



What do High School Students Think about School Lunch?

Results from the Thompson School District Lunch Program Experience Survey

The mission of the Thompson School District (TSD) Nutrition Services Department is to feed every child, every day, nutritious and affordable meals. In an ongoing effort to improve our services to students, we have partnered with Colorado State University (CSU) Department of Food Science and Human Nutrition to evaluate our school breakfast and lunch program. Our goal in working with CSU is to understand students' likes and dislikes, students' eating habits, and how to encourage students to make healthy choices now and in the future. This partnership has already led to several projects, all completed with the help of CSU graduate students, that provided us with valuable information from which we can develop future enhancements to menus, food quality and the school cafeteria environment.

The **Lunch Program Experience Survey** was conducted in two TSD high schools. The purpose was to determine students' overall experiences with school lunch.

Student lunch program experience: How was it measured?

On 2 separate days in April 2011, a total of 127 students who regularly eat school lunch completed a survey administered in the cafeteria during the lunch periods. Surveys were approximately evenly distributed between schools and genders.

What did we find?

First, we wanted to know about students' school lunch behaviors. We found that students ate something for lunch on most days of the week, and most often got their lunch from the school cafeteria rather than bringing lunch from home or elsewhere. When asked in the survey, students reported that they throw away at least 25% of their lunch about 2 days per week, and this was most often because they didn't like the taste of the food. However, a recent plate waste study in these same high schools found very little waste from student trays. A summary of plate waste results can be found here:

http://district.schoolnutritionandfitness.com/thompsonsd/files/Plate_Waste_Information_for_Parents.pdf

Second, we wanted to determine students' attitudes toward school lunch. About half of the students either agree or feel neutral that school lunches are healthful, taste good, and make them full, and about 40% of students agree or feel neutral that school lunches provide enough variety. When deciding what to get for lunch from the school cafeteria, students indicated that good taste is important, whereas the nutritional value of food is not so important to them.

Practical Uses for This Information

Nutrition Services wants to make sure that participating students receive at least one-third of their daily nutrition needs from school lunch. Therefore, we plan our lunches accordingly. What we prepare and what we offer for school lunch can influence the dietary choices of students. If students are interested in school lunch, find it appealing, and consume the foods offered, then they are likely receiving their daily lunch nutrition needs.

A large national study reported that students who participate in school lunch consume less sugar-sweetened beverages, more milk, and more fruits and vegetables at school than

non-participants¹; therefore, it is important to consider ways to keep school lunch appealing to students. A better understanding of students' attitudes and behaviors relating to school lunch gives us ideas on how to design more attractive, healthful meals according to students' taste preferences. By involving students in decision-making regarding changes to the menu, it is likely that they will become more satisfied with the lunch program and choose school lunch over other options more often. Below are some ideas we are considering:

Better understand students' specific taste preferences

- Interview or survey students, addressing detailed likes and dislikes of school lunch vegetables.

Involve students in making menu revisions

- Conduct student taste tests, and have students involved in decisions of what to include or not to include on the menu.

Implement changes of vegetable preparation/offering

- Improve the flavor of vegetables by adding spices.
- Consider the cooking method. For example, should vegetables be roasted instead of steamed?
- Re-evaluate cooking time, being sure not to over-cook hot vegetables.

1. Gordon A, Fox MK, Clark M, et al. School Nutrition Dietary Assessment Study-III: Volume II: Student Participation and Dietary Intakes. *Final Report prepared for the USDA Food and Nutrition Service by Mathematica Policy Research, November. 2007.*

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