



# Nutrition and Schools

*Youth and Their Parents Speak Out*



CHILDREN'S ALLIANCE

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Children's Alliance

2017 E. Spruce St.  
Seattle, WA 98122  
1-800-854-KIDS

P.O. Box 3063  
Spokane, WA 99210  
509-747-7205

<http://www.childrensalliance.org>

This report is available on the web at <http://www.childrensalliance.org/publications/reports.htm>.

## INTRODUCTION

The Children's Alliance is a statewide member-based child advocacy organization working to change public policies, priorities and programs so that all children have what they need to thrive. The Alliance acts as a voice on behalf of children in Olympia, mobilizes child advocates around the state, and connects families and communities to programs that benefit children. The Alliance's staff work on a number of children's issues including poverty, health, nutrition and hunger, and improving the foster care and juvenile justice systems. The goals of the Alliance's nutrition and hunger work are to protect and increase funding for school meal programs and other federal food programs, increase access, improve program quality, and decrease the administrative red tape associated with applying to and operating the programs. We also provide resources and technical assistance to school districts and communities around the state to help get school meal programs started.

According to the Washington State Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, almost 37% (364,803 out of 986,274) of children enrolled in Washington's public schools qualify for free or reduced price meals through the School Breakfast and National School Lunch Programs. Nationally, participation in school meal programs has decreased over the past 20 years. <sup>1</sup> School meal programs are an important source of good nutrition for school-aged children. Participation in the National School Lunch Program is associated with higher average intakes of many key nutrients, both at lunch and over 24 hours. <sup>1</sup> And research has shown that participating in the School Breakfast Program helps children perform better academically. <sup>2</sup>

To assist us in our work, we wanted to hear from youth and parents about school nutrition, healthy eating and barriers to participation in school meal programs. The following report highlights key findings from six focus groups conducted in Spokane, Tacoma, and Sunnyside, Washington, among families enrolled in the free or reduced lunch program at their local public high school. In each location, we conducted one group among high school students, ages 14-18, and another group among parents and guardians of high school students. The information gathered in the focus groups does not necessarily indicate widespread support of or opposition to ideas or concepts but does provide general impressions and opinions. The groups were held in April and May 2003.

## KEY FINDINGS

### Overview of Student Eating Habits

Parents of high school-age students in the focus groups acknowledged that their children generally have poor eating habits and little interest in improving them. Parents and students both report that students generally eat whatever they want without much if any thought to its impact on their health or contribution to proper nutrition. With the exception of student athletes, students do not seem to make a connection between nutrition - what they eat - and their own health or sense of physical well-being.

I just don't worry about what I eat. What I eat is what I eat and that's how I do it.  
– Tacoma student

Both parents and students readily acknowledge how much junk food and soda students purchase and consume at school, from a la carte lines in the school cafeteria, from food carts stationed around the school, from vending machines, and from student stores.

Sometimes she drinks three pops at school. In between classes she buys a pop because that's the easiest to buy. There are no juices.  
– Yakima parent

### *Breakfast*

While the parents and many students say they know the value of eating breakfast, generally half the students in each region report that they skip this meal. It appears that parents are aware that their high schoolers are often skipping breakfast. The two most often cited reasons for skipping breakfast are that the students do not have time in the morning and that the school-provided breakfasts do not taste good. Some students report that they would have to eat at 6:00 a.m. to get to school on time, and some do not feel hungry that early in the morning, while others say their buses or rides arrive too late for them to get a school breakfast.

A lot of times I'll get up late and I'll go to school...and see if I can make it to the breakfast line. Then it closes before I get there. I can't eat anything. So I have to wait until lunch.  
– Sunnyside student

The majority of students at Spokane and Tacoma report having a mid-morning snack. Fewer students report doing so in Sunnyside, where eating in class is strictly prohibited, school vending machines sell only drinks, not candy or snacks, and there are no convenience stores or fast food restaurants within walking distance of campus. Those Sunnyside students who have a mid-morning snack say they have to “sneak it in.” In all cases, the students’ mid-morning snacks are generally of low nutritional value, including candy, cookies, crackers, chips, Pop-Tarts, sugared fruit snacks, and pretzels.

### *Lunch*

Most students eat lunch regularly, with their lunch choices including chicken nuggets, nachos, pizza, corn dogs, fries, cookies, chips, spaghetti, hamburgers, deli and sub sandwiches, Cup-O’ Noodles, and burritos. Only a few students say they intentionally choose healthier fare, describing as healthier choices items such as deli and sub sandwiches, prepared salads, chicken or teriyaki beef, and yogurt.

It is important to note that the children do not get these items only from the free and reduced lunch line in the school cafeteria. They also buy their lunch at the school store, the a la carte lines in their cafeterias, school vending machines, and off-campus fast food restaurants or convenience stores. Virtually no student packs a lunch from home, an act described as “geeky.” While the school’s free and reduced lunch lines do not sell candy, cookies, chips, or soda, those items can be bought in school at vending machines, a la carte cafeteria lines, or the school store.

### **Overview of Student Knowledge and Views of Eating Healthy**

Students appear to have only a very general awareness of what is healthy to eat, without much knowledge of specifics about healthy food choices. When asked if they ever thought about eating wheat bread instead of white, or chicken breasts rather than legs, most students responded with blank stares. This may indicate that they have a general understanding, such as cookies are bad, vegetables are good, but have a hard time making more sophisticated distinctions.

Some students do think about healthier eating options, at least occasionally. Both students and parents report three different significant motivations for students to eat healthier diets. First is participation in organized sports, where coaches provide specific diet and nutrition advice, which student athletes and their parents try to follow during sports season to give students more energy. They say, however, that they abandon this effort when they are not in sports competition. Next is family illness, where the doctor of a parent with diabetes, a heart condition, high blood pressure or cholesterol, or other medical conditions related to diet and nutrition, has impressed on the family the importance of changing their family’s eating habits for better health. Finally, students and parents report that a desire to be thin and “look good” can be a motivator to eat

better foods. Only a few students report that they try to eat well for general good health or in order to feel better or have more energy.

If you're in sports and stuff you want to be in shape and you eat healthy food.  
– Spokane student

In addition to learning nutrition from coaches, students and parents say high schoolers learn about health and nutrition in school health classes. Parents and students have mixed views on whether or not these lessons are interesting to the students. Other sources of health and nutrition education include family, television, friends, and magazines. Some parents also say they get information from the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) or from self-help books.

### *Barriers to Healthy Eating at School*

Parents are not optimistic about the likelihood of their high schoolers eating healthier foods. However, a few students say they have tried – and would continue to try – but are thwarted by a number of factors. These factors include the feeling of being rushed, a perception that extra time is required to prepare healthy foods, lack of variety of healthy foods available, less availability and greater expense of healthy foods, peer pressure, television advertising that makes unhealthy foods desirable, and the perception that unhealthy foods are better tasting and more filling. The ready availability of junk food both in school and elsewhere and the temptation that its omnipresence creates was cited as a reason that students abandon their best intentions and buy candy, cookies, soda, or other “junk food.”

My son grabs a Mountain Dew as he walks to class. He goes to school at 7:15 and he has a Mountain Dew every morning.  
– Spokane parent

### *The School Lunch Program*

Views of school lunches are mixed. While some report that there are a variety of choices available, others feel that the food is poor quality, does not taste good, and is not fresh. They also report that portions are too small. Students are generally more critical of the quality of school lunches than are their parents.

There are always fresh fruit and vegetables every day. There's always that choice. There are the sandwiches so they can have good bread, whole wheat bread, the choice of meat and cheese and vegetables on that.

– Tacoma parent

Apart from the food itself, reports about the experience of eating lunch at school are not positive. Most students report extremely crowded cafeterias and crowded hallways where students gather to eat. They report long lines, lunch periods that are too brief, few or no chairs or tables for sitting to eat, and cafeterias that run out of preferred foods before students get to the front of the line. With the exception of Spokane, students report “mean” cafeteria staff.

I can't even walk by. I can't even get to the office because the lunch line is so long on the side of the wall.

– Yakima parent

### *The Ideal Lunch Experience*

Students and parents were asked to name aspects of the ideal lunch experience. Their statements reflect what they think is not working in the current lunch program. They would like to see cleaner and more organized lunchrooms, with more space to eat and chairs so students can eat at a table. They would like to see more attractive lunchrooms, with student art, natural lighting, flowers, and outdoor dining areas. They would like to see the food options be fresher, better tasting, and of better quality, as well as more nutritious, more varied, more plentiful, and in bigger portions. They think students need more time to eat lunch and shorter lines to give them more time to eat and socialize. They also feel that the cafeteria employees should be nicer, that everyone should receive free lunch, and that students should be able to apply their free lunch credits to the a la carte lines in the cafeteria.

### **Parent Views of the School Lunch Program**

#### *The Free and Reduced Price Lunch Program*

Despite various complaints about the food quality and eating experience, parents are particularly grateful for the financial help of the free and reduced lunch program. They say that they feel reassured knowing their children can get a hot meal for lunch.

Most parents say that they learned about the free and reduced price lunch program from a paper sent home with their children or when they registered their children for

school. Some parents in Spokane mentioned other sources including a daycare provider and an employee at the unemployment office. Most parents think the application is easy to complete, although some complain that the print is too small and the application is difficult to complete for those with limited English.

Last year, or the year before, I didn't qualify. Some days my kids wouldn't eat because there was no money. So it does help me a lot because then your children are eating. They go to school and you feel comfortable that you know your children are eating.  
– Yakima parent

Social stigma against students participating in the free and reduced meal options seems minimal at schools with high participation rates in the programs, though it is more significant at schools with lower participation rates. Students in all groups report that there are privacy problems in terms of their participation in the free and reduced program, with several ways in which other students find out which students are, or are not, in the program. In Sunnyside, parents report that some families do not apply to the program out of concern it may hurt their immigration status.

I'm a counselor at the high school and a lot of kids don't apply because they feel a stigma.  
– Tacoma parent

### *Voicing Complaints About the School Lunch Program*

Most parents say that if they have a complaint about the school lunch program they would tell the principal, the superintendent, or a teacher. While the parents generally feel comfortable voicing their complaints, they do not necessarily feel their efforts will generate results. Some parents feel less comfortable complaining about the food service because of a language barrier and concern about retaliation against their children if the parents complain too much.

### *Junk Food Ban and Other Reforms in Schools*

Students who attend schools with vending machines say they buy snacks and drinks from these machines often – more often than their parents generally believe. Almost all students use their allowance or work money to make these purchases, rather than money given by their parents for that purpose. Students also often buy food at the student store, where, like the vending machines, snacks tend to be non-nutritious and include candy, chips, and soda.

Opinion is mixed as to the impact of a ban on junk food and beverages in schools. Students are generally strongly opposed to a ban, saying they should have the right to choose whether to buy those items or not, and stating that if not available at school, they would simply buy them elsewhere before, during, and after the school day. Both students and parents also talk about the importance of the funds generated by the vending machines for school sports and other activities.

Parents are more likely to support a ban. They say that if healthy snacks and beverages are the only option available, their children will buy them because of the convenience, although they think students would buy a lesser amount of healthy snacks compared to their current volume of junk food purchases. Parents acknowledge that students would continue to buy junk food off campus.

There is nothing wrong with choices; it's what they give them for choices. A few choices are good. But they don't need choices of junk. Nobody does.  
– Spokane parent

While most students oppose an outright ban, they generally support reducing the amount of unhealthy items and increasing healthy choices. Students say they would probably choose to buy healthier selections if they were available – albeit less often than they purchase junk food in the vending machines and student store.

...As long as they replaced it with something healthy, I don't see the problem.  
– Sunnyside student

Both students and parents believe that a pricing program that prices healthy items significantly below the prices of the unhealthy items would encourage students to make the healthy choice. However, the students acknowledge that what they buy would still largely depend on what they feel like eating at the moment, and that ready availability is one of the strongest determinants of their food choices.

## ADDITIONAL INFORMATION ABOUT THE RESEARCH

### *Differences Between the Three Regions*

Students in the Spokane group attended one of four public high schools in Spokane. These students are non-Hispanic whites and attend schools in an urban environment. Parents were from the same schools and were also non-Hispanic whites. All four schools have open campuses, though more students left campus for lunch at schools that have fast food restaurants in easy walking distance than at those that do not. The proportion of the student body that participates in the free and reduced school lunch programs varies among these schools, with two schools at about 25 percent participation, one school at about 45 percent, and another school at more than 60 percent of the student body enrolled in the program.

Sunnyside is an agricultural area in the central part of Washington near Yakima. Students and parents in these groups were Latino. The students and parents were all from Sunnyside High School, which has an open campus. About half of the high school students participate in the free and reduced lunch program. The parent focus group in Sunnyside was conducted in Spanish to best guarantee a full understanding of the issues being discussed. Their comments were then translated into English. A Latino moderator who is a native Spanish speaker conducted both the student and parent groups in Sunnyside.

Tacoma is an urban/suburban area just south of Seattle. Students and parents were from the Mount Tahoma and Lincoln High Schools. Both high schools have closed campuses. These groups were very diverse. Participants were African-American, Latino, non-Hispanic white, Asian, Pacific Islander, and Native American. Both schools have high participation rates in the free and reduced lunch program.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### Make breakfast and lunch available in every school

- A mandate passed by the Washington state legislature in 1989 requires all schools in which 40% of children are eligible for free or reduced price meals to operate the School Breakfast Program. Since 1993 the state legislature has supported the School Breakfast Program by creating a pool of funds to supplement federal reimbursement and to provide start-up and expansion grants to districts. While 85% of schools in Washington operate a School Breakfast Program, there are still 287 schools that do not – 155 of which are elementary schools.
- There is no mandate for schools to operate the National School Lunch Program. While most schools do offer the program, 55 do not – 24 of which are elementary schools.
- We recommend that every school operate the School Breakfast and National School Lunch Programs. Efforts must also be made to promote the programs and to make the programs accessible to all students. Schools can take an additional step and offer breakfast free to all children through Provision 2 of the federal program. We also encourage schools to explore alternative methods to breakfast service such as breakfast in the classroom, grab-n-go breakfast, or breakfast after first period.

### Set standards for foods and beverages sold outside the school meal programs

- While federal regulations require school meals to be consistent with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, there are no reasonable standards for food and beverages sold outside the school meal programs (competitive foods) in vending machines, school stores, a la carte lines and for fundraising purposes. However, USDA does allow states to develop their own standards for competitive foods. Most of what is sold outside the school meal programs is high in calories, fat and added sugars. This not only contributes to overall poor eating habits but also sends a conflicting message to students about the importance of healthy eating. In addition, the sale of junk food and soda in schools undermines participation in the school meal programs.
- We recommend that reasonable nutrition standards be set at the state level for food and beverages sold in competition with the school meal programs. Individual school districts can and should set their own policies above and beyond these standards. This would insure that ALL children have access to healthful food and beverages in school and would increase participation in the school meal programs.

### Improve school meal quality and the school meal environment

- Although schools have made significant progress in meeting USDA nutrition requirements since the mid-1990s there is still much work to be done. Nationally, more than three quarters of schools operating school meal programs do not meet the requirement of no more than 30% calories from fat.<sup>3</sup> Competitive food sales, overcrowded and chaotic cafeterias, and limited time to eat decreases participation

in the school meal programs significantly. This in turn affects their financial viability and ability to offer high quality nutritious items to those students who purchase a federally reimbursable meal.

- We recommend improvements continue to be made in the school meal programs to insure that they meet federal nutrition standards. In addition, we encourage school districts to set policies and make changes to improve the school cafeteria environment, reduce the stigma associated with free and reduced price meals, limit marketing of non-nutritious foods, provide students with adequate time to eat, and limit access to unhealthful food and beverages sold in competition with the school meal programs.

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## RESOURCES

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