Iowa Parent School Lunch Survey: Formative research for communication about school meal pattern changes

The University of Iowa Public Policy Center
The University of Iowa Department of Community & Behavioral Health
Iowa Department of Education
Team Nutrition Program

BRIEF REPORT Spring 2013
I. Purpose

This report summarizes salient findings from an online survey of parents of students in the state of Iowa (n = 2,189). The purpose of this survey was to determine Iowa parents’ knowledge and perceptions of the school lunch program and the new school meal patterns as defined by the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010. For the survey, Iowa parents of school-aged children answered a series of questions intended to assess attitudes, beliefs, and practices surrounding the school lunch program at their oldest child’s school. Specifically, questions were oriented to reflect the federal school lunch guidelines implemented in August 2012, and were designed to gather opinions on the policy initiative from parents representing many districts in Iowa.

The results of the survey will inform the development of a health communication intervention to educate parents about the new school meal patterns and encourage their support of the reforms. This parent survey is one component of a larger research effort to understand school meal reform, with the goal of supporting Iowa schools, parents and students in the successful implementation of new school meal reforms. Telephone interviews were conducted with school food service directors, school administrators, and school nurses. A national environmental scan was completed to determine how other states are responding to these changes. A random sample of Iowa school district websites was examined to identify what information school districts are already providing about school meals. Iowa high school students (n = 18) participated in focus groups. Beginning in Fall 2013, telephone interviews will be conducted with rural food service directors in order to better understand the unique challenges they face and the support and resources they need to successfully implement the new school meal policies.

The central objectives of this online survey data collection were:
1. Assess parental knowledge of the recent federal school lunch changes and the ensuing attitudes toward these changes
2. Uncover parental beliefs surrounding healthy nutritional practices for their children, and shed light on the importance of school lunch within this schema
3. Gauge preferred modes of communication for schools to keep parents informed about school meals, and assess which resources parents use to access information about healthy eating and nutrition for their children.

II. Methods

The survey instrument was designed to identify parental knowledge and attitudes on topics such as the role of school lunch in childhood nutrition, communication efforts between parents and the school, and the delivery of the school lunch program in their child’s school.

The electronic survey instrument was jointly developed with the University of Iowa Public Policy Center and the Iowa Department of Education. The University of Iowa Institutional Review Board approved the study. The survey was developed using Qualtrics® survey software and was fielded from March 1, 2013 –March 18, 2013.
Participants were parents recruited from elementary, middle, and high schools across the state of Iowa. Schools distributed the online survey via email, on the school website, and as information sent home with the students. Parents were also encouraged to disseminate the survey to other parents of children enrolled in an Iowa school. Only parents of currently enrolled Iowa school students (K-12) were included in the survey.

The survey items were developed based on previous research that had been conducted with school administrators and staff, as well as information gathered from other states. Parents were asked to report on the experiences of their oldest child, because school staff identified the younger children as being less concerned about the meal changes. The final survey instrument included 28 items, two of which were for demographic purposes (identifying the grade level and school district of their oldest school-aged child). Questions were asked about current school lunch practices, communication preferences surrounding eating practices and other health-related behaviors, knowledge about school lunches and attitudes—including those of the parent-respondent and his or her perceptions of both the child’s attitude and the attitudes of other parents—toward these changes.

Both quantitative and qualitative responses were collected from parents. Quantitative data is tabulated below as frequencies and percent of responses. Qualitative responses were coded thematically and organized categorically by relative frequency of response; given the high volume of qualitative responses to the open-ended questions posed by the survey instrument, some particularly illustrative excerpts are provided in the results section below. The full body of qualitative responses is provided throughout the report. The qualitative responses appear as they were submitted by the parents without any corrections or deletions from the researchers.

It is important to note three limitations of this study that should be considered when interpreting the results. First, parents without Internet access would not have been able to complete the survey. Efforts were made to include school districts that have limited electronic communication with parents. Second, the sample is not a random sample of Iowa parents, but a convenience sample. Parents with stronger opinions about school lunch may have been more likely to respond. Third, parents were asked to report only on the experiences of their oldest child, therefore more high school students are represented in the sample. The experiences of elementary age students might not be well represented.

III. Results (n = 2,189)

The responses detailed in this report represent parents from a broad range of backgrounds, experiences, and geographical locations within Iowa, encompassing 139 districts across the state and 12 private/parochial schools. Every school district has implemented the school lunch changes differently. Of the 1,757 respondents who indicated the age of their oldest child, 44% or 773 reported their child was in grades 9-12, 22.8% or 400 reported their child was in grades 6-8, and 33.2% or 584 reported that their child was in grades K-5. About 8% or 130 parents reported that their children participated in free or reduced cost lunch.
School lunch participation
Most children (72.6%) eat school lunch at least 4 times a week instead of bringing it from home. Parents report a variety of reasons for this, most commonly: lack of time to prepare a lunch at home, child preference for school lunch, and normative culture at their child's school of eating school lunch. Parents report that 22.7% of students never bring a lunch from home. Of the students who bring lunch from home, 42% do so because they report they do not like school lunch.

Knowledge and communication about the new school meal patterns
Parents are aware of the changes and are highly engaged when it comes to school lunches. 84% of parents were aware of recent changes to the school lunch program. The most frequent sources for information about the changes were from their own child, the school, national news, local news, and other parents. Parents generally report high levels of communication with their child about school lunches. Of parents who reported knowing about recent changes, 75% of them said their child had talked to them about the changes.

The parent-child conversations included discussion about:

Smaller portions (Often raised because the child is active in extracurricular activities, like sports)
“\textit{When I pick him up after school, he complains he’s ‘starving’}”

Food taste and quality
“\textit{Nothing tastes goods anymore}”

Waste of unappealing food
“\textit{They throw away lots of food}”

Limited availability of flavor enhancers (Salt, pepper, ketchup, and ranch dressing were common examples of missing condiments / dipping sauces to improve flavor)
“\textit{Kids (mine included) still don’t understand why they can’t even have more than a packet of ketchup or why they can’t have ranch dressing with their fresh veggies}”

Improvements with availability of fresh fruits and vegetables
“\textit{Big improvement. Fruit and veggie bar is a big hit}”
Adjustment to change

“At first [the kids] were still hungry, even after lunch. Now there is a larger variety offered, and she is no longer hungry. She says the meals aren’t that bad, and she can always find something she likes to eat.”

Lack of non-whole grains

“Hates the fact that everything is whole grain”

Lack of desserts

“Complains about changes in the lunch options provided; specifically the lack of desserts”

Lack of variety of appetizing choices

“Different variety of meals – expanded choices”

Attitudes and perceptions of the new school meal patterns

Many parents (40.5%) believe that school meals and meals from home are equally healthy.

Since the start of the school year, on a typical day does your oldest child get a more nutritious meal at home or at school?

7.9% My child rarely or never eats school meals
5.2% School
40.5% Both equally
46.4% Home

Although there were some very negative reactions to the actual implementation of changes to the school lunch program, opinions were mixed on whether the changes were needed—over half (54%) responded that “[changes] are needed a little” or “needed very much”, and a little over 30% responded “not needed at all” or “not that needed.”

Over half (59.7%) of parents believe that other parents are dissatisfied with the new changes.

Almost half of parents (48.2%) agree that school meals are healthy.
30.5% of parents report that school lunch today is a lot healthier compared to when they were in school.

34.2% believe school meals are less appealing than when they went to school.

36.9% of parents indicated they would be less likely to eat school meals now than when they were in school.

45.8% believe that less food is served at school meals than when they were in school.

Although parents acknowledge the need for more nutritious foods as currently provided under the new program, parents in general expressed anger that the portions are too small, and the quality of the newly added nutritious foods is substandard.

Parents (64.1%) feel that children are not getting enough to eat at school lunch and that unappealing food often goes to waste.

Many parents express that their children report they do not like what is being served at school lunches. For example:

- Children want more fresh fruits and vegetables at school lunch
- Children want more condiments, dressings, and desserts, such as cinnamon rolls to be served at school lunch

Some parents report that because kids are not getting enough food they eat unhealthy snacks to compensate.

“Quantity of food seems to be limited and not enough for growing children who are doing sports after school with no time to eat between school and sports time.”

“There are children passing out during school and during sporting events because they are not being fed enough throughout the day.”

“I have noticed that they eat more snacks after school.”

“Kids all go to vending machines after lunch to get more to eat.”

“Kids are bringing junk food to satisfy their hunger.”

Some parents report that since changes to the school lunch program have been implemented, there may be more food waste.

“He doesn’t like that he is forced to take food he knows he will not eat. It just gets thrown away and is wasted.”

“I think the school lunches sound better and have less starch than before, however, the kids won’t eat 90% of what is being served. I see more thrown out (even with choices) than ever before.”
Many parents express worries about their child’s health in general, but do not see school lunch as being a causal factor in childhood obesity. Some parents express concern that altering school lunch standards is not an effective way to combat childhood obesity.

Parents report that lunches made from scratch are preferred over processed or pre-packaged foods, and express nostalgia for the “home-cooked” school lunches they remember having as children.

Many parents report an observed relationship between school lunch consumption and performance in school (i.e., having energy for classes, tests, and extracurricular activities). Moreover, improving school lunches may have a relationship with improved academic performance and intellectual curiosity.
Purpose of school meals as reported by parents
Parents report the purpose of school meals is to: provide school children with healthy food (65.3%), make sure school children have something to eat during the day (54.6%), set an example for what a healthy meal looks like (39.2%), and help low-income families struggling to feed their children.

Meal cost
Of parents who do not participate in Iowa’s free and reduced lunch program, 71.8% reported that the cost of school lunches is at least “somewhat reasonable.” Less than a quarter (23.2%) of respondents reported that school lunches are at least “somewhat expensive.”

Importance of healthy eating/fresh foods
Parents overwhelmingly agree that it is important/extremely important for school lunches to include fresh fruits and vegetables and protein-rich foods, but do not think this need is currently being met.

Parental comments regarding the importance of preparing fresh foods:
“Many days the food is not cooked in school. The food is warmed and served or thawed and served.”
“There’s not enough good fresh food (not just oranges and mushy red delicious apples).”
“They need to make more things from scratch. They buy everything pre made.”

How would you rate the cost of school meals at your oldest child’s school?

- 17.9% Somewhat expensive
- 33.0% Very reasonable
- 34.5% Somewhat reasonable
- 4.3% Best value for my dollar
- 4.9% No opinion
- 5.3% Very expensive

Is it important that fresh fruits and vegetables are available for your oldest child’s school lunch?

- 69.7% Extremely important
- 21.4% Very important
- 6.9% Neither important nor unimportant
- 1.5% Very unimportant
- 0.5% Not at all important
Taste
Perhaps unsurprisingly, the vast majority of parents (93.8%) indicate that it is very important their child thinks school meals taste good. However, fewer parents report that their child actually thinks school meals taste good, with 68.1% reporting that it depends on the day, and 19.4% reporting their child does not think school meals taste good at all.

How important is it to you that your child thinks school meals taste good?

Is it important that whole grain products are available for your oldest child’s school lunch?

Is it important that protein rich foods (like meat, fish, beans, cheese, nuts) are available for your oldest child’s school lunch?

Does your oldest child think the new school meals taste good?

Is it important that school meals are NOT preprocessed or prepackaged?
IV. Conclusion

While a majority of the parents surveyed are aware of changes to school meals and regularly communicate with their child about their school lunches, opinions are mixed on whether the changes are effective in providing students what they want and need in terms of taste and nutrition. Parents overwhelmingly agree that the school lunch should be composed of fresh, nutritious food, yet do not believe this need is being met. In addition, while almost half of the parents agree that school lunches are “healthy,” a list of common concerns emerged on survey. Among them are smaller/inadequate portions and their impacts to student performance, off site/pre-packaged meal preparation, wasting of undesirable food, and poor food taste and quality. Parents experiences, perceptions and attitudes differed by school district. An important next step to the effective implementation of this policy would be to better understand how school districts are implementing the policy. School districts which are more successful at implementation can provide important ‘lessons learned,’ while those districts which are struggling can pinpoint the areas where more support is needed.

PREPARED BY

Natoshia M. Askelson, MPH, PhD  
Assistant Research Scientist

Elizabeth Golembiewski, BA  
Graduate Student Research Assistant

Daniel Elchert, BA  
Graduate Student Research Assistant

COVER PHOTO: Christ the King School in Des Moines