

Universal School Lunch in NYC Year One

Insights from High School Cafeterias



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Background: The Importance of School Lunch

New York City has one of the highest concentrations of wealth in the world. Yet, nearly 1 in 4 children experience food insecurity; and in the 2016-17 school year, nearly 80% of the City's public school students came from families with incomes low enough for the children to qualify for free or reduced price school meals.^{1,2} Many of these children rely on school food programs for their daily nutrition. As part of our mission, CFA strives to identify and promote strategies that improve access to nutritious food, including through school meal programs.

Child health advocates and NYC's Office of Food and Nutrition Services (OFNS, formerly the Office of SchoolFood) administrators recognize participation in school breakfast and lunch as critical, not only to benefit students' well-being and academic success, but also to help families meet their household food budgets. Research has linked children's participation in school food programs to positive health and academic outcomes.

For nearly four decades, the founders of Community Food Advocates (CFA) and their partners have advocated for free school lunch for NYC public school students.³ Prior

In the first year of Universal School Lunch, an additional 26,000 students ate lunch daily

to the 2017-18 school year, the Department of Education (DOE) offered lunch at no charge – without regard to family income – only to students at middle schools and at a handful of elementary and high schools. That left

hundreds of thousands of students, many from families with incomes just above the eligibility level, who still had to pay a fee for school lunch, which prevented many from participating and stigmatized those who ate free meals.

Therefore, we applaud DOE's decision to offer free school lunch to all students in every public school as of September 2017. Universal School Lunch (USL) eliminates the poverty stigma of the program, provides financial relief for families, and removes a number of administrative burdens.

CFA assessed the impact of the first year of USL in high schools, where participation in school lunch is traditionally lowest. This report describes our findings from visits to over 100 NYC high schools, most of which were in their first year of USL implementation.⁴

¹ FoodBank for New York City's Meal Gap 2016 Trends Report

² In 2016-2017, annual income eligibility for a family of 3 was \$26,208 for free and \$37,296 for reduced price meals.

³ Breakfast became free for all NYC students in the 2003-2004 school year.

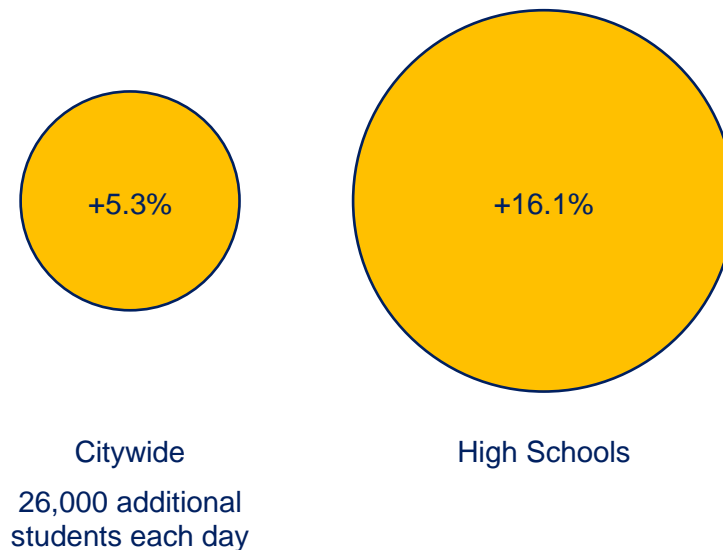
⁴ A handful of schools CFA visited had established free lunch for all through the federal "Provision 2" option prior to the 2017-2018 school year.

Citywide Impact of Universal School Lunch

Prior to USL, in the 2016-17 school year, school lunch participation citywide was approximately 59% across all grades. When isolating the data by grade levels, the average participation in high schools was below 35%; in middle schools it was 55%; and in elementary schools it was 70%.

In the 2017-18 school year, the first year of Universal School Lunch (USL), an additional 26,000 students ate school lunch daily on average.⁵ This represents a 5.3% increase citywide over the previous year. In high schools, where participation tends to be lowest, participation increased by 16.1%. (See Figure 1 and Appendix A.)

Figure 1. Percent change in Average Daily Participation (ADP) in school lunch in the first academic year of USL (2017-2018), compared to the previous year (2016-2017).



The increased participation in the first year of USL is an accomplishment. This change was achieved with limited promotion, but to reach its full potential there needs to be a dedicated investment of resources. DOE must commit funds for an ongoing innovative, sustained social marketing effort, with tailored approaches and messaging that reaches all members of the school community.

⁵ Increased participation increases federal reimbursement to the City. CFA estimates that NYC DOE received an approximate \$16 million increase in federal reimbursements during the first year of USL.

School Visits in the 2017-2018 Academic Year

The selected schools for CFA's 2017-2018 school visits are from across all five boroughs and reflect New York's cultural and economic diversity.

CFA's staff conducted observations and interviews during visits to 132 high schools in 54 buildings throughout the City. Twenty-five schools were in single-school buildings and 107 schools were "co-located" in 29 buildings. Co-located schools share a single cafeteria but do not usually share lunch periods.

CFA staff observed lunch periods in the cafeterias and talked with OFNS staff whenever possible. CFA staff also ate school lunch with the students, observed what students consumed and discarded, and interviewed other school personnel—principals, teachers, and cafeteria supervisors—to gain additional insights. Students occasionally volunteered their opinions. CFA observed practices throughout the school and sought to identify direct and indirect contributing factors linked to student participation.

Key Findings

CFA's interviews and observations yielded six key findings that directly influence high school students' participation in the free school lunch program:

- 1** Cafeteria environment sets the tone of the school lunch experience
- 2** Enhanced, food court-style cafeterias have higher school lunch participation
- 3** Scheduling is an important factor for school lunch participation
- 4** A supportive school administration can lead to higher participation
- 5** Open campuses adversely affect school meal participation
- 6** Alternative food sales in the cafeteria compete with school lunch

The following sections further describe the key findings.

1 Cafeteria environment sets the tone of the school lunch experience

Many cafeterias are overcrowded, and students stand in long lines for food. OFNS staff are pressed to feed as many students as quickly as possible. The occasional malfunctioning of the point-of-service (POS) electronic system, where students must check in before they can get a meal, extends the wait.

One in six high schools we visited—21 schools in 10 buildings—are in non-traditional high school settings, such as former elementary schools or commercial buildings. These settings lack appropriate cafeteria facilities for high school students, and often have small and dark lunchrooms and limited kitchens.

We noted several traditional high schools with basement cafeterias that are windowless and poorly-lit. In many cafeterias, we also observed overburdened lunchroom staff with insufficient time to clean tables between lunch periods and custodial staff who did not clean the floors between lunch periods. This results in messy tables and floors, which compounds over the course of several lunch periods, and creates an unappetizing environment.

An inadequate physical environment, and interactions with overextended adults, can make students feel unwelcome and disrespected. Conversely, a well-designed cafeteria that is kept clean creates an atmosphere that may entice students to eat school lunch.



Clean floors and pleasant lighting contribute to a positive dining experience.

2 Enhanced, food court-style cafeterias have higher school lunch participation

In early 2017, DOE's Office of SchoolFood (now OFNS) began rolling out the innovative Cafeteria Enhancement Experience (CEE) initiative. CFA visited ten school buildings—serving 32 separate schools—with enhanced cafeterias. The serving and eating areas were transformed to resemble a food court-style operation. Food items are attractively displayed as hot or cold options under heat lamps or in refrigerated display cases. Students may select from hot or cold display stations. Daily options include prepared sandwiches and salads, pizza, baked french “fries”,⁶ and baked popcorn chicken. Also available is the option from the standard citywide menu, which changes daily.

The food court-style design dramatically alters both food appeal and the cafeteria environment. Dining area changes included replacing traditional institutional furniture (rectangular tables with attached benches) with friendlier options, such as booths and round tables that allow students to congregate more sociably.

Some enhanced cafeterias also received renovations, such as new floors, walls, and lighting, which truly transformed the environment in the serving and eating areas.



The enhanced serving line offers more daily options and moves more quickly than the traditional line.

Importantly, food court style service allows students more latitude to self-select meals reflecting their increased autonomy as they get older. This dramatically reduces wait time, thereby increasing the time students have to eat and recharge.

For schools that were enhanced in the 2016-17 school year, lunch participation increased 30.1%, compared to before the enhancement. The increase was 33.1% for schools enhanced in the 2017-18 school year. This is approximately double the increase under USL in all high schools, which was 16.1%. (See Appendix B.)

⁶ All OFNS menu items are baked in processing, and no items are fried on site.

3 Scheduling is an important factor for school lunch participation

Overcrowded schools with inadequate kitchen and cafeteria capacity force many administrators to schedule lunch periods as early as 9:30 a.m. and end as late as 2:30 p.m. Where the lunch period is the last period of the school day, students may skip lunch and go home early.

Approximately forty-two schools visited had lunch periods that began before 10 a.m. and ended around 2 p.m.⁷ Students at the early and late extremes of lunch schedules often skip lunch because they may not be hungry yet, may eat “alternative” foods to ease their hunger, or eat after they leave school.

In assessing participation rates by school, rates are higher when students have lunch closer to noon and lower when lunch is scheduled much earlier or later.

4 A supportive school administration can lead to higher participation

CFA encountered schools where principals or other supervisors spend time in the cafeteria with students, and where faculty and staff occasionally eat school lunch. Some schools make daily PA announcements of the lunch menu; a few post menus and other promotional materials in areas inside and outside the lunchroom.

Principals who believe their own participation in school lunch improves students' acceptance of the program are also more likely to ensure that lunchroom supervision effectively maintains a socially healthy environment in the cafeteria. In addition, when principals and other administrators develop relationships with the kitchen staff, it benefits the school lunch program.

In general, in schools where principals and teachers demonstrate support for the school lunch program, we see higher participation rates than schools with non-engaged administrations.

⁷ Forty-two is a conservative figure, as we were unable to document lunch schedules in all schools we visited.

5 Open campuses adversely affect school meal participation

Administrators may limit the number of students in the lunchroom by allowing them to leave the campus for lunch, depart school early if lunch is their last period, or spend their lunch periods in the library or other school facility. A few high schools may even omit lunch periods from some students' schedules, offering them more options to meet graduation requirements or add elective courses.

Eight schools we visited had "open campus" policies that permit all students to leave the building during their lunch period. Most students opt to go out for lunch. Another eight schools had partially open campuses, where only seniors or students in upper grades may leave the school.

Student participation rates in schools with open or partially open campuses are significantly lower, typically only 15-20%, compared with approximately 38% in the 2017-18 school year for all high schools.

6 Alternative food sales in the cafeteria compete with school lunch

Federal and City regulations prohibit sales of "alternative foods" in the cafeteria during lunch periods. This includes vending machines, which are supposed to be turned off or inaccessible during lunch periods. The policies are intended to discourage students from substituting high-calorie, high-priced foods for nutritious school lunches that adhere to dietary requirements.

Despite alternative food sale regulations, some schools regularly sell food and beverage items in the cafeteria through school stores, student and PTA fundraisers, or special events during lunch. Administrators often turn a blind eye to these practices because the funds raised may support student activities, supplement their schools' budgets, or be used to purchase otherwise financially out-of-reach, much needed items.



Cafeteria garbage at lunchtime

Sale of alternative foods during lunch may lead students to consume items that are less nutritious than what is offered by OFNS and can perpetuate stigma of the school lunch program.

Is it the Food?

Food quality issues are the most often heard criticism when students, parents, and school staff talk about school lunch. We find the term “quality” is usually referring to three related, but different, issues: appeal, taste, and nutritional value.

Our experience indicates that while there is work to be done to improve school food, the blanket criticism of quality is often misplaced. It is a remnant of decades of policy, before universal free school lunch where children were separated by income in the cafeteria. The poverty stigma of the program extended to the food itself.

DOE purchases items of equal or better quality than foods sold to the public. Stringent USDA nutrition requirements and the New York City Food Standards require schools to serve foods lower in salt and fat with fewer additives, are baked not fried and contain whole grains, so they may not taste quite the same as home-cooked or restaurant meals.

Sometimes malfunctioning equipment or staffing shortages leads to over- or under-cooked food items, which may impact the appeal and taste of certain items, but we did not find this to be a prevalent issue. Late deliveries, or foods of unacceptable quality that are returned, force cooks to improvise with whatever is on hand. These incidents, however, are also infrequent exceptions.



Informational signage about school food in a high school cafeteria.

Recommendations

Participation in and appreciation of school lunch by high school students is influenced by policies and practices of both OFNS operations and school administrators. The following recommendations stem from the key findings detailed in this report and offer opportunities to build on the foundation of universal school lunch.

We have found the highest levels of success in schools with administrators that value school meals and have a positive, mutually respectful relationship with OFNS staff. CFA urges OFNS and school administrators to work closely with each other to create a school food environment that is inviting and ultimately more attractive to students.

Actions for the Chancellor

- Budget capital dollars to food court style redesign all high school cafeterias, including improved lighting, seating, and fully enhanced cafeterias
- Dedicate resources to prioritize innovative and sustained marketing/communications of school food

Actions for the Office of Food and Nutrition Services

- Increase daily menu choices and allow more menu flexibility by OFNS managers and staff at the cafeteria level
- Ensure sufficient OFNS staffing
- Encourage student input through school committees, focus groups, and surveys
- Emphasize OFNS training efforts on food presentation and customer service, in addition to food service preparation
- Make more timely equipment repairs and purchases
- Facilitate teachers and other school staff in purchasing school lunch
- Work with school administrators to improve cleanliness and noise levels
- Provide school administrators with materials and approaches for promoting school meals

Actions for School-Level Administrators

- Make daily announcements about the menu and place promotional menus and posters throughout the building
- End open campus practices. Where a closed campus is not feasible, find creative ways to encourage participation, such as grab-and-go lunch options
- Program all students for a lunch period as close to the middle of the school day as possible
- To ease crowding, provide additional areas for students to consume lunch
- Eat with students. It will have an impact. Take advantage of the free school lunch option available to principals
- Assign well-trained cafeteria supervisors who are respectful of students and create a welcoming lunchroom environment
- Work with OFNS to support school based student input into menus, food choices, and other areas affecting the lunchroom
- Work with cafeteria supervisors and students to improve cleanliness and noise levels
- Adhere to regulations prohibiting sale of “alternative foods” that compete with school meals



Promotional signage outside a school.

Conclusion

In the first year of universal school lunch, high school students' participation increased 16.1%. This initial increase occurred with little or no promotional activity within schools or through public media. Some high schools doubled their participation, others experienced little or no change, and a few schools even had a decrease. Our visits to high schools helped us identify policies and practices that can encourage student participation in the lunch program, and they form the basis for our recommendations to the Chancellor, Office of Food and Nutrition Services, and school administrators.

School meal programs are not often prioritized, especially in high schools. Yet, nutrition is essential for learning and thriving in school, and school meals can make a significant contribution to the overall health and mental development of students. With NYC offering free breakfast and lunch for all students, participation in school meals can also alleviate financial stress for families. The school meal programs deserve increased attention and support from the entire education community.



Appendix A

Participation in school lunch in the first academic year of USL (2017-2018), compared to the previous year (2016-2017).

	ADP⁸	ADA⁹	% Participation
CITYWIDE			
2016-2017	570,937	969,477	58.9%
2017-2018	596,738	962,234	62.0%
% Change			5.3%
HIGH SCHOOLS			
2016-2017	73,340	221,442	33.1%
2017-2018	84,718	220,417	38.4%
% Change			16.1%
CITYWIDE, not including High Schools			
2016-2017	497,597	748,035	66.5%
2017-2018	512,020	741,817	69.0%
% Change			3.8%

Appendix B

Participation in school lunch before and after cafeteria enhancement.

	ADP	ADA	% Participation
CAFETERIAS ENHANCED 2016-2017 SCHOOL YEAR			
Before	4,531	11,401	39.7%
After	6,160	11,917	51.7%
% Change			30.1%
CAFETERIAS ENHANCED 2017-2018 SCHOOL YEAR			
Before	11,287	27,373	41.2%
After	14,307	26,063	54.9%
% Change			33.1%

Data provided by the Department of Education Office of Food and Nutrition Services.

⁸ ADP: Average Daily Participation

⁹ ADA: Average Daily Attendance