



Exploring Parental Perspectives: Insights on School and Summer Meal Programs from North Texas Focus Groups

Meal programs play a crucial role in ensuring that students receive adequate nutrition for healthy growth and development. Despite the importance of these programs, challenges such as stigma, lack of awareness, and low participation rates persist. This report explores the significance of utilizing parent focus groups to gather valuable feedback on school meals, including breakfast, lunch, and summer meal programs. This information can be instrumental in reducing stigma, increasing awareness, and boosting participation rates. Parents are key stakeholders in their children's education and well-being; they hold insight into how to address these issues effectively.

METHODS

We hosted two focus groups, the first held on Wednesday May 1st with twelve participants and the second on Saturday May 18th with eight participants. This met our target goal of 20 parents attending between the two groups. Each group lasted approximately an hour from start to finish. Participants were provided meals and compensated with a twenty-five dollar gift card for their time.

The groups were led by Mel Jackson, Executive Director, of The Josh Howard Foundation and Dr. Jeannine Rios, Senior Program Manager, No Kid Hungry. By engaging parents in meaningful discussions, we gained a better understanding of their needs and concerns and gathered insights on how to enhance the quality and accessibility of meals provided to students/participants. Parents offered unique perspectives on the nutritional value, variety, taste, and overall satisfaction levels of the meals served, which can be used to help guide program improvements and adjustments for school districts and summer meal sponsors.

RESULTS

When speaking with the two focus groups, we had three areas of focus: **school breakfast, school lunch and summer meals**. We gained insight into each participant's household, questions, concerns and participation in federal meal programs or lack of. The list of questions was designed to gain insights from parents into their thoughts surrounding food quality, nutritional value, barriers and general information that could be relevant to parents and operators of child nutrition programs. We asked the following questions:

1. What do you know about the school (breakfast, lunch and summer) meals program?

2. What feedback has your child shared with you about these meal programs?
3. Can you tell us about your child's experience with breakfast/lunch? I.e. do they have to go to the cafeteria, is it served directly to the classroom, or is it grab and go to a common area, etc.?
4. With summer meals: Can you tell us about your child's summer meals experience? I.e. what is served, how it is served, where is it served etc.
5. What questions do you have about the program?

FOCUS GROUP ONE

Participants engaged in a detailed discussion surrounding the quality of food offered, the nutritional value of the meals, and the barriers faced in ensuring students have access to healthy meal options. The overview of the meeting encapsulates a comprehensive analysis of the current state of school breakfast programs, shedding light on the importance of providing nutritious meals to students to support their academic performance and overall well-being. Additionally, general information shared during the meeting offers valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities present in enhancing the quality and accessibility of breakfast options in schools, highlighting the need for collaborative efforts to address these critical issues effectively. Below you will find in-depth responses from participants broken into categories.

BREAKFAST

Quality of Food

Responses from parents during the focus group meeting provided valuable insights into the quality of food offered in school breakfast programs. While many parents expressed their satisfaction with items like juice boxes provided, emphasizing their child's enjoyment of this item, others shared contrasting experiences. For example, one parent highlighted their child's positive association with school food, particularly praising meals like pancakes, waffles, and juice that are eagerly consumed, especially after engaging in morning athletics.

In contrast, another parent voiced concerns about their child's aversion to school meals, describing them as "disgusting." This parent noted a shift in their child's perception, initially enjoying the food at the start of the school year but later expressing disdain towards it. These varied responses underscore the importance of consistently maintaining high-quality and appealing food options in school breakfast programs to meet diverse student preferences and promote positive eating experiences.

Nutritional Value

When discussing nutritional value, it became evident that some parents lacked awareness of the actual nutritional content of the meals provided to their children. Following an exploration of the nutritional aspects of school breakfast offerings, several parents expressed a sense of relief and satisfaction upon discovering that their child's meals were more nutritious than previously perceived. This newfound knowledge not only enlightened parents about the healthiness of the

food their children were consuming but also instilled a greater sense of confidence in the school's commitment to providing balanced and wholesome breakfast options. The revelation of the nutritional value of school meals highlights the importance of transparent communication and education for parents, along with the significance of promoting awareness and understanding of the nutritional benefits in school breakfast programs. By bridging this information gap, schools can empower parents to make informed decisions about their child's dietary choices and further support the promotion of healthy eating habits among students.

Barriers

The issue of stigma surrounding cafeteria meals emerged as a significant concern among participants. One parent highlighted the fear that students experience when faced with the prospect of being stigmatized for eating in the cafeteria, leading to behaviors such as avoiding the cafeteria altogether. This fear of stigma was exemplified by students feigning illness to visit the nurse's office for food, where they could consume their meal without the fear of judgment. The realness of this stigma was underscored by a parent who shared an anecdote about their daughter choosing to stay with friends instead of eating, despite feeling hungry. This preference for social interaction over addressing hunger reflects the impact of social dynamics on students' mealtime choices and sheds light on the challenges posed by stigma in the school breakfast setting. The experiences shared by participants underscore the need to address and mitigate stigma associated with school meals to ensure that all students feel comfortable and supported in accessing nutritious breakfast options without fear of judgment or social repercussions.

In conclusion a range of perspectives and experiences were shared regarding school breakfast programs, offering valuable insights for the public and stakeholders. Topics such as food waste, offer vs serve policies, and shared tables were briefly discussed, highlighting the importance of efficient meal service and reducing waste. For parents of secondary students, they humorously mentioned their children becoming accustomed to free meals, leading to unintended consequences such as purchasing a la carte items in excess or sharing meals with friends charging their meal card multiple times. Varying feedback on the breakfast program was noted, with some children enjoying school breakfast while others expressed dislike. The discussion also touched upon the diverse breakfast habits of students, with some eating at home before school, some having meals both at home and at school, and others not being big breakfast eaters. Furthermore, the impact of COVID-19 on school meals was highlighted, indicating a period where stigma was reduced as all students participated in free meal programs. These insights underscore the complexity and nuances surrounding school breakfast programs, emphasizing the importance of understanding diverse preferences, behaviors, and challenges to enhance the overall effectiveness and inclusivity of such initiatives.

LUNCH

Parents expressed a range of opinions regarding the quality of food provided to students. Some parents commended the school for offering a variety of healthy and appealing meal options, noting that their children enjoyed the lunches and found them to be nutritious and satisfying. However, others raised concerns about the taste and nutritional value of the meals, mentioning instances where their children refused to eat certain items or expressed dissatisfaction with the overall quality of the food. These differing opinions shed light on the importance of continuously assessing and improving the quality of school lunches to meet the diverse preferences and dietary needs of students. Overall, the feedback shared by parents highlights the significance of prioritizing high-quality, nutritious meals in school lunch programs to support the well-being and academic success of students. One thing that stood out in this discussion as a main concern

was portion sizes. One parent shared “The portion sizes are not enough for my 5th grader. They receive the same amount of food as the younger kids.”

Barriers

Parents have expressed various concerns regarding their children's dining experiences at school. One common issue raised is the lengthy lines in the cafeteria, leading to complaints from students about not having enough time to eat. To address this, some children opt to pack their own meals, a practice that can be influenced by perceptions of the cafeteria environment.

Additionally, parents have noticed that meals can become costly for their children, particularly when they choose a la carte items in addition to their regular meal or instead of it. This financial aspect of school lunches may contribute to a sense of stigma, as students' food choices could be seen as a reflection of their economic status or social standing.

In conclusion the discussions about school lunch experiences, parents have provided diverse insights into their children's dining preferences and challenges. Parents noted that their children eagerly anticipate special lunch days featuring favorite items like pizza or hamburgers, prompting them to ensure that their kids have the means to purchase meals at school. Specific dietary considerations were also mentioned, with one child favoring sunflower butter sandwiches over peanut butter due to allergies, while another child was allergic to sunflower butter. Concerns about meal charges and portion sizes were raised, as some children were observed receiving multiple entrees or sharing meals with friends, potentially impacting meal costs. Additionally, a parent, despite working at the school, shared struggles in encouraging their child to eat school meals, reflecting individual preferences and perceptions. Highlighting the issue of stigma, parents recounted past practices of distributing lunch bags to financially disadvantaged students discreetly, a practice seen as stigmatizing. Moreover, some students shared their meal access numbers, indicating the varied ways in which students navigate the complexities of school lunch programs within the broader context of social dynamics and food-related experiences.

SUMMER MEALS

Various insights were shared concerning the quality, nutritional value, barriers, and general aspects of the meals provided. Parents noted that children highly enjoy the meals offered through the Community in Schools program, expressing a preference for these over the school meals typically provided. This preference was attributed to the appeal of the meals' taste and overall quality. Additionally, some children were observed adjusting their meal preferences to align with those of their friends, highlighting the social influence on food choices.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was also emphasized, with parents acknowledging that the expanded meal options during this time facilitated increased student participation in the program. Children's preferences for variety in meals, including fresh fruits, juices, hot dogs, and corn dogs, were highlighted as key factors in their enjoyment of the summer meals, underscoring the importance of diverse and appealing food options in promoting meal satisfaction and participation among students.

FOCUS GROUP TWO

For the second group we had eight participants. Chart paper and markers were used to capture individual's responses which were later clarified in a larger discussion. We opened the focus

group with a brief discussion about school meals and after school meals and let the group know we would be focusing on solutions this session. Once we discussed some of the concerns, we also talked about the proposed solutions.

BREAKFAST

Meal Quality

We opened our discussion with focus on food quality and nutritional value surrounding school meals, participants highlighted several key concerns. Parents and stakeholders expressed apprehension over issues such as spoiled milk and expired food items that impart a stale taste to the meals, indicating a potential lapse in food quality standards. Additionally, the presence of excessive sugar in the food offerings was noted, with observations that children gravitated towards pastries and muffins despite concerns about their nutritional content.

Preferences for juice over milk were also mentioned, suggesting a disparity in the perceived desirability of certain beverage options. Furthermore, the example of goldfish crackers being enriched or whole wheat, rather than the conventional variety found in stores, underscored a discrepancy in the nutritional composition of school-provided foods compared to what children are accustomed to, potentially influencing their dietary choices and overall satisfaction with the meal offerings.

Barriers

In a discussion focusing on school breakfast programs and the barriers that impact participation and appeal, several key insights were shared by participants. Parents noted that some children preferred to eat breakfast at home before school, indicating a preference for familiar and personalized meal options. To address timing challenges and hunger levels among students, the concept of a "Second Chance breakfast" during mid-morning or brunch hours, such as from 10:00 am to 10:40 am, was proposed. This alternative breakfast time aims to accommodate students who may not be interested in food immediately upon waking up in the morning. Additionally, participants raised concerns about school start times being too early, leading to students arriving late and feeling too tired in the morning to eat a proper breakfast. These barriers, including timing conflicts and fatigue, highlight the need for flexible breakfast options and schedules to enhance participation and appeal among students in the school breakfast program.

LUNCH

Lunch meals were referred to as "fake food" that has made kids sick. Parents shared that they felt the food was bland, the chips are often stale, and meat doesn't look real. Other common concerns included students bringing their lunch and lack of variety at lunch time.

Nutritional value:

During a parent focus group discussion focused on the nutritional value of school lunches, participants emphasized the critical importance of ensuring that meals provided to students are nutritionally balanced and beneficial for their development and well-being, as well as proper portion sizes.

Parents expressed concerns regarding the quality of ingredients and the overall nutritional content of the meals, emphasizing the need for fresh produce, whole grains, lean proteins, and limited processed foods to be incorporated into school lunch offerings. They also highlighted that often the food would be cold or not fully cooked. All participants agreed upon the significance of providing healthy and well-rounded meal options to support students' physical health, cognitive function, and overall academic performance, highlighting the role of nutritious school lunches in promoting positive eating habits and long-term well-being among children.

To end the discussion various key points were highlighted by participants. Suggestions were made for providing alternative vegetable options to cater to students with specific preferences or dietary needs. Parents emphasized the importance of adjusting serving sizes to accommodate the appetites of older children, ensuring that meals are filling and satisfying. Additionally, concerns were raised regarding the timing of lunch service, with calls for later serving times to better align with students' hunger levels and schedules.

Furthermore, the social dynamics of lunchtime were discussed, noting that some students may feel isolated or left out of social circles, impacting their overall lunch experience and appetite. Addressing these considerations, such as diverse food options, appropriate serving sizes, adjusted mealtimes, and strategies to foster inclusivity, is crucial in creating a positive and supportive school lunch environment for all students.

SUMMER MEALS

Anecdotally, most parents stated that they have had a great experience! Kids seem to enjoy the food that is offered as part of summer meals. This group expressed great appreciation of the summer meal program. They loved that summer meal sites offer more games and activities.

Parents did share some concerns around lack of variety, a need for more scratch cooked meals, and an option for fresher snacks versus packaged snacks.

PARENT SUGGESTED SOLUTIONS

In summary of the parent focus group discussions, a range of innovative solutions were proposed to enhance the school meal experience for students. Recommendations included:

1. Improving recipe quality and presentation to make meals more appealing,
2. Adjusting breakfast serving times to accommodate late arrivals,
3. Conducting taste tests to introduce new menu items and offer choice,
4. Implementing a "Grab and Go" meal option akin to "Door Dash" for convenience,
5. Utilizing social media challenges to promote food options and engage students,
6. Providing diverse and appealing menu choices like frozen grapes and fruit bars,
7. Exploring varied protein sources,
8. Incorporating student-preferred foods such as wings, pizza, smoothies, and desserts,
9. Establishing rewards for meal participation and feedback,
10. And introducing milk alternatives to cater to diverse preferences.

These proactive suggestions aim to address the diverse needs and preferences of students while promoting a positive dining experience within the school environment.

DISCUSSION

Parents are instrumental in shaping beliefs and participation in these programs. Involving them helps them to feel valued and invested in the success of these programs. Understanding that one of the significant benefits of engaging parents in focus groups is the potential to decrease stigma associated with school meal programs. We did this by answering questions about federal nutrition programs, increasing information and dispelling myths about these programs. We realized that encouraging open dialogue and addressing misconceptions or concerns raised by parents, schools and community programs can work towards creating a more inclusive and supportive environment for students/participants who rely on these programs. Additionally, insights from parents can help in designing targeted awareness campaigns to promote the benefits of school meals, highlight success stories, and showcase the nutritional value of the meals served.

In conclusion, we leveraged the parent focus groups to gain insights on school and summer meal programs because we know it's instrumental in improving the overall quality, accessibility, and perception of these services. By actively involving parents in the dialogue, school districts and community programs can work towards reducing stigma, increasing awareness, and enhancing participation rates in breakfast, lunch, and summer meal programs. The collaborative efforts of parents, educators, and policymakers are essential in creating a supportive and nourishing environment that prioritizes the health and well-being of all students.

The insights gathered from the focus group discussions are invaluable in shaping future strategies and improvements for school meal programs. It is recommended that this report be shared with key stakeholders, including school administrators, policymakers, and nutrition experts, to inform decision-making and drive positive changes in the delivery of school breakfast, lunch, and summer meal initiatives.

To disseminate the findings and recommendations outlined in the report that addresses the issues, concerns, and opinions of parents and stakeholders regarding school breakfast, school lunch, and summer meals, it would be beneficial to share the report with relevant school administrators, policymakers, and nutrition program coordinators. Additionally, organizing a presentation or workshop to discuss the key points and proposed solutions with school officials and community members could help foster understanding and collaboration in implementing positive changes. Furthermore, leveraging social media platforms or school newsletters to communicate the findings to a wider audience, including parents and students, can raise awareness and generate support for improving the quality and accessibility of school meal programs. Finally, considering submitting the report to local education authorities or relevant government agencies could help advocate for policy changes and investments in nutrition programs to better serve the needs of students and enhance their overall well-being.