



# INCREASING PARTICIPATION BY HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS IN THE SCHOOL LUNCH PROGRAM

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## OVERVIEW

There is growing concern regarding low-student participation in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) at high schools throughout the United States. This issue of *INSIGHT* presents the results of a survey of 11th grade students. This study was conducted in two states and analyzed factors associated with student participation in the NSLP. Student concerns impacting participation in the school lunch program are discussed and strategies for responding to these concerns are given. Suggestions are provided that may be useful to CNP directors for building participation.

## DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to identify factors associated with participation by high school students in the NSLP. Six high schools in Minnesota and six high schools in Iowa were included in this study. In each state, three schools had low-student participation in the NSLP (31%) and three schools had high-student participation (85%). Less than 20% of the average student enrollments in both the low- and high-student participation schools were approved to receive free- or reduced-priced meals. There were 812 students who responded from the low-student participation schools and 482 students who responded from the high-student participation schools.

## STUDENT LUNCH DINING HABITS AND PREFERENCES

Students in the schools having high participation ate the school lunch twice as often as students in the schools having low participation (3.7 days per week versus 1.8 days per week). In low-student participation schools, 40% of the students indicated they never eat the school lunch. This compares with only 11% of the students in the high-student participation schools. Convenience was the number one reason given by students who eat school lunch in both low- and high-student participation schools. Another common reason given by students from both groups of schools was that they had no other choice but to eat the school lunch (Figure 1). Competition to the NSLP is represented by on-campus and off-campus lunch alternatives. Students purchased food from on-campus vending machines,

snack bars, or concessions more than one day per week (1.8 days per week in low participation schools versus 1.4 days per week in high participation schools). These foods might be in addition to the school lunch or a substitute for lunch. Neither group of students brought a lunch from home more than once a week, but students in the low participation schools did so twice as often (.9 days versus .4 days per week). Students in schools with low participation ate off-campus much more frequently than students in the high-student participation schools (2.4 days versus .6 days per week). When students ate off-campus, the most likely purchases were hamburgers or pizza.

## STUDENTS' OPINIONS ABOUT THE SCHOOL LUNCH PROGRAM

Students were asked to rate their satisfaction/dissatisfaction with the school lunch program overall and with four aspects of the program on a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being "extremely dissatisfied" and 5 being "extremely satisfied". An additional 33 statements of characteristics of the program were rated on a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being "strongly disagree" and 5 being "strongly agree". Students in the two groups of schools surveyed were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied with the school lunch program overall. There were significant differences in 13 of the total items rated by students in low and high participation schools (Figure 2, 3 and 4 on next page).

Students were also asked to identify one thing they would change that would encourage them to eat the reimbursable school lunch more frequently. Increase in variety and choice was the most frequent response to this question.

**STUDENTS' REASONS FOR EATING SCHOOL LUNCH**  
(PERCENTAGE OF RESPONSES)

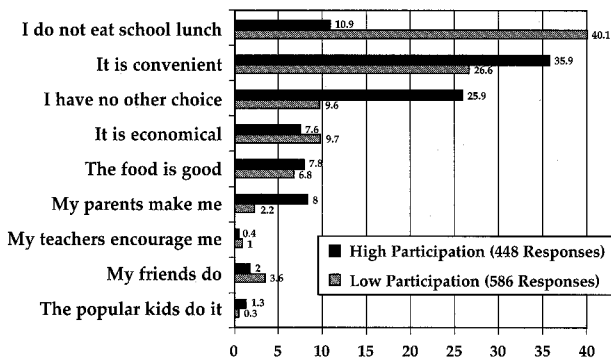


Figure 1

## FOOD QUALITY AND APPEARANCE

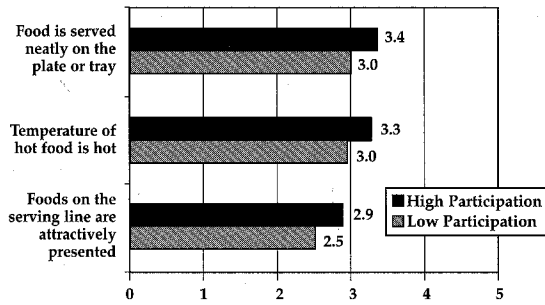


Figure 2

## OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

Based on students' perceptions of satisfaction about school foodservice programs in both the low participation and the high participation schools there are opportunities for improvement. The following paragraphs focus on the concerns and suggestions expressed by student survey respondents.

### FOOD QUALITY AND APPEARANCE

Both groups rated the appearance, presentation, and taste of the food low. Both the appearance and taste of food are important criteria in attracting and keeping customers. Variety of-color of the foods may contribute to attractiveness, and this aspect of food quality and appearance was assessed as neutral. When students had the opportunity to suggest changes in the lunch program, specific comments about food quality focused on taste and freshness.

## DINING ROOM ENVIRONMENT

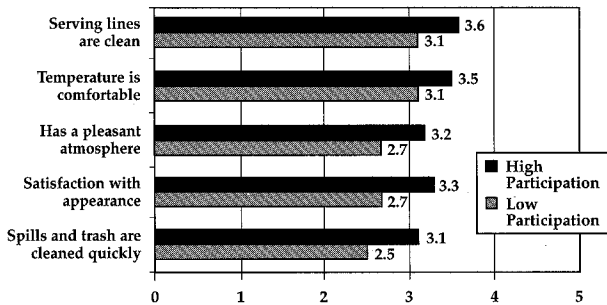


Figure 3

### DINING ROOM ENVIRONMENT

Prompt cleaning of spills and trash in the dining room was the statement indicating the greatest need for improvement. Atmosphere in the dining area was assessed as neutral or low. Based on their experiences, the students in both groups agreed that the dining room was crowded. In both groups of schools, an evaluation may be needed of the number of students expected to eat at one time and the seating capacity in the dining area.

## GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS

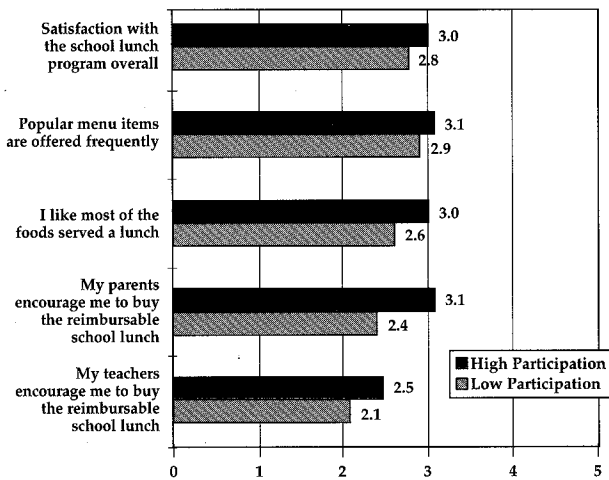


Figure 4

### MENU VARIETY AND CHOICES

Students in both groups of schools were dissatisfied with the variety and choices of foods offered. One of the frequently mentioned changes in the school lunch program suggested by students was a request for more variety in the foods offered and additional food choices. Students' comments indicated the menus were predictable and monotonous. In some schools, only one main dish was offered, and these students desired another option. In other schools, the same choices were offered daily or on a set rotation during a week, leading to monotony. New and different foods were desired by some students, whereas others wanted specific branded foods as choices. Vegetarian meals were not offered frequently in either group of schools and dessert choices were not perceived to be offered frequently in the high participation schools.

### FOODSERVICE PERSONNEL

Students in both groups were positive about the friendliness of the cafeteria staff, but differed as to whether they were treated with respect. Students in both groups agreed that cafeteria workers served food in a sanitary manner, but differed in their assessment of the workers' appearance as neat and clean.

### SERVICE TIME

Students in both groups of schools thought that the lunch lines were too long and that time available to eat once seated

**7. Improve foodservice staff appearance.** The appearance of service personnel also sends messages to students. School foodservice directors might consider setting standards that reflect pride in the school lunch program and support for the high school. Quick-service restaurants have their service people wear similar-looking clothing to convey a unified image to their customers. School food services can do the same thing. For example, colored polo shirts could be imprinted with the school name and/or logo or the school food service logo. A variety of colors or school colors could be worn. Asking the staff to

identify each day the color they will all wear the next day gives the staff options. Aprons could be imprinted and worn instead of polo shirts.

Foodservice staff are aware of the importance of clean uniforms and appearance. They also need to be reminded that good grooming, especially of the hair conveys a message of pride and sanitation to customers. Pictures might be used to establish desirable appearance standards. Involve the staff in establishing the desired standards.

## ADMINISTRATIVE STRATEGIES

Some changes cannot be made without the support of other decision makers. The food service director will need to know and follow the existing school decision-making structure. Careful thought and involvement by those affected by an existing situation is needed to identify possible solutions to specific problems. Possible solutions must be seen as reasonable by those making decisions. Facts will be needed to support any requested changes.

**1. Enhance the dining environment.** General maintenance of the dining area, the color of walls and furnishings, and amount of light are some of the things that create the dining environment. An institutional look is to be avoided if possible. A new coat of paint or improved lighting can change how a space looks. A dining area that is clean at the start of the serving period and dining tables that are wiped clean between serving periods convey to students that they deserve a clean place to eat. Cleaning floors and removing tables from the area while students are still being served tells students to hurry up and get out of the dining area. This does not create a desirable environment for enjoying lunch. A close look at the dining area and practices observed during meal service may help to identify some inexpensive changes that will improve the overall environment.

**2. Evaluate seating capacity.** One way to look at crowding is to divide the number of seats in the dining area by the number of students enrolled in the school. We found there were 25 seats per enrolled student in the low-student participation schools, and 41 seats per enrolled student in the high-student participation schools. This information gives some indication of whether it is even possible to meet the lunch needs of all students within a reasonable period of time.

**3. Evaluate lunch period schedule.** Determine how long it takes for most students to be moved through the food serving lines during each meal period. After subtracting that number from the length of the lunch period, how much time is left for those last students to eat their meal? The researchers found that the amount of time available to eat the lunch varied quite a bit from one period to another. This might indicate that the number of students released each period is not very evenly divided among the lunch periods. Additionally, the last students in low-student participation schools had more time available to eat than the last students in high-student participation schools (15 - 19 minutes, compared to more than 10 minutes). Look to see what may be slowing down the serving line.

- ✓ Do the servers also have to supply the serving lines?
- ✓ Are there problems at the cashier station?
- ✓ Is it the students who are slowing down the line? Why?
- ✓ Identify the most typical causes and focus on solving those specific problems to reduce service times.

**4. Evaluate prices of the reimbursable meal, a la carte, and snack bar products.** Check the prices charged by the local competition for similar food products. Are the school prices the same or lower for the same amount of product? Compare the choices and prices of competitive foods offered within the school building. Are students being encouraged to select a la carte or other food offerings because of the way products are priced? Could a la carte choices be combined to create a reimbursable lunch?

## CONCLUSION

Keeping the food service program in high schools alive and well requires attention to details, as well as creative imagination and a willingness to involve students in decision-making. Maintaining and building participation requires continued commitment to the program and openness to change.

was inadequate. Students suggested changes such as shorter lunch lines, more lunch lines, fewer students per lunch period, or longer lunch periods. More such comments were made by students in low-student participation schools than by students in high-student participation schools. Decisions about these matters usually are not made by the school foodservice staff, but must be negotiated with the school administrators.

## LUNCH PROGRAM SUPPORT

Students surveyed in both groups of schools perceived that neither teachers nor parents encourage them to eat the school lunch. This indicates a need for school foodservice staff to encourage support for the school lunch program from those individuals who may influence student lunch purchase decisions.

Students in both groups of schools were dissatisfied with food promotions and specials offered. They did not feel that special decorations encouraged them to eat and did not perceive that special events and promotions were offered frequently. Students indicated that they were rarely involved in activities related to the school lunch program and indicated a desire to be more involved in:

- planning the lunch menu,
- tasting and evaluating food products,
- providing suggestions and feedback, and
- learning more about nutrition.

Students from low participation schools indicated that they usually received no information about the school lunch menu from on-campus sources (21%) or off-campus sources (54%). Students did not perceive that information about fat and calories in foods was usually available and nutrition information was usually posted. Students' comments from both groups of schools indicated some interest in having nutrition information available.

Students in the low participation schools did not feel the lunch price was reasonable for the amount of food received. Average lunch prices were \$1.41 in low-student participation schools and \$1.16 in high-student participation schools. Students who commented on price wanted a greater quantity of food for the price, although some students suggested a lower price for the current quantity of food. A few comments also indicated inconsistency in the quantity of food received from day to day.

## STRATEGIES TO INCREASE STUDENT LUNCH PARTICIPATION

The general lack of satisfaction with the school food service program, even by students who participate in the program, indicates a need to try some new approaches. The students' suggestions for change give some indication of places to start improving the programs. Statements receiving negative ratings also provide helpful clues. Some opportunities for improvement may be internal to day-to-day food service operations, while others may involve decisions external to these activities. It is most productive to first focus on those internal operational aspects of the lunch program that are within the control of school foodservice personnel. Situational constraints that are external to the food service program will require the cooperation and support of district administrators and board members who have the authority to remove these barriers. Both operating and administrative strategies to increase student lunch participation are summarized in Figure 5.

## OPERATING STRATEGIES

1. Evaluate menu offerings and make appropriate revisions
2. Improve food quality and appearance
3. Involve students in menu planning and marketing of the school lunch program
4. Increase promotional activities
5. Improve communication about menus and ingredients
6. Provide customer service training to the CNP staff
7. Improve foodservice staff appearance

## ADMINISTRATIVE STRATEGIES

1. Enhance the dining environment
2. Evaluate seating capacity
3. Evaluate lunch period schedule
4. Evaluate prices of the reimbursable meal, a la carte, and snack bar products

Figure 5

# OPERATING STRATEGIES

**1. Evaluate menu offerings and make appropriate revisions.** Food variety and choice need increased attention. Predictability and monotony appear to be enemies of the school lunch program. The students may be bored with the current menus, especially if the foods and food combinations have not changed much over the 11 years the students have been eating school lunches. Balancing the need to create new menu items and keep up with the latest food trends against offering known favorites is a challenge to all food service managers, but is necessary to keep a food service program healthy. Contracting for service of popular branded food products may be an option for some schools as a way to expand the choice of products. Whether there is demand for vegetarian meal choices should be explored.

**2. Improve food quality and appearance.** Taste of food is affected by the initial food ingredients or products purchased and seasonings added during the combining or cooking processes. Students may be reacting to the increased use of pre-packaged, pre-processed, and/or pre-prepared institutional food products in school food service. The same institutional product, such as a frozen beef patty, may be served frequently but with different menu names. Careful evaluation of the taste of processed food products before purchase, attention to flavorful seasoning of prepared foods, and limited use and unpredictable rotation of basic products on the menu are strategies to overcome some of these concerns. Since students indicated that they were not involved in taste testing, this may be a good student involvement activity.

Freshness and overall appearance affect the eye appeal and attractiveness of food. Overcooked foods and brown edges of lettuce, celery, or cut apples are examples of products that do not appeal to students. Avoiding these situations requires proper timing during the cooking process to avoid overcooking and careful handling and timing of preparation and service set-up of products that are adversely affected by exposure to air. It may be a better choice to throw away a deteriorated product than to recycle it one more time. Monitoring food temperatures and changing procedures to maintain appropriate temperatures during service are good management practices affecting food quality.

**3. Involve students and others in menu planning and marketing of the school lunch program.** Students and possibly teachers and parents need to be involved in planning any marketing efforts if the marketing is to be successful. The students themselves are a potential source of ideas. The level of interest shown by students in both groups of schools in helping to plan menus and to taste and evaluate food products should be tapped. This is an opportunity to interact with the student customers, to share information, and to learn from them and promote

their ownership in the program. Surveys, focus groups, and advisory councils may be effective methods of soliciting feedback from students and others. Efforts should be made to evaluate how effectively the menu and other program activities are communicated to students, but also to teachers and parents.

**4. Increase promotional activities.** There appeared to be few attempts to market or promote the school lunch program in the high schools or to offer special meals or events for the students. It conveys to students that there is limited interest in having them as customers. High schools with high participation need to combat the "captive" customer feeling students expressed. Food services in high schools with open campuses must compete with commercial food services that make direct appeals to the students. Similar attention-getting activities may be needed for the school lunch program. Creating "advertisements" for school food service might be offered as a project for some class. Food service can promote the convenience of eating at school. The prices of school products can be compared to prices from the local competition.

Having something special or different to publicize may be needed to attract the attention and generate interest among students. Food service might help promote itself and school events by finding ways to tie-in with athletic events, school plays, concerts, etc. This might include new food items with event-related names, give-away meals, tickets to the event, some sort of event-related game with prizes, or similar activities. Occasionally developing and publicizing an event that is unique to food service, such as a winter beach party or similar "off-the-wall" idea to catch the imagination of students, could break up the monotony of the usual school day for both students and foodservice personnel.

**5. Improve communication about menus and ingredients.** The number of different ways students can find out the menu for the day should be reviewed and increased, if it seems appropriate. Students indicated that information about the nutrient content of foods, especially fat and calories, was not posted, yet there seemed to be some interest in access to nutrition information. As nutrient standard menu planning becomes more common, this information from standardized recipes could be shared with students. What kind of information and how best to share the information should be decided in consultation with the students.

**6. Provide customer service training to the CNP staff.** Students react positively to foodservice personnel who smile, make conversation, and respond to their questions while serving the lunch. The focus on fast service may overshadow the importance of conveying friendliness. The positive attitude of school foodservice workers can make a difference to students. Involving workers in identifying ways to serve quickly and at the same time convey respect and interest in students can help them balance these two important tasks.

*(Continued)*

