

Redesigning School Meals:

New Student Survey Tells Us How

OVERVIEW:

- Schools have options for redesigning the school meal experience that can make a difference without major new investments.
 - Students want **more time** to eat their meals, but they aren't asking for a lot – just an extra 10 minutes would be well-received, according to this survey.
 - School-wide strategies to **reduce waste** appeal to students' values and can often involve simple changes that offer all students a chance to cooperate.
 - Students would value more information about their food's **nutritional content**, and schools generate much of this information anyway during menu development, and could make it more available with relative ease.
- Other changes might require more resources but would be likely to draw more students into the meal programs, increasing federal funds to schools. These are areas like **food freshness, quality and taste**, as well as seating comfort.
- Technology may have an important role to play.
 - What about an app for the nutritional content of cafeteria choices?
 - How about an online student food preference survey?

DETAILS:

- 75 Fuel Up to Play 60 student ambassadors completed a survey on how to re-design the school meal experience to make it better for kids.
 - FUTP60 ambassadors are student leaders who work with an adult supporter to rally other students and commit to leading healthy, sustainable changes in their local schools.
- Nearly 80% of the students can get breakfast in the cafeteria, but less than one-quarter have access to breakfast in the classroom. Of students who don't have **breakfast in the classroom**, almost half (42%) wish it was available. Even more (58%) would like access to a **grab-n-go breakfast**, if they don't already have that option (40% already do).
- The student ambassadors **eat school meals more frequently** than the national average. Fewer than 30% say they don't eat school meals; that share would be above 40% on a national-average basis.
- The single most popular reason for eating school meals is **not having to bring a lunch from home**. In second place is the variety of food options (29%).

- When students rated various aspects of school food on a scale of 1 to 5, only one item got an average score of **4 or higher: that beverages such as milk are served cold.** It seems schools have figured out that cold milk tastes better.

- Items that averaged a **score of below 3** included food freshness, food quality, its overall taste, similarity to restaurant or café food, time allotted to eat breakfast, the time spent waiting in line, and how comfortable the chairs and tables are. There is plenty of room for progress in getting students to really like the food.
- Apart from beverage temperature, the **highest-scoring items** (all 3.5 or higher) were the temperature at which food is served, school meal staff uniforms and being treated as a valuable customer by the staff.

Students express strong interest in having information about school food **nutritional content** in order to make healthful choices. Nearly 90% said this information was either very or somewhat helpful.

Students like school meal periods. When entering the dining space, over 70% reported being happy, perhaps because over 80% said they were hungry then. Nearly 58% said they felt satisfaction, and almost 53% actually said they were delighted.

- However, nearly two-thirds (62%) felt hurried, and nearly 69% did not feel relaxed.
- Students are glad to get to their meal period, but **one thing it isn't for them is relaxing.**

Reducing food waste got even stronger support from the students than nutritional information: Over 90% said it was either somewhat or very important, and no respondents said it was not important at all.

When students were presented with multiple options to make school meals better, and rated them on a 1-5 scale, the single most popular option was **extending the lunch period by 10 minutes.** Close behind in second place was the opportunity for student input on meal offerings. More flexible seating and outside seating during clement weather were also rated very high.

- In fact, none of the improvement options was unpopular – all but one scored 3.5 or better, and the **lowest-rated item** (vending-machine school meals) was just marginally below 3.5.



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