



# California Students' Voices on School Meal Time

## Results from a Survey of California Middle and High School Students

Conducted for  
California Food Policy Advocates

By  
PerryUndem Research/Communication

With funding from  
Orfalea Foundation

*October 2013*

# Introduction

California Food Policy Advocates commissioned PerryUdem Research/ Communication to conduct a statewide survey among California middle and high school students on the topic of school meals with funding from the Orfalea Foundation. The purpose of the survey was to hear students' views toward and experiences around school meals and lunchtime. The survey was conducted among 519 public school students in grades 6 through 12 from May 17 to 31, 2013.<sup>1</sup>

## Summary

The survey results offer a unique window into students' perceptions of school meals. The results provide insight into why some students skip school meals and what might motivate them to eat the meals more often. Dissatisfaction with the food is offered as the main reason students skip school lunches, though factors such as long lines, feeling rushed, and not having enough time also impact students' ability to eat their lunch at school. The survey captures their feelings about the school cafeteria and the amount of time they have each day to eat lunch. It also reveals the kinds of feelings students experience in the afternoons after lunch, feelings such as fatigue and hunger, which can impact their ability to learn.

Key survey results include:

- More than half of the middle and high school students in the survey (53%) eat schools meals but many of them report they sometimes skip the meals.
- Students say that if meals tasted better (69%), they were offered more food choices (64%), or there were shorter lines (55%), they would eat school meals more often.
- Likewise, the top barriers to students eating school meals more often are not liking the meals (45%) and long lines to get the food (41%).
- The average lunch period for students in this survey is 36 minutes. Six in ten (61%) feel rushed during this time period and more than one-third (37%) say this is not enough time to eat. Students whose lunch period is over 45 minutes are much less likely to feel rushed.
- School cafeterias receive mixed reviews. Most students say their cafeteria is too loud (68%) and about one-third feel there are not enough places to sit (35%), that it

---

<sup>1</sup> The survey was administered online, using Knowledge Networks' probability-based panel of residents in California. A supplemental online sample was used to increase the number of responses. Parents were screened for having an eligible child in the household. The parent(s) then gave permission for their child to participate. Parents were welcomed to be present or help their child take the survey.

is not a nice place to eat and hang out (34%), and that monitors and school staff rush them (31%). More than one-quarter of students (28%) also feel that some people are embarrassed to eat in the cafeteria.

- More than half of students report feeling tired (62%), hungry (54%), or sleepy (51%) in the afternoons after lunch period.
- Throughout the survey, there are differences among student responses based on income and race, as well as some distinctions between middle and high school students. For example, lower-income and Latino students are more likely to report feeling hungry during afternoons than their higher income and white counterparts. Lower income and Latino students are also more likely to report they eat school meals on a regular basis. Offering better tasting meals at school is more important to lower-income and Latinos students in terms of motivating them to eat school meals more often.

Following are more details about these and other survey results.

## Detailed Findings

### More than half of students in the survey eat schools meals on a usual basis.

Most of the middle and high school students in the survey report they either eat a school meal or purchase snacks at the school. As Table 1 shows, 53% of students say they usually eat a “school meal,” defined as “food at school that comes as a whole meal – like a burrito with a side of vegetables or fruit, and milk.” In addition, more than a quarter (28%) eat “snacks or other things sold at school.”

Lower-income and Latino students are more likely to report they eat school meals than other students. Specifically, 70% of students with household incomes below \$50,000 report they usually eat a school meal (vs. 38% of those from households of \$50,000 or higher), while 64% of Latino students report they eat school meals on a usual basis (vs. 36% among white students). Latino students are also more likely than white students to eat snacks they buy at school (32% vs. 20%). In addition, more middle school students report eating school meals (65%) than high school students (45%).

Of those students who eat school meals, almost three-quarters (72%) had one every day in the last week they were in school but 27% report they did not eat a school meal every day. Almost half (45%) of those students who reported eating a school meal every day last week acknowledge that they sometimes skip school meals.

Finally, most students in the survey (77%) say that they eat a school meal at some point during the year and the overwhelming majority (90%) have close friends who eat school meals.

	Total (n=518)	Students from households under \$50K (n=243)
A school meal (a “school meal” means the food at school that comes as a whole meal – like a burrito with a side of vegetables or fruit, and milk).	53%	70%
Food I bring from home	41%	26%
Snacks or other things sold at school (like a slice of pizza on its own, a bag of chips, sports drinks, or other snacks).	28%	29%
Food I buy off campus	9%	7%
Nothing – I don’t usually eat lunch on school days	5%	5%
Something else	2%	2%

**Offering better tasting meals and more food choices could make school meals more appealing.**

The survey explored motivations for students to eat school meals more often. Better tasting food (69%) and having more food choices (64%) top the list for students. Shorter lines (55%) and more time to get their meal and eat it (48%) are also motivations. (See Table 2) Having better tasting meals is important to more students with household incomes less than \$50,000 (77%) and Latino students (76%) than to higher income (64%) and white (63%) students.

Table 2: Would you eat school meals more often if...

	Total (n=399)			Students from households under \$50K (n=183)		
	Yes	Maybe	No	Yes	Maybe	No
The food tasted better?	69%	19%	11%	77%	15%	8%
You had more choices for school meals?	64%	24%	11%	73%	19%	6%
The line for school meals was shorter?	55%	22%	21%	62%	21%	14%
You had more time to get your meal and eat?	48%	26%	24%	53%	24%	21%
The food was healthier?	41%	36%	21%	42%	39%	15%
More of your friends ate school meals?	24%	32%	42%	32%	28%	39%

**Barriers to school meals include disliking the meal and not having enough time to eat.**

The main reasons students sometime skip school meals or do not usually eat school meals are a dislike of the meals being served and feeling the line is too long. Also, a number of students feel they do not have enough time to eat. (See Table 3)

Table 3: Why don't you usually eat school meals?

	Total (n=358)	Students from households under \$50k (n=128)
I don't like the school meals	45%	50%
The line for school meals is too long	41%	43%
There is not enough time	30%	29%
I want to do something else during my lunch period	25%	18%
I want to eat other healthier food	20%	19%
Other reason	17%	17%
My friends do not eat school meals	11%	10%
I don't want to eat in the cafeteria or multi-purpose room	9%	9%
I'm not sure	8%	8%

When asked to choose just one main reason they do not usually eat school meals, one-third of students say they do not like the school meals (34%) and about one-fifth say the line for school meals is too long (22%). In addition, 14% say they want healthier food, 10% want to do something else during lunch period, and only 4% say they do not have enough time to eat.

The survey probed time issues for students and school meals. Students were asked – on a range from less than 30 minutes to more than an hour – how much time they have for lunch and the average time they reported is 36 minutes. For many students, this time period may not be enough. Indeed, six in ten students (61%) report feeling rushed during lunch and 37% say they do not have enough time to eat their meal (however, 61% say they have enough time to eat their meal). (See Tables 4 and 5)

Table 4: Do you ever feel rushed at lunch time?		
	Yes	No
Total (n=519)	61	39
Students with lunch times 30 minutes or less (n=245)	69	31
Students with lunch times 31-40 minutes (n=107)	64	36
Students with lunch times of 45 minutes or more (n=163)	49	51

Table 5: Do you have enough time to eat lunch during your lunch period?		
	Yes	No
Total (n=519)	61	37
Students with lunch times 30 minutes or less (n=245)	54	43
Students with lunch times 31-40 minutes (n=106)	60	39
Students with lunch times of 45 minutes or more (n=162)	74	27

### **School cafeterias receive mixed reviews from students.**

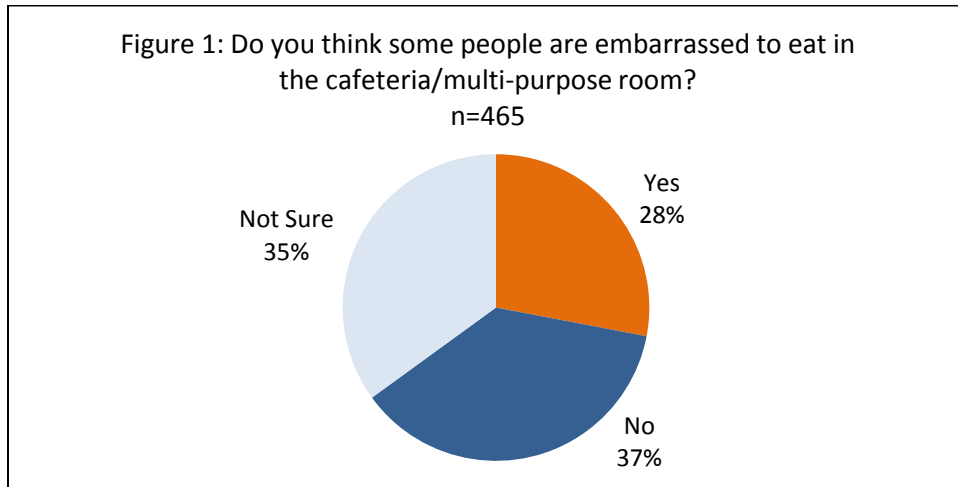
The survey asked a number of questions to learn students’ feelings about their school cafeteria. The overwhelming number of students (89%) report their school does have a cafeteria or multi-purpose room where they can eat meals while only 10% say their school does not have such a place. Two-thirds of students (65%) who report their school has a cafeteria or multi-purpose room say they are allowed to take their meals out of that space and eat elsewhere while 25% say this is not allowed and 10% do not know. Those students who sometimes or usually do not eat school meals were asked if it would matter to them if they could take meals outside of the cafeteria. In response, 24% say eating meals outside of

the cafeteria would make them more likely to eat school meals while 53% said it might make them more likely to eat school meals and 24% said it would have no effect.

Students who attend schools that have a cafeteria were then asked about the atmosphere of that space. They tend to give it mixed reviews: 68% say their cafeteria is too loud, 35% say there are not enough places to sit, 34% say that it is not a nice place to eat or hang out, and 33% say that monitors rush them. (See Table 6)

Table 6: Think about your cafeteria or multi-purpose room during lunch. (n=465)			
	Yes	No	I'm not sure
Is it ever too loud?	68	24	7
Are there enough places to sit?	54	35	10
Do monitors or other staff ever rush kids?	33	47	20
Is it a nice place to eat and hang out?	47	34	18

More than one-quarter of students (28%) feel that embarrassment about eating in the cafeteria might be an issue for some students, while 35% are not sure and 37% feel that it is not an issue. (See Figure 1)



When asked to speak for themselves – do they feel embarrassed eating in the cafeteria – only 15% say “yes” they feel embarrassed while 78% say “no” and 6% say they are “unsure.” There was no significant variation in response based on household income of students.

## More than half of students report feeling tired, hungry, or sleepy during afternoons after lunch.

Students were asked about feelings they had in the past week at school after lunch but before the end of the school day. Half or more of students say they felt tired (62%), hungry (54%), or sleepy (51%) during the afternoons. (See Table 7)

Those students living in households with incomes less than \$50,000 are more likely than their higher income counterparts (over \$50,000) to feel hungry in the afternoons (57% vs. 50%). Latino students were also more likely to report feeling hungry than white students (58% vs. 47%)

Table 7: Think about the time after your lunch period and before the end of the school day. In the past week at school, did you have any of these feelings during that afternoon time?

	Yes
Tired	62%
Hungry	54%
Sleepy	51%
Distracted	31%
Anxious/stressed	23%
Grumpy	21%

## Conclusions

This survey of middle and high school students attending public school in California gives insight into why some students might skip school meals. Disliking the food being offered and long lines to get food appear to be top barriers to eating a school lunch on a usual basis. Time pressures seem to be a factor as well – with an average lunch period of 36 minutes, many students feel rushed. The cafeteria atmosphere may also discourage some students from eating school meals. Most say it is too loud and about one-third of students feel there are not enough places to sit, that lunch monitors are rushing them, and that the cafeteria is not a nice place to eat and hang out. For some students, embarrassment eating in the cafeteria may be a barrier too.

The survey results suggest ways to motivate students to eat school meals more often. Improving the taste of the meals served at schools, offering more food choices, reducing lines, and giving students more time to eat are steps that could work. These kinds of improvements to school meals seem to be important to students. Many say they experience fatigue and hunger during the afternoons before the end of the school day. Consistently eating a school meal could help students avoid these feelings.

*This report was made possible thanks to funding from the Orfalea Foundation.*