

# bridging the gap

Research Informing Policies & Practices  
for Healthy Youth

Research Brief  
July 2014



## Student Reactions During the First Year of Updated School Lunch Nutrition Standards

### Introduction

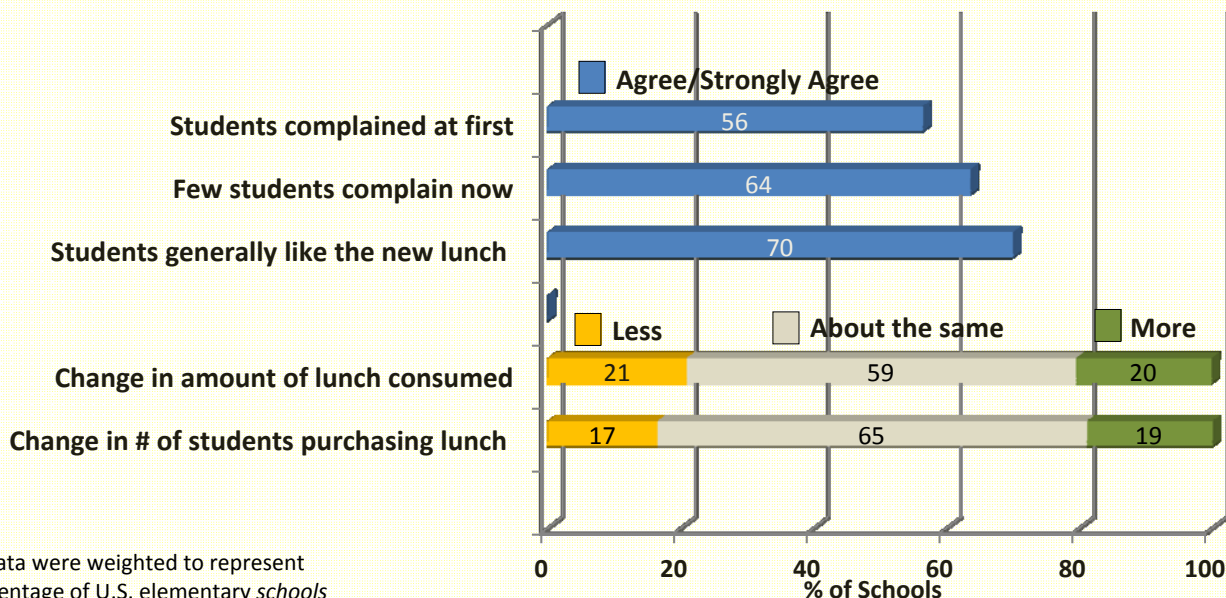
Most American children consume *more* sugar, fat and sodium and *fewer* fruits, vegetables and whole grains than recommended. School meals, which feed more than 30 million children and adolescents each year, play a major role in shaping the diets and health of young people. Updated nutrition standards for school meals, put forth by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, went into effect at the beginning of school year (SY) 2012-13. The updates significantly increased the amount of whole grains, low-fat dairy, fruits, and vegetables in the meals, and set limits for sugars, fats and sodium.

Some schools did report early challenges with implementing the standards and building student buy-in, but there have been no systematic nationwide studies examining students' reactions to the updated meal standards. This brief summarizes data from two studies<sup>1,2</sup> investigating reports from administrators at elementary, middle and high schools of students' reactions to the healthier lunches.

### Summary

- *By the spring of SY 2012-13, school administrators in U.S. public elementary, middle and high schools reported that the majority of students liked the new meals, at least to some extent.*
- *Across all grade levels, most respondents reported that students complained initially in fall 2012, but that far fewer students were complaining by the time of the surveys in spring 2013.*
- *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 at middle and high schools.*
- *Respondents from elementary and middle schools where a large proportion of the student body was eligible for free or reduced-price lunch perceived that very few of the students were discarding the meal.*

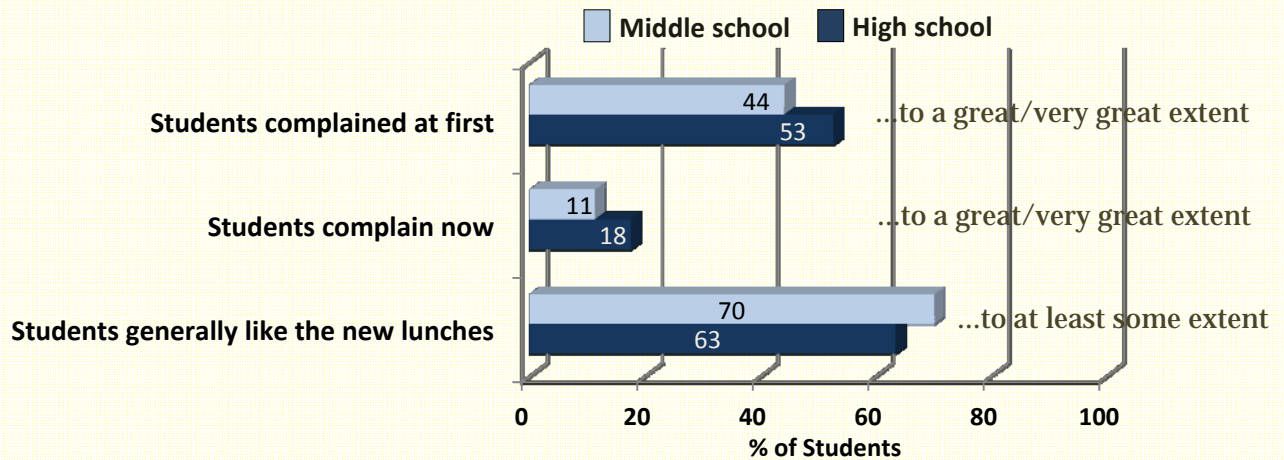
## Administrator Perceptions of Student Reactions to Updated USDA Meal Standards in U.S. Public Elementary Schools, School Year 2012-13



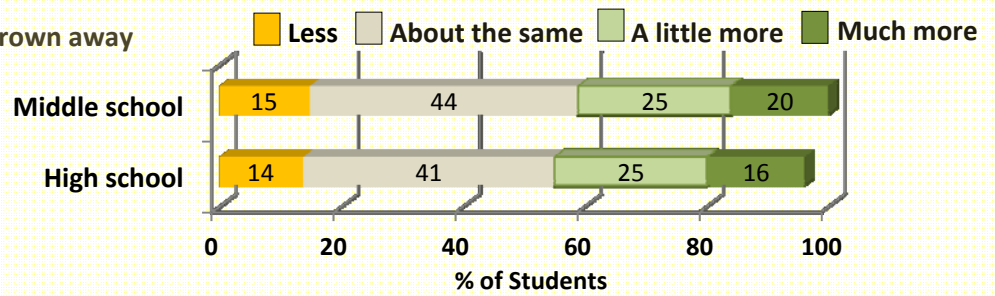
### Key Findings: Elementary Schools

- Respondents from 56 percent of public elementary schools agreed that students complained about the new lunches at first, but approximately two-thirds reported that only a few students were complaining about the lunches at the time of survey (spring 2013).
- Respondents at 70 percent of schools thought that students generally liked the new lunches.
- Compared with the 2011-12 school year (when the healthier meal standards were not in place), respondents reported that the new healthier meals had no impact on student participation in the lunch program or on plate waste from students throwing away food. Among respondents who did perceive changes, the impact was equally divided between positive and negative:
  - Sixty-five percent of public elementary schools reported no overall change in the number of students purchasing lunch, 19 percent reported an increase in student participation, and 17 percent reported a decrease.
  - Fifty-nine percent of schools reported no change in plate waste, 21 percent reported a decrease, and 20 percent reported an increase.
- Reports of elementary school students' reactions to the new meals varied significantly based on school location and the overall socioeconomic status (SES) of the student body:
  - Compared with urban and suburban schools, respondents at rural schools reported more student complaints, decreased student participation, and increased plate waste.
  - Schools in which two-thirds or more of students were eligible for free and reduced-priced lunches (FRPL) reported more student participation in the lunch program and less plate waste, compared with schools that had fewer students eligible for FRPL.

## Administrator Perceptions of Student Reactions to Updated USDA Meal Standards in U.S. Public Secondary Schools, School Year 2012-13



### Change in the amount of lunch thrown away



Note: Data were weighted to represent the percentage of U.S. middle and high school students attending schools with various outcomes.

### Key Findings: Middle and High Schools

- Student complaints about the new lunches dropped dramatically over the course of the school year. By spring 2013, administrators reported that few students complained about the new lunches to a great or very great extent (dropping from 44% of students at first to 11% at time of survey for middle schools and from 53% to 18% for high schools).
- By spring 2013, respondents perceived that the majority of students generally liked the new meals to at least some extent (70% of middle school students; 63% of high school students).
- Respondents perceived some increases in plate waste over the previous year: “a little more” waste at schools attended by 25 percent of middle and high school students; “much more” waste at schools attended by 16 percent of middle and 20 percent of high school students.
- Reports of secondary school students’ reactions to the new meals varied significantly based on grade level and other school characteristics:
  - Student complaints (initially and at the time of survey) were higher at high schools than middle schools.
  - Compared with urban or suburban middle schools, rural ones reported more student complaints (at first and at the time of survey) and were more likely to report increases in plate waste.
  - Less plate waste was reported in middle schools where 40 percent or more of students were FRPL-eligible compared with schools with fewer FRPL-eligible students.

## Conclusions and Policy Implications

Perceptions of school administrators and food service personnel at public schools across the nation suggest reasonable student acceptance of school lunches at both elementary and secondary schools following implementation of the updated USDA nutrition standards. The majority of survey respondents reported that students liked the new meals to at least some extent.

While many reported that students had complained at first in the fall, student complaints were far less common by the spring when the surveys were conducted. The generally positive reactions to updated school meal nutrition standards may indicate they are a promising strategy to improve the diets of children and adolescents. Policymakers should continue to assist elementary and secondary school officials with implementation of the updated nutrition standards.

## Methods

Data in this brief come from two parallel, nationally representative studies conducted through the *Bridging the Gap* research initiative: the elementary school-level *Food and Fitness* study, and the middle- and high school-level *Youth, Education, and Society* study. For both studies, mailed questionnaires were sent to school administrators in spring 2013. Resulting measures are based on the perceptions of school administrators and school food service personnel.

## About Bridging the Gap

*Bridging the Gap* is a nationally recognized research program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation dedicated to improving the understanding of how policies and environmental factors affect diet, physical activity and obesity among youth, as well as youth tobacco use. For more information, visit [www.bridgingthegapresearch.org](http://www.bridgingthegapresearch.org) and follow us on Twitter: @BTGresearch.

## Suggested citation

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## References

<sup>1</sup>Turner L, Chaloupka FJ. Perceived reactions of elementary school students to changes in school lunches after implementation of the United States Department of Agriculture's new meals standards: minimal backlash, but rural and socioeconomic disparities exist. *Childhood Obesity* 2014;10(4). DOI: 10.1089/chi.2014.0038

<sup>2</sup>Terry-McElrath YM, Colabianchi N, O'Malley PM, Johnston LD. *First Year of USDA School Lunch Meal Standards: Findings from US Secondary Schools*. Youth, Education and Society Occasional Paper No. 7. Ann Arbor, MI: Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan; 2014. <http://yesresearch.org/publications/occpapers/YESOccPaper7.pdf>

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