



# Recommendations for Communicating with Parents and Students About School Meals

No Kid Hungry engaged FM3—a California-based company that conducts opinion research—to complete a national series of discussion boards and surveys with parents and students in low- and middle-income households to assess their views of school meals, and to assess their reactions to key messaging designed to encourage greater participation.<sup>1</sup> The goal of the research was to understand, as we begin to emerge from the coronavirus pandemic, what opportunities may exist to increase parent and student engagement with school meals – both in and out of session.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The following were key recommendations to emerge from the research:

### COMMUNICATING ABOUT SCHOOL MEALS

- Use colorful imagery in communications wherever possible.
- Consider showing food in communications.
- Ensure that all communications include explicit directions about how to learn more.
- Ask parents about their communication preferences and utilize multiple channels of communication to reach them.
- Speak to the unique solution school meals offer working parents.
- Communicate that younger children (or those not in school yet) can access meals too.<sup>2</sup>
- Emphasize that school meals are free.<sup>2</sup>

### RAISING AWARENESS

- Recognize that the pandemic is an opportunity to “reframe” school meals.
- Paint an inclusive picture of who uses school meals.
- Broaden awareness of out-of-school time meals—like summer and afterschool meals—potentially starting with those who are regular users of school meals.
- Address logistical and informational barriers to out-of-school time meals.
- Work to create community among students around school meals.
- Provide families and students opportunities to weigh in on the content and quality of school meals.
- Understand and speak to the diverse factors that contribute to the way that families view meal quality – taste, smell, portion size, variety, packaging, and cultural appropriateness.

### ENGAGING MESSENGERS

- Leverage parents’ and students’ high degree of trust in teachers and doctors by using them as messengers.

Read on for additional details, including the research findings that support these recommendations.

<sup>1</sup>Methodology: From March 30–April 1, FM3 conducted two online QualBoard sessions with parents (one in English and one in Spanish) and one with students ages 12–18, all from low- and middle-income households. That qualitative research was followed by national surveys of 1,018 low- and middle-income parents (conducted by phone and online) and 400 high school students in low- and middle-income households (conducted online), conducted in English and Spanish from April 23–May 3, 2021.

<sup>2</sup>Refers to the option for schools to operate under SSO for SY21–22, per USDA COVID-19 nationwide waivers.



## COMMUNICATING ABOUT SCHOOL MEALS

- **Consider showing food in communications.**

Acknowledging the variation in how meals look, to the extent that visual images of school meals can convey that they are fresh and appetizing. A variety of messages were tested in the qualitative research; messages that had images of food (even abstract ones) consistently outperformed messages that had identical text but no images.

- **Use colorful imagery in communications wherever possible.**

Adding color and graphics almost always drew more positive and enthusiastic responses in the qualitative research, especially when – as noted above – it depicted food.

- **Ensure that all communications include explicit directions about how to learn more.**

In the qualitative research, messaging that left out details about how to access school meals, or raised logistical questions that parents didn't know how to answer, made them frustrated. This was particularly the case around out-of-school time meals. Parents wanted to have an easy-to-find, central source of information that answered all their basic questions straightforwardly – which kids are eligible, how much does it cost, what are the menus, where and when can the food be picked up, etc. A simple, easy-to-remember website URL which prominently features all of those key logistics would suit them well.

- **Ask parents about their communication preferences and utilize multiple channels of communication to reach them.**

Fewer than three in ten parents (28%) say their children's school has reached out to find out how they would like to learn about school meals. The survey shows that the question is worth asking, as parents' communications preferences on school meals vary

widely. Sizable groups prefer to hear via email (49%), text messages (33%), phone calls (32%), printed material in the mail (19%) and robocalls (15%). While calls, emails, and texts are broadly useful for nearly all subgroups of parents, older parents like hard-copy communications and younger ones like social media. Communications will need to be diverse and mutually-reinforcing.

- **Speak to the unique solution school meals offer working parents.**

Working parents show more interest in school meals across the data: 84% say they are likely to use in-session meals, and 71% out-of-session meals – in both cases notably higher than the proportion of non-working parents who said the same. Many of the main appeals of school meals touch on making parents' lives easier in various ways – the family budget, convenience, difficulty overseeing kids' other meals – suggesting that working parents are likely to be particularly advantageous targets for our reach on school meals.

- **Communicate that younger children (or those not in school yet) can access meals too.**

Many parents were unaware of this, and it was seen as a major benefit – one that might help attract more people to out-of-session meals as well. Using inclusive “all kids” language wherever possible will help – messages that used it tested very well in the research.

- **Emphasize that school meals are free.**

The vast majority of the parents in our study said that they qualified for free (60%) or reduced-price (21%) meals. In addition, during the pandemic many districts made all school meals free, and some have extended that policy into the future. However, 51% said that the cost of the meals – or inability to qualify for discounted meals – was

a barrier to their participation. Making clear that meals are available at no cost to them (in those circumstances where that is in fact the case) could help to boost participation.

### RAISING AWARENESS

- **Recognize that the pandemic is an opportunity to “reframe” school meals.** During the pandemic, many parents have needed help with food (a 51% majority said they ran out of food without money to buy more in the last 12 months); appreciation of school meals is high (more than four in five parents see them as easy to get, convenient, and saving them the time of packing a lunch); and routines have been broken – there may be a greater opportunity this summer and fall to draw parents to try new things. More than four in five parents (81%) say they are likely to use school meals when school is back in person in the fall, and a significant number of middle-income families who did not previously use school meals regularly now express interest.
- **Paint an inclusive picture of who uses school meals.** Many of those uninterested in school meals do not think of themselves as being the kind of people who would use them. Among parents whose kids use school meals daily, 83% see them as being “for people like you;” among

those whose kids rarely or never eat them, only 44% feel the same. Visual communications should emphasize the breadth and diversity of kids and families who use them – implicitly making the point that they are for all families.

- **Broaden awareness of out-of-school time meals (like summer and afterschool meals), potentially starting with those who are regular users of school meals.** Less than half of students (40%) and parents (44%) who already use in-session school meals every day report having used out-of-session meals. Many are unaware that they are offered: 43% of parents and 39% of students either say that their school does not offer out-of-session meals, or that they are unsure whether they are available. Simply increasing awareness of the availability of school meals may help to lead to a significant boost in participation.
- **Address logistical and informational barriers to out-of-school time meals.** Significant numbers of parents report inconvenient pickup times (50%), inclement weather (50%), inconvenient pickup locations (49%), and long lines (49%) as disincentives to accessing out-of-session meals. In addition to increasing the awareness of out-of-session meals, it will be important to address some of the logistical hurdles that make some parents think it’s not worth the effort.



- **Work to create community among students around school meals.** Three-quarters of parents (77%) see school meals as allowing their child “to build community and friendship with other students.” At a time when many students have been out of their school buildings for much of the last year and a half, the opportunity to spend time with their friends and fellow students could help to ease the difficulty of re-adjusting. That feeling of community – of sharing meals with a wide range of fellow students – could help overcome some of the barriers from stigma and a sense that school meals “are not for people like me.”
- **Provide families and students opportunities to weigh in on the content and quality of school meals.** Few students (32%) or parents (28%) said that their schools have reached out to learn their preferences on these issues. Reaching out to parents and kids can both yield useful information to guide planning and outreach efforts, and the very process of seeking feedback can demonstrate a commitment to change and improvement which may help to build engagement.
- **Understand and speak to the diverse factors that contribute to the way that families view meal quality – taste, smell, portion size, variety, packaging, and cultural appropriateness.** More than any other factor, parents’ (and especially students’) perception of school meals’ quality determines their likelihood of using them. The qualitative research showed that parents and students view many different factors as contributing to their overall perception of school meals’ quality. Do the meals taste good? Are they nutritious? Are they served hot or cold? Is the food processed or fresh? Are the portions large enough to satisfy them? Is the packaging appealing? Does the food fit within cultural traditions that all students are comfortable with? All of these factors play a part in the way kids and parents evaluate food quality – and communications designed to make the case that the food is high-quality may need to address all these dimensions.

## ENGAGING MESSENGERS

- **Leverage parents’ and students’ high degree of trust in teachers and doctors by using them as messengers.** Survey respondents were asked to indicate how much they trusted a variety of people and organizations that might be sources of information about school meals. Those that topped the list included “your child’s pediatrician” (trusted on school meal programs by 86%), “your child’s teacher” (84%), “your school district” (82%), “your child’s principal” (81%) and “a local food bank” (80%). Generally, the most trusted messengers were those with some close connection to their child or some reliable expertise in food and nutrition.

## DETAILS & METHODOLOGY

### Survey

**Dates:** April 23-May 3, 2021

**Research Population:** Low- and middle-income parents of children 18 and under. Students between the ages of 16-18.

**Total Interviews:** 1,018 parents and 400 students

### Parent Survey Data Collection

**Modes:** Telephone and online

**Student Survey Data Collection Modes:** Online

**Languages:** English and Spanish

### Qualitative Research

**Dates:** March 30-April 1, 2021

**Collection Mode:** Online discussion groups, known as Qualboards, were conducted among two groups of parents from a mix of low- and middle-income backgrounds, and one group of students ages 12-18. The income tiers were based on household income and size. Respondents answered two sets of questions daily. Respondents were recruited to reflect diverse backgrounds by gender, geography, ethnicity and children’s ages.

**Languages:** English (1 student group, 1 parent group) and Spanish (1 parent group)