

ACHIEVING EQUITABLE SCHOOL MEALS THROUGH A COMMUNITY-DRIVEN APPROACH

Divya Kulkarni, College of Science and Technology, Temple University
 Molly Kerstetter MPH SBS, College of Public Health, Temple University
 Yerusalem Yohannes MPH SBS, College of Public Health, Temple University
 Garima Adhikari, College of Liberal Arts, Temple University
 Gabriella M. McLoughlin PhD, College of Public Health, Temple University



This project aims to identify what works well and what needs help in the implementation and participation of the universal school meals program in the School District of Philadelphia.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

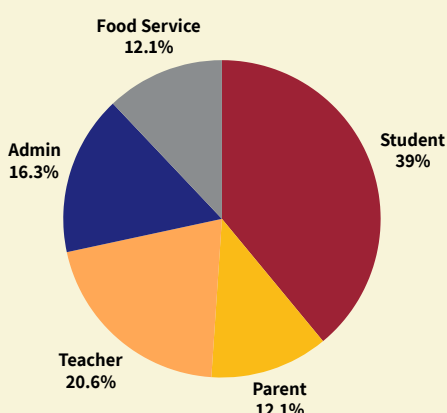
In 2020, almost 31 percent of households with children in Philadelphia County experienced food insecurity¹. Addressing the implementation and quality of meals that students count on during school is essential to maximizing consumption of nutritious meals.



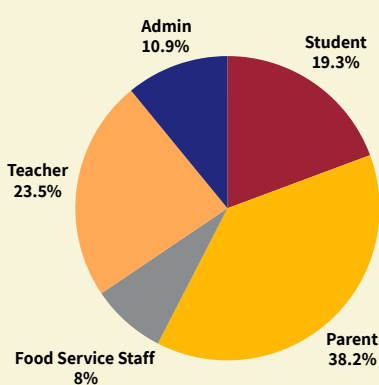
WHO ARE WE AND WHAT ARE WE DOING?

- Dr. McLoughlin’s Community-Driven Implementation Science Research Lab conducted an NIH funded study to address gaps in implementation of the Philadelphia school meals program.
- In September of 2023, our team recruited eight schools across the Philadelphia School District. They conducted surveys, interviews, and focus groups with students grades 6-12, as well as parents, teachers, climate staff, administration, and food service staff. Essential demographics and findings of this study are highlighted below.

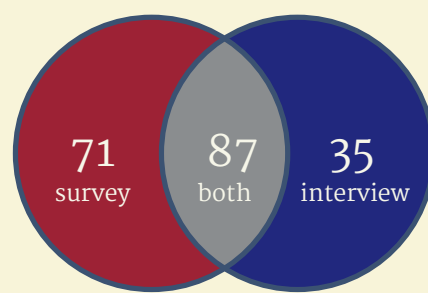
INTERVIEW PARTICIPATION



SURVEY PARTICIPATION

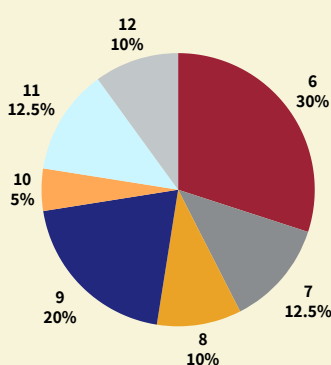


TOTAL PARTICIPATION

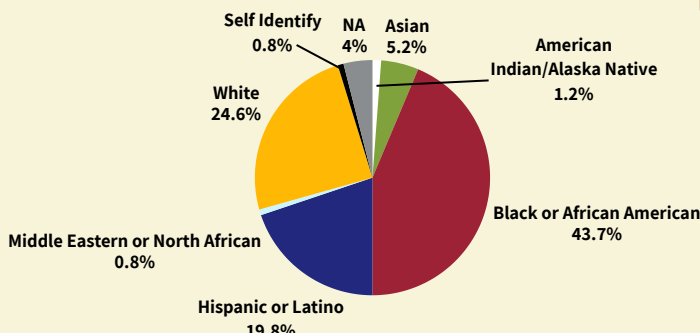


We observed over 30 meals, received 158 surveys, and conducted 122 interviews.

SURVEY SAMPLE OF STUDENTS: GRADE LEVELS



RACIAL/ETHNIC BREAKDOWN OF ENTIRE STUDY SAMPLE



Eight public schools

- Six middle schools
- Two high schools
- Six full-service kitchens
- Two satellite kitchens

IMPACTFUL QUOTES FROM PARTICIPANTS

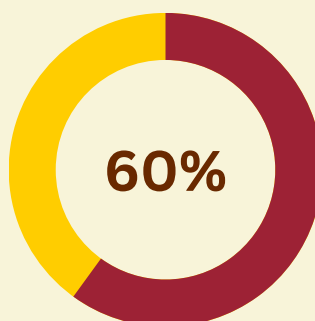
“The benefits of free lunch and free breakfast is it comes in handy because a lot of parents right now are, you know, living under their needs, you know, living paycheck to paycheck. Sometimes parents don't got, you know, food in their fridge to feed their kids. So being able to go to school and get two free meals is important.”
 (Parent)

“They call it a freebie. Yeah. It's like, oh, you're getting you're getting the free lunch. You suck.”
 (HS Students)

“We can tell after a weekend who's hungry who didn't eat at home. You can tell who doesn't eat dinner and comes in and devours breakfast.”
 (Food Service)

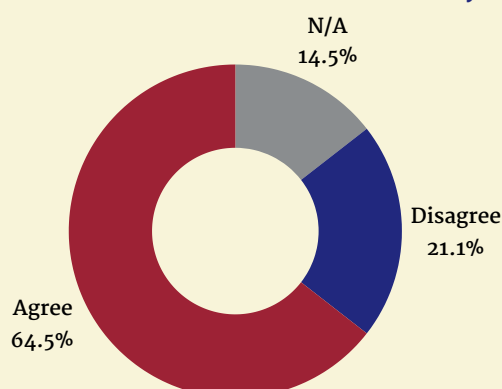
“And my students are a very vocal, and I always try to teach them to really advocate for themselves, right that you want to be heard. And I think that's something that we're doing a good job, because they will let you know that they don't like something.” (Admin)

IMPORTANT FINDINGS IN THE DATA



of school staff, including teachers, admin, and food service, feel that the school meals policy requires more work than can be accomplished with current resources available to their school

Levels of agreement when students and parents are asked if the school meals program helps the low-income students in school access healthy food:



Almost 65 % of all participants agree that the school meals program helps the most socioeconomically disadvantaged students in your local school access nutrition support.

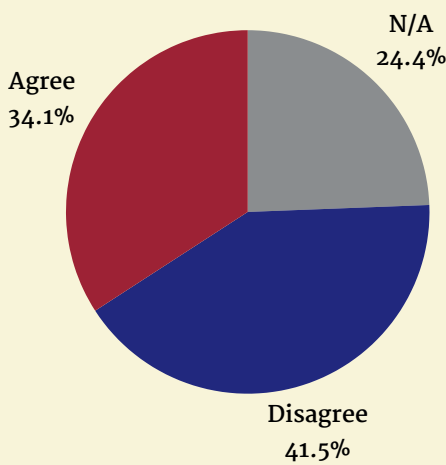
¹. Philabundance. (2022, July 20). Food Insecurity Rates for Our Service Area. Philabundance. Retrieved May 20, 2024, from <https://www.philabundance.org/food-insecurity-rates-for-our-service-area/>

MAIN TAKEAWAYS

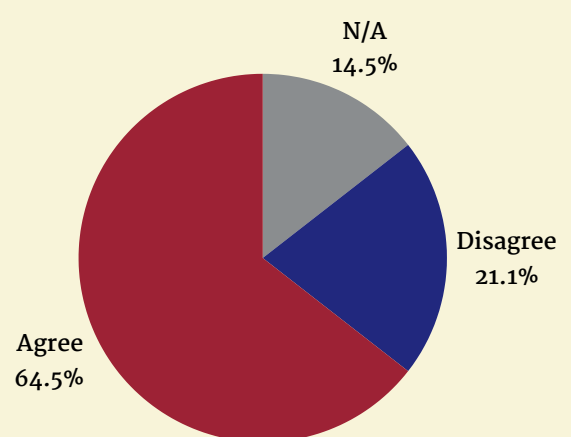


- Major barriers include the quality and cultural appropriateness of meals, a lack of resources, and stigma surrounding free meals in older grades:

Levels of agreement when students are asked if the school meals program makes students from different cultures feel included:



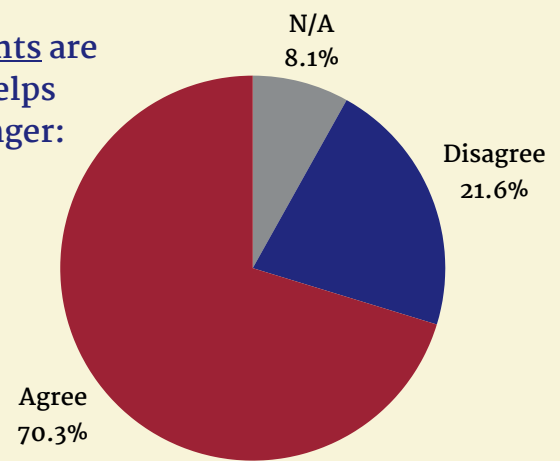
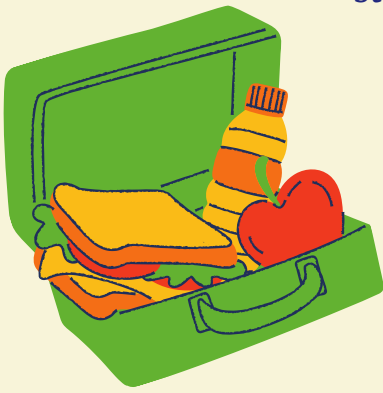
Levels of agreement when all participants are asked if the school meals program reduces stigma associated with receiving free school meals:



Questions were asked on a scale with choices ranging from strongly disagree, disagree, agree, strongly agree, and N/A. Levels of agreement were grouped for analysis purposes.

- Main facilitators are perceptions of school administrators and a definite need for school meals across all participant groups and schools:

Levels of agreement when all participants are asked if the school meals program helps students who are struggling with hunger:



CONCLUSIONS

A community-based approach to school meals allowed this research team to identify the tiers of decision making and influence that ultimately affect delivery of school meals. Engaging with students, parents, teachers, admin, and food staff helped us create a holistic picture of the school meal system:

- Factors such as access to meals, genuine implementation leaders like food staff and admin, relative culture and attitude of school towards meals are all working well.
- Factors such as quality and recipient-centeredness of meals need some work.

WHAT'S NEXT?

- We are sharing the findings from this study across the city of Philadelphia, the United States, and internationally to raise awareness of school meals.
- We are using these results to design and evaluate changes to implementation of Universal School Meals and meal policy.
- The next part of this project will explore barriers and facilitators of school meals at the district level.

ABOUT US!

We are a research Team at Temple called the Community-Driven Implementation Science lab.

What does this mean?

We do research that is driven by the needs of the community by partnering with local experts and people who are often forgotten in research.

We use a range of methods aimed at improving the delivery of evidence-based programming!

About our Community Advisory Board We led this project in partnership with our Community Advisory Board (CAB). Here are our members and their roles:

- Laura Crandall, Office of Children and Families
- Dr. Jonathan Deustch, Drexel Food Lab
- Irene Hong, Feeding Philly/Student
- Hillary Kane, PHENND/Parent
- Jacob Kurtz, Reinvestment Fund
- Rose Marone, Feeding Philly/Student
- Randy Persaud, Jefferson
- Sultan Raheem, Parent Representative

WANT TO GET INVOLVED?

We have a Community Advisory Board (CAB) and are building a community network listserv to share updates on the project. Want to get involved? Contact us here:

Contact us!

