meal items take longer to eat:

Also they didn’t accommodate time to eat more grainy foods if that makes sense. Like, you know, it’s quicker to eat a pizza than to eat rice and, like, chicken, and a lot more people – some people were eating it more than before, and they didn’t account time for it, so a lot of times, people didn’t finish their food.

Methods Summary

This policy brief summarizes findings from a quality study of 15 high school students who were affiliated with the [Youth for Healthy Schools](#) with the [Funders' Collaborative On Youth Organizing](#) (FCYO). Students participated in focus groups during a Healthy Schools meeting in Los Angeles, California in July 2015, followed by individual telephone interviews, and a 'member checking' call to review preliminary findings. Detailed information about study methodology can be found [here](#).

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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