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School Leaders Report Widespread Student Acceptance of Healthier Lunches, Studies Find

Majority of elementary, middle and high school students like meals offered after USDA improves nutrition standards.

Princeton, NJ, July 21, 2014—Seventy percent of elementary school leaders nationwide reported that students generally like the healthier school lunches that rolled out in fall 2012, according to a [study](#) published online today in *Childhood Obesity*. An accompanying [research brief](#) shows 70 percent of middle school students and 63 percent of high school students also like the meals. These are the first national studies to examine students' reaction to the healthier meals.

“The updated meals standards are resulting in healthier meals for tens of millions of kids,” said Lindsey Turner, lead author of the first study, and co-investigator for Bridging the Gap, a research program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF), which funded the study. “Our studies show that kids are okay with these changes, and that there have not been widespread challenges with kids not buying or eating the meals.”

The nationally representative surveys were conducted in spring 2013, roughly six months after healthier meal standards put forth by the U.S. Department of Agriculture went into effect. Researchers analyzed survey responses from elementary, middle, and high schools across the country. Most respondents were either principals or school food service providers. They were asked about students' initial reaction to the meals in fall 2012, and how things were progressing a few months afterwards.

Approximately half of respondents at elementary schools (56 percent), middle schools (44 percent), and high schools (53 percent) reported that students complained at first, but student acceptance greatly increased across all grade levels by spring 2013.

The research on elementary schools included findings about student purchases and specific menu items. A significant majority of elementary school respondents (84%) said about the same number of students, or more, were purchasing lunch during the 2012-13 school year as did during the previous school year. Seventy-nine percent said elementary school students were consuming about the same amount or more of the lunch as they did the prior year. Respondents in

elementary schools that offered vegetables most days said more students were buying meals and those that offered salads most days said students were eating more of the meals. When elementary schools never offered regular pizza (i.e., pizza made without whole grains or lower-fat toppings), respondents perceived more complaints.

Researchers also found variances based on socio-economic status (SES), school location, and grade level:

- Respondents at elementary schools with more students from lower-income families reported increases in student purchasing, compared with decreases reported from higher-SES schools.
- Respondents from urban and suburban elementary and middle schools reported fewer student complaints and less waste than did those from rural schools. Urban and suburban elementary schools also were less likely to report decreases in the number of students who purchased lunch.
- Elementary school respondents did not perceive much change in the amount of food students were discarding, but some increased plate waste was reported by middle and high schools. There was less plate waste in elementary and middle schools with a large proportion of students from lower-income families.

“The updated meal standards are a landmark achievement—they make schools healthier places for our nation’s children and are a critical step toward reversing the childhood obesity epidemic and building a Culture of Health nationwide,” said Tina Kauh, program officer at RWJF. “Policy-makers at all levels should be encouraged by these findings and should continue to support schools’ efforts to provide students with healthy meals and snacks.”

These analyses are based on two parallel studies conducted through Bridging the Gap. The survey of elementary schools was led by Turner and conducted through the Institute for Health Research and Policy at the University of Illinois at Chicago. The survey of middle and high schools was led by Yvonne Terry-McElrath and conducted through the University of Michigan’s Institute for Social Research. Both studies are summarized in the research brief: Student Reactions during the First Year of Updated School Lunch Nutrition Standards.

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About Bridging the Gap

Bridging the Gap is a nationally recognized research program dedicated to improving the understanding of how policies and environmental factors influence diet, physical activity and obesity among youth, as well as youth tobacco use. The program is jointly conducted at the University of Illinois at Chicago and the University of Michigan. For more information, visit www.bridgingthegapresearch.org. Follow Bridging the Gap on Twitter www.twitter.com/BTGresearch.

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