

FROM MIDDLE SCHOOLS TO ALL SCHOOLS:

Maximizing Free School Lunch in New York City



Community Food Advocates

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Introduction

The announcement of the “Free School Lunch for All” initiative on September 6, 2017 makes a historic change to New York City’s school lunch program by eliminating a decades-long policy that has separated children by income in school cafeterias. Under the prior system, poverty stigma plagued the program and led to various forms of “lunch shaming,” and consequently tainted student views of the program and negatively impacted participation, especially among older students.

Universal School Lunch (USL) increases student participation in cities and schools throughout the country where it is implemented. In NYC, we have already seen a significant increase in participation in the first two months of citywide implementation with 40,000 additional students eating each day. While this is very important, it is only just the beginning.

This report describes NYC’s pilot experience with USL in “stand-alone” middle schools that began in the 2014-15 school year. We hope our findings will be used to develop a citywide advertising/social marketing campaign and a set of centrally coordinated school-based practices to be required in all schools.



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Summary

In September 2014, USL first became available in all stand-alone middle schools. During the first two years of USL, overall student participation increased. To sustain this increase and further improve participation during the 2015-16 school year, Community Food Advocates visited 20 middle schools to identify best practices as well as challenges and barriers to the program. This report presents our findings (based on our observations and interviews in the second year of New York City's middle school initiative) and offers recommendations to ensure that there is not simply an increase in participation, but that strategy and sustained efforts are put into place by the Department of Education to ensure NYC realizes the full the impact of USL.



Identifying Schools to Visit

Of 247 standalone middle schools, we targeted 13 schools that experienced significant increases and seven schools where participation had decreased since lunch became universal.

During our school visits we met with administrators (primarily principals), SchoolFood personnel, and students. At each school, we visited the cafeteria during lunch periods to observe the program's implementation and talk to students where feasible.



Data Collection and Analysis

We developed questions for both categories of schools visited, slightly tailoring the questions to reflect the position of the individual we were interviewing. Detailed notes were taken for each visit. We condensed and arranged the responses on a spreadsheet, and added comments to reflect our own subjective observations.

Our questions and observations were centered on understanding why schools experienced either an increase or a decrease in participation since adopting USL. Based on this, we analyzed the data by grouping similar responses and observations across schools into a few main categories.

Findings

Findings in Schools with an Increase in Participation (13 schools)

Our respondents included principals, assistant principals, parent coordinators, school aides, secretaries and kitchen staff. We asked each of them questions about student participation in order to understand why participation increased in their particular school. The following reasons were the most common responses and/or observations across the 13 schools in this category:

1. *Lunch is free*

At five schools, the respondents explicitly stated that they believed USL was either the reason or one of the reasons for higher student participation. While CFA had verified that participation in all stand-alone middle schools increased overall, the presence of ‘free school lunch’ alone did not explain the exceptional increases in participation in these schools and/or account for the variation across schools in general. We found that other practices in addition to USL contributed to the increases. These are explored below.

2. *Communication and Engagement with Students and their Families*

At least one respondent in each of the 13 schools emphasized the importance of engaging with students and their families when implementing USL or any new program or policy in general. More specifically, the respondents talked about cultivating an environment in which schools could more effectively communicate with the students and parents.

Utilizing morning announcements. In the first year of USL in middle schools, one principal actively advertised the program to her students and parents. She had the menu included in the daily morning announcements in addition to reminding students that lunch was now free for everyone. After adopting USL, her school’s participation percentage rate went from the 60th percentile to the 90th percentile.

Informing parents. A principal based in upper Manhattan makes it his mission to ensure his parents know about the program. He uses parent meetings, PTA meetings, and other school events to remind the parents that their children have access to free school lunch.

Regularly encouraging the students to take lunch. During lunch periods, many administrators in the schools with increased participation actively try to convince students to go on the lunch line. For example, the Washington Heights principal speaks with reluctant students and directs them to the line. A school aide from a Bronx middle school goes to each lunch table to tell non-participants to take a lunch.

A school aide in another school based in mid-Manhattan encourages his students to eat by appealing to their sense of aesthetics. He believes more students eat when the items are set up in a visually appealing way. For example, on the day of our visit the cafeteria staff had poured

chocolate milk in a pretty glass bottle and arranged the sandwich and the sweet potato fries on a sample plate. The aide explains that because students eat with their eyes, the food needs to be dressed up in way that seems more appetizing to children.

3. *Administrators themselves participate in the program to encourage more of their students to take a lunch.*

At ten schools, administrators actively promoted USL by example. Some principals frequently eat school lunch with their students in the cafeteria. Other administrators such as assistant principals and deans often eat school lunch to encourage more students to participate.

One principal explained that children are more likely to try the food if they see an adult they trust eat it as well. In another school, even if the principal does not always have enough time to eat with his students, he still tries to go down to lunchroom to take a lunch tray. Interestingly, both schools have a majority of students from families with higher incomes and the participation rates were unusually high (above 90%).

In addition to administrators, teachers, school aides, and Parent Coordinators can influence students to eat. In a middle school located in the Bronx, one of the school aides was the champion for the lunch program in her school where most students qualify for free and reduced price lunch. The school aide told us that her students are picky so she tries the food in front of them and always exhibits a positive response.

4. *Maintain consistent positive communication with cafeteria manager and kitchen personnel.*

One of common patterns that was noted in the wide range of middle schools with participation increases is the positive relationship between the program's "champion(s)" and the cafeteria manager and kitchen staff.

This was especially visible in a Bay Ridge middle school where the assistant principal and the cook spoke almost every day. The AP also helps the cafeteria staff by ensuring that students throw out their garbage and help keep the lunchroom clean.

Another school principal has a rapport with the cook and provides feedback to her about particular food items that he likes.

5. *Structuring cafeteria operations to ensure school lunch remains a primary option.*

Limiting outside food in the cafeteria (i.e. bake sales and school stores). Some of schools in the increased participation category did have bake sales, but these were usually held less frequently (monthly rather than twice a week as in the case of one of the schools with decreased participation).

One principal discouraged students from bringing outside food into the cafeteria. He upholds the regulation prohibiting competitive food sales in the cafeteria. He knows that if given the choice, his students would rather buy junk food than take school lunch, a more nutritious option. When outside food is available for sale or present in the cafeteria environment it further separates out and stigmatizes students who do eat free lunch.

Guiding the students directly to the lunch line upon entering the cafeteria. A few schools mentioned that before USL many of the students who qualify for free lunch hesitated to go on line for lunch to avoid drawing attention. One assistant principal reported that to address this issue, she steers everyone to the line. This way, students can participate without feeling the stigma around taking a free lunch.

Findings in Schools with a Decrease in Participation (7 schools)

The 7 middle schools we visited were experiencing challenges that contributed to lower participation rates in lunch. The most common reasons given and/or observed are listed below:

1. Little to No Promotion of USL

Six schools did little promotion beyond sending backpack notices home at the beginning of the year. (One principal was initially unsure and had to check with his secretary before confirming that the notices had been sent to parents.) The lack of school-based outreach likely reflects that the school's leading administrators did not prioritize or value the program.

2. Attitudes about Lunch

At six schools, administrators believed that either low food appeal and/or lack of options on the menu were the reasons for their school's decrease in participation. Interestingly this was also present in schools that had an increase in participation.

3. Open Campus

Schools that have "open campus" policies permit all, or some, students to leave the building during their lunch periods. This practice was put in effect decades ago when students were able to go home for lunch (a non-working parent was presumed to be home) but has largely been discontinued over time. However, some high schools and a few middle schools allow some students, if not all, to go out for lunch—often as a "perk" for good behavior. In our sample, two middle schools with decreased participation have open campus policies, which contributes to their lower participation. On the other hand, we visited a middle school that had changed its open campus policy to allow only 'honor roll' students to go out for lunch, limiting the number of students leaving the building during lunch time, resulting in an increase in participation.

4. Scheduling, Crowding

Some schools had cafeteria issues that appear to contribute to lower participation rates. At one school, the dean spent the first 20 minutes roll calling to ensure that all the students scheduled for that lunch period were present. This did not leave enough time for every student to go on line for lunch. At two other schools, overcrowding and scheduling was the problem. One principal stressed that she had to share the cafeteria with another school and it was hard to schedule lunch periods without experiencing overcrowding. Long waits resulted in many students not even going on line.

5. School stores and frequent PTA bake sales.

PTA bake sales and school candy sales can significantly discourage student participation if they are allowed to operate more frequently than once a month. One school reported that they had a bake sale or school store every Monday and Friday.

Other Findings

Every school visited stated that there was no change in the income form collection. All the schools made serious efforts to collect 100% of their students' income forms—primarily for Title I allocation purposes. USL implementation had no effect on the return rates.

Inflexibility in portion size. Some middle school administrators raised concerns about the small portion size—many students ask for seconds. Particularly, in schools with higher participation rates, administrators claimed that some students were constantly hungry and the portions were not big enough and seconds are not allowed. Because students vary in size and have different nutritional needs, they felt that there should be more flexibility in portion sizes.

Recommendations

Our findings reflect the important role school communities play in eliminating barriers and making school lunch more accessible to students. From our visits to schools with an increase in participation, we identified school-based practices that ensure the success of USL in their schools. In contrast, in schools where participation decreased, we found a range of challenges that discourage more students from participating.

The following are recommendations for all schools:

1. School-Based Actions:
 - Discontinue open campus policies
 - Comply with federal regulations by prohibiting sales of other foods during lunch periods
 - Limit fund-raising days and try selling items other than food
2. For Parents:
 - Send regular text messages to parents, robocalls, and backpack notices
 - Promote the program during parent-teacher conferences, and other parent meetings
 - Have taste-testing samples at parent meetings and conferences

Finally, recognizing that school lunch is for students', their opinions and suggestions are crucial to the lasting success of the school lunch program, we recommend the following:

3. For Students:

- Display posters throughout the building
- Put the menus in more prominent and visible sites
- Make daily announcements of the menu on the PA system
- Provide opportunity for regular input/feedback from students (either through student councils, partnership meetings, school nutrition meetings, etc.) on menus, food, and cafeteria environment issues.

Lunch 4 Learning Campaign's Proposed DOE Communications Plan



The most critical and notable omission to the implementation of middle school USL was the lack of citywide-coordinated and comprehensive plan to promote the program.

With this year's citywide program, it is even more critical to disseminate information throughout the school community about the new lunch program that is free for all students, regardless of family income.

Therefore, we have attached an outline of a plan that was developed by the "Lunch 4 Learning" campaign partners and informed by visits and conversations with parents, students, and administrators. The plan discusses how the city can promote USL through citywide and schoolwide activities. We look forward to working with SchoolFood and DOE to implement these strategies.

Conclusion

Making school lunch free for all students (USL) increases participation among students from all income categories. Not only does USL provide better nutrition for students, but participation in the school lunch program has recently been proven to increase standardized test scores.¹

Yet, USL does not uniformly increase participation in all schools. Therefore, we identify what makes the program successful in some schools and how they differ from less successful schools.

The recommendations above are based on our observations that one of the most important factors to success is active support from the school community, usually the principal or another administrator who understands the importance of school meals to all students. When the school administration visibly supports and encourages participation, the long-standing stigma of the program is diminished.

Finally, students must play a significant role in transforming the lunch program. We know students have many opinions about school food. Effective engagement of students in improving the school food is key to its growth and success.



¹ See *Let Them Eat Lunch: The Impact of Universal Free Meals on Student Performance*, a multi-year statistical study in NYC's middle schools by Amy Ellen Schwartz and Michah W. Rothbart, of Syracuse University's Maxwell School Center for Policy Research.



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