



Center for
Applied Research and
Educational Improvement

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

Driven to Discover®

2024 Minnesota Universal School Meals Program Evaluation – Student Perspectives

March 2025

Prepared by:
Coy Carter, M.A.
Molly Illes, Ph.D.

Research, Development and Engagement to Improve Education

How to Cite this Report

Carter, C., & Illes, M. (2025). *2024 Minnesota Universal School Meals Program Evaluation – Student Perspectives*. Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement, College of Education and Human Development, University of Minnesota.

Contact Information

Molly Illes, PhD
Research Associate
Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement
College of Education and Human Development
University of Minnesota
1954 Buford Avenue, Suite 425
Saint Paul, MN 55108
Telephone: 612-227-8864
Email: milles@umn.edu
<https://carei.umn.edu/>

Table of Contents

Introduction	4
Methods	4
Survey Demographics	5
Evaluation Results: Breakfast	9
School Lunch Feedback	13
Conclusion	22

List of Figures

Figure 1 Racial Demographics of Student Survey Respondents.....	6
Figure 2 2022-2023 Free/Reduced Lunch Rates of Student Survey Respondents.....	7
Figure 3 In the last year, did you have enough food at home?	8
Figure 4 Prior to 2023-2024 observations of students denied a meal due to the lack of money	8
Figure 5 Breakfast frequency prior year.....	10
Figure 6 Breakfast frequency current year.....	10
Figure 7 Lunch frequency prior year.....	13
Figure 8 Lunch frequency current year.....	14
Figure 9 Changes to the amount of time it takes to get a meal?	16
Figure 10 Changes to the types of school meal options?	16
Figure 11 <i>Changes to the number of students eating school lunch this year versus last year</i>	17
Figure 12 <i>The amount of food served is enough to fuel me throughout the day.</i>	18
Figure 13 The meal options meet my dietary needs (like food allergies)	19
Figure 14 The meal options meet my cultural preferences.....	19
Figure 15 The meal options meet my religious needs	20
Figure 16 Student perceptions of positive outcomes.....	21

List of Tables

Table 1 Reasons students do not eat school breakfast	11
Table 2 Reasons students do not eat school lunch	15

Introduction

The Center for Applied Research and Education Improvement (CAREI) was contracted by Hunger Solutions (now part of The Food Group) to conduct a statewide evaluation of the effects of the Universal School Meals, Free School Meals for All program (H.F. No. 5, ratifying Minnesota Statutes 2022, sections 124D.111; 124D.1158; 126C.05, subdivision 3) codified by the Minnesota Legislature and signed into law by Minnesota's governor in March 2023. The program launched on July 1, 2023. The legislation funded free school meals for all students attending participating public, private or charter schools across the state. Two school districts chose not to participate in the program.

The purpose of this report is to share students' perceptions of the Free School Meals for All program during its first year, gather formative feedback for continuous improvement, and document outcomes based on survey and listening session data. This report is part of a larger evaluation that includes parent/guardian survey and listening session feedback, a second round of parent and student survey feedback during program year 2, and 2025 survey and interview data from nutrition staff. A comprehensive report will be submitted to the Food Group in late Fall 2025. The student perspectives report addresses evaluation questions 1 – 5; question six will be addressed in the final report.

The following evaluation questions guide the inquiry:

1. How is the Free School Meals for All program in Minnesota perceived by diverse participants including students and families?
2. How does offering free meals at schools affect access to food?
 - What is the effect on student achievement?
 - What is the effect on student health outcomes?
3. How do students perceive the quality of the food, including menu choices and culturally-appropriate food options?
4. How do food service delivery options work for students and families?
5. What are the perceived barriers encountered by students and families with this food program?
6. What successes and challenges have food service staff, schools, and school districts encountered with the Free School Meals for All program?

Methods

The Free School Meals for All program evaluation was designed with a community-based, grass roots, equity-focused outreach. The Food Group worked through the Minnesota statewide Hunger Free Schools Coalition community partners to spread the word to attract participants across Minnesota. The 2024 youth-focused evaluation consisted of a statewide student survey and four community-based youth listening sessions with middle and high school students who attend participating schools. The evaluation was approved by the University of Minnesota's Institutional Review Board. The following methods were employed to conduct the 2024 Universal School Meals Student Perspectives evaluation.

2024 Student Survey

The 2024 student survey was conducted using Qualtrics, a University of Minnesota licensed web-based survey platform. Community partners helped spread the word to attract survey respondents. Students who completed the survey were offered a \$10 electronic gift card incentive. The survey was conducted in April and May 2024. There were 500 responses to the survey split into two sections: one section was completed by 483 students who attend participating schools; 17 students at non-participating schools completed an alternative set of questions. The survey requested respondents include their name for the

gift card fulfillment. All identifying information, including the student's name, reference to specific school or district and community information, was de-identified or removed prior to analysis. Data from the survey were downloaded for analysis and maintained in the University of Minnesota's secure, password-protected storage, Box.

Survey respondent data were disaggregated by students who identify as Black, Indigenous, students of color, *BIPOC* (self-reported by respondent, n=103) and students who indicated they have *lived experience* with food insecurity at home (n=77). Disaggregation of the survey data allowed the evaluation team to understand the effects of the Free School Meals for All program on BIPOC and students with lived experience in contrast with the general population of respondents.

2024 Youth Listening Sessions

Listening sessions were hosted by three community-based partners and one session was hosted via Zoom, a web-based meeting tool. Community partners reached out to their constituents to attract students who identify as students of color and/or students who have lived experience with food insecurity. The target age was middle and high school students. Each participant received a \$100 electronic gift card for participating. All students attended schools that participated in the Free School Meals for All program. A total of 36 students participated in listening sessions: 18 students from both urban and suburban schools in the Twin Cities metro area (organized into two groups of 9), 3 students from Northern Minnesota who joined a Zoom session, and 15 students from a rural community in Southeastern Minnesota.

Listening sessions were conducted between June and November 2024. Each in-person session was audio recorded and transcribed using Rev.com's artificial intelligence service. The virtual session utilized Zoom's recording and transcription services. All transcripts and recordings were downloaded and maintained in the University of Minnesota's secure, password-protected storage, Box.

Evaluation Limitations

Students who participated in the survey and the listening sessions were middle or high school students only. The evaluation was designed to engage students in meaningful, rigorous ways and it was not possible to utilize the same rigorous approaches across the state with elementary students. Therefore, this report reflects the middle and high school student experience but not the experiences of younger students. Feedback from parents who represent many young students across the state was gathered and will be included in a parent-focused report.

Survey Demographics

The survey information was sent to food coalition partners across the state who helped spread the word to invite students to complete the survey. This grassroots approach was part of the evaluation design.

The survey received 500 responses, of which 483 students attended a participating Free School Meal institution. The largest percentage of respondents identified as White (70%, N=277) followed by Asian (11%, N=45) and Black or African American (8%, N=31) Hispanic/Latino (4%).

The demographics of the survey respondents indicated a higher percentage of students of color than the Minnesota average. According to the July 1, 2024 Census data¹, Minnesota residents identified as 82.3% White, 7.9% Black, 1.4% American Indian and Alaska Native, 5.5% Asian, 0.1% Native Hawaiian

¹ As reported on <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/MN/PST045224#PST045224>

and Other Pacific Islander, and 2.9% two or more racial identities. The White population had 6.5% who identified as Hispanic or Latino and 76.9% who identify as White, not Hispanic or Latino.

Figure 1

Racial Demographics of Student Survey Respondents

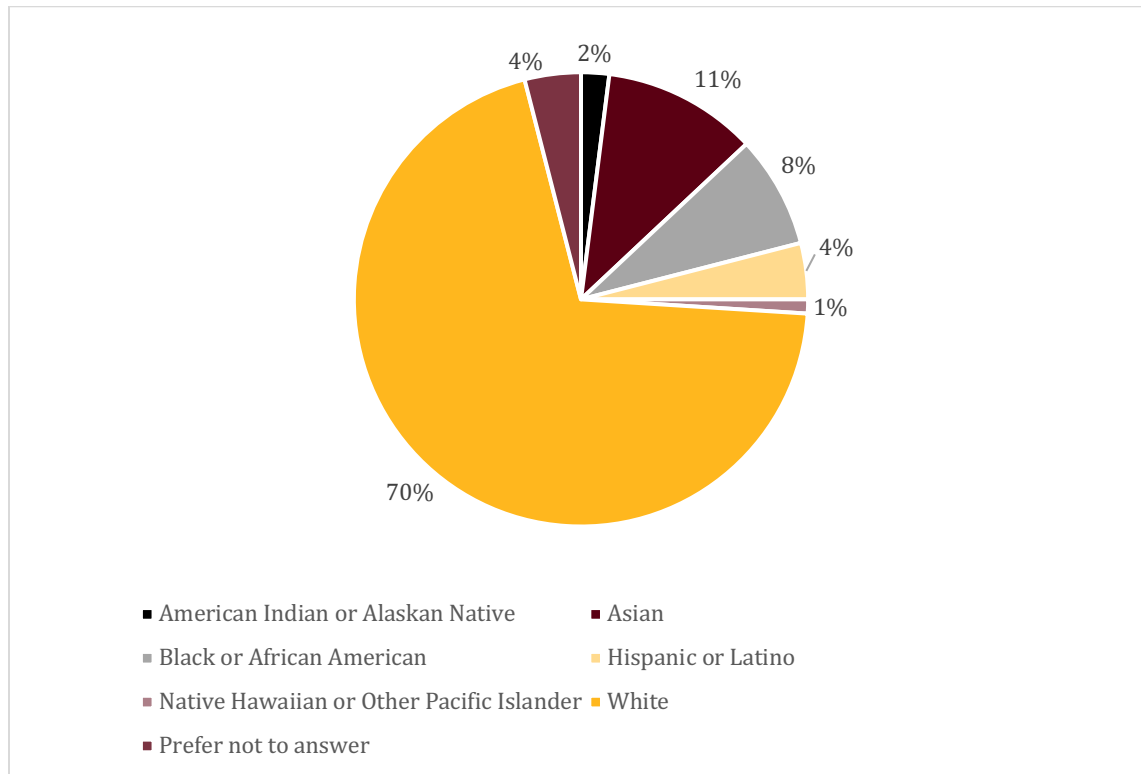
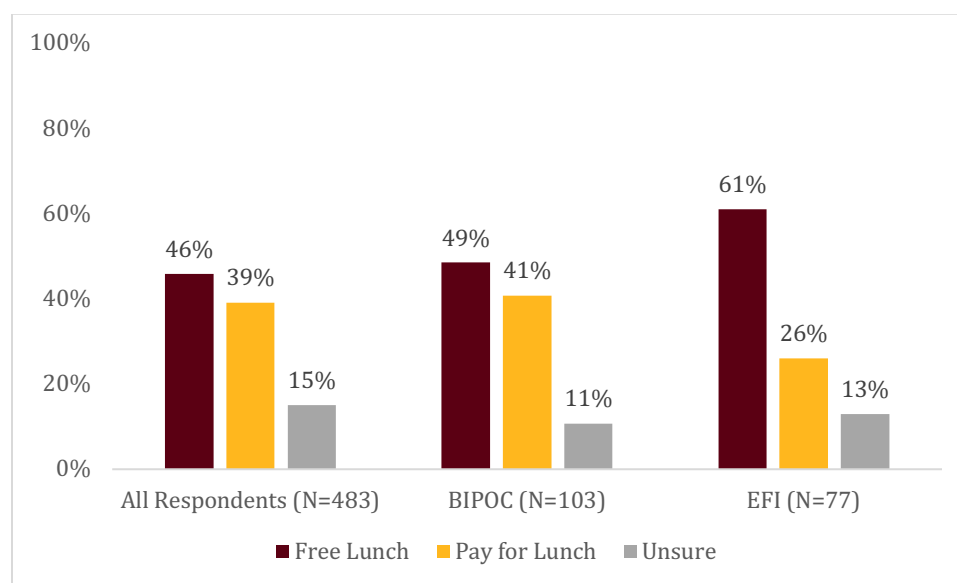


Figure 2 depicts the rates of student respondents who qualified for free or reduced lunch during the 2022-2023 school year. Nearly half of all student respondents (46%) qualified for free or reduced lunch in the year prior to the Free School Meals for All program inception; 61% of students who had experienced food insecurity qualified for free or reduced school meals prior to the program, and 49% identified as Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC).

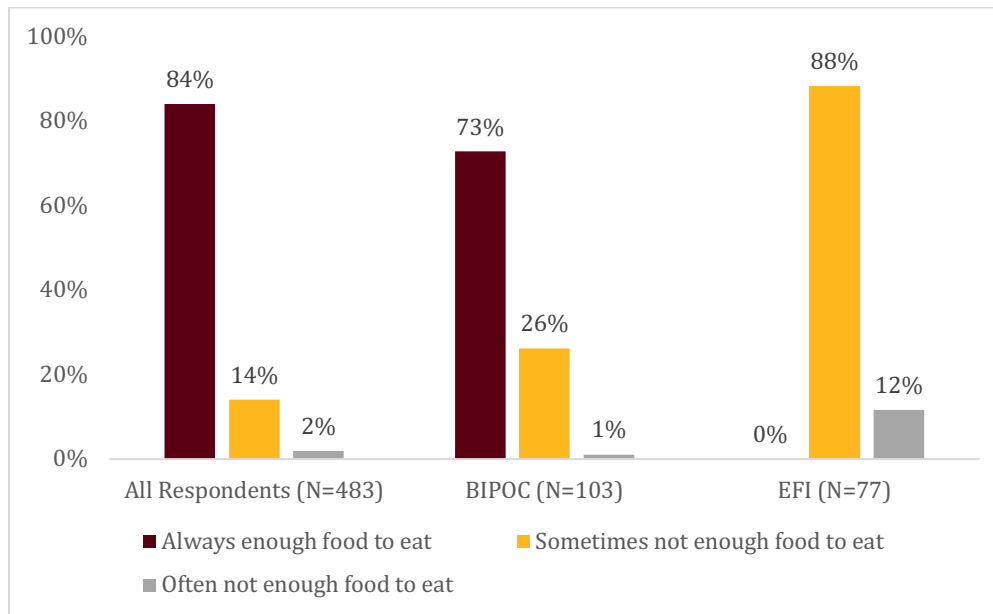
Figure 2
2022-2023 Free/Reduced Lunch Rates of Student Survey Respondents



First, the survey measured food insecurity within the student respondent's home. The intention was to understand food security concerns regardless of their qualifying for free or reduced school meals. The majority of respondents (84%) had not experienced food insecurity at home in the last year. However, BIPOC students and those with lived experience of food insecurity reported higher rates of food insecurity in the last year; 26% of BIPOC students and 100% of the students who indicated lived experience with food insecurity did not have enough food at home during the past year. This question was used to disaggregate the student data for the "Experienced Food Insecurity" (EFI) category in the graphs included in this report.

Figure 3

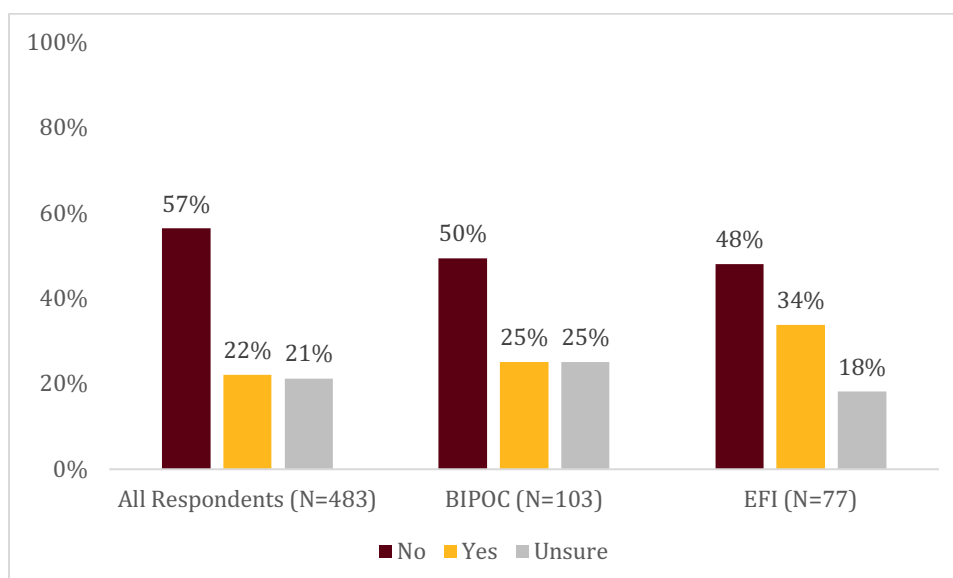
In the last year, did you have enough food at home?



The survey then asked about student participants who may have experienced or observed other students being denied meals due to the lack of money in their accounts during the 2022-2023 school year. More than half of all respondents (57%) indicated they had never experienced or observed this. The rates of observing or experiencing this among BIPOC and students with lived experience were higher; a quarter of all BIPOC respondents and 34% of students with food insecurity lived experience reported experiencing or observing students being denied a meal due to lack of money in their account at their school.

Figure 4

Prior to the current school year (2023-2024), did you experience or ever see any students being denied a meal due to the lack of money in their account?



These findings were further supported by comments from students in the listening sessions, who shared personal experiences of either observing or directly experiencing meals being thrown away due to insufficient funds before the implementation of the Free School Meals for All program.

One student described, “But if your account got like negative \$100, you couldn't take food anymore. So, they would just like, take the tray, throw it away.” While other students felt the new meal program alleviated the embarrassment, not only of having a meal thrown away in front of them due to lack of funds in their account, but also the stigma of eating alternative meals when their family cannot afford hot lunch, students described:

I think making it, like, so everyone gets free food. I think it saves kids from feeling maybe embarrassed or families that don't mean like they don't meet the exact like cut off, or whatever like, maybe 'cause they make a little too much money, but they're still struggling to get by. I think I think it really helps.

[When food is thrown out in front of a student] Embarrassing. Yeah, it's embarrassing and it probably sticks with them a while. When I was in elementary school that happened to me and I had to eat a meat sandwich that had nothing in it...it was embarrassing like oh my goodness.

Evaluation Results: Breakfast

The survey and listening sessions included a series of questions about breakfast. The questions focused on the timing, variety and quality of food served, and the food service process. Figure 5 illustrates the rates at which students ate school breakfast during the year prior to the Free School Meals for All implementation. Most students indicated they did not eat school breakfast, with 73% of all respondents, 60% of BIPOC students, and 68% of students with lived experience reporting they did not participate. The survey asked about the frequency of consuming school breakfast during the current, 2023-2024 school year (see Figure 6). The rates of eating school breakfast increased compared to the prior year; from 22% to 25% of all respondents, 30% to 31% for BIPOC students, and from 26% to 34% for students with lived experience of food insecurity, which was the largest increase.

Figure 5

Last year during the 2022-2023 school year, did you usually (at least 3-5 days per week) eat breakfast at school?

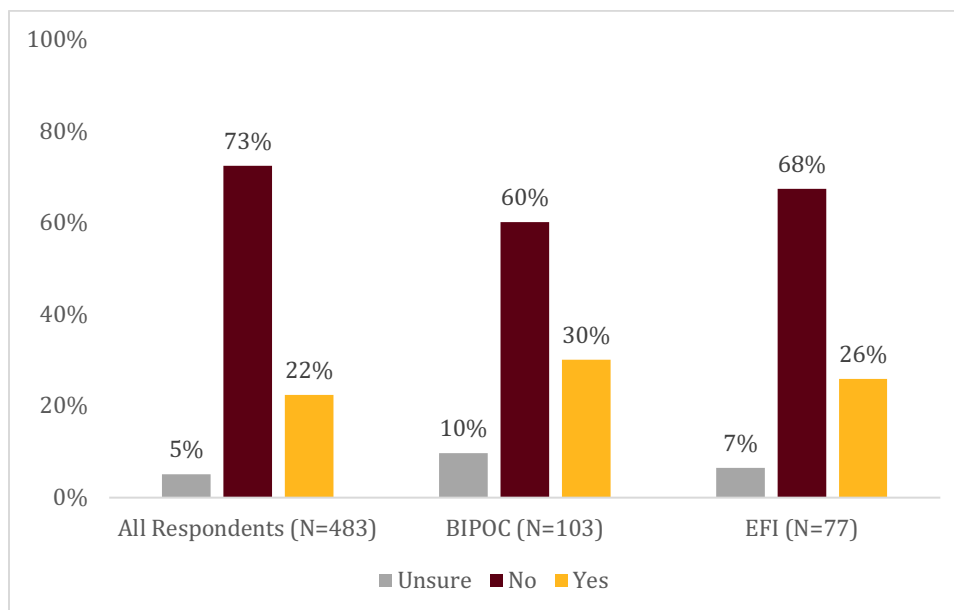
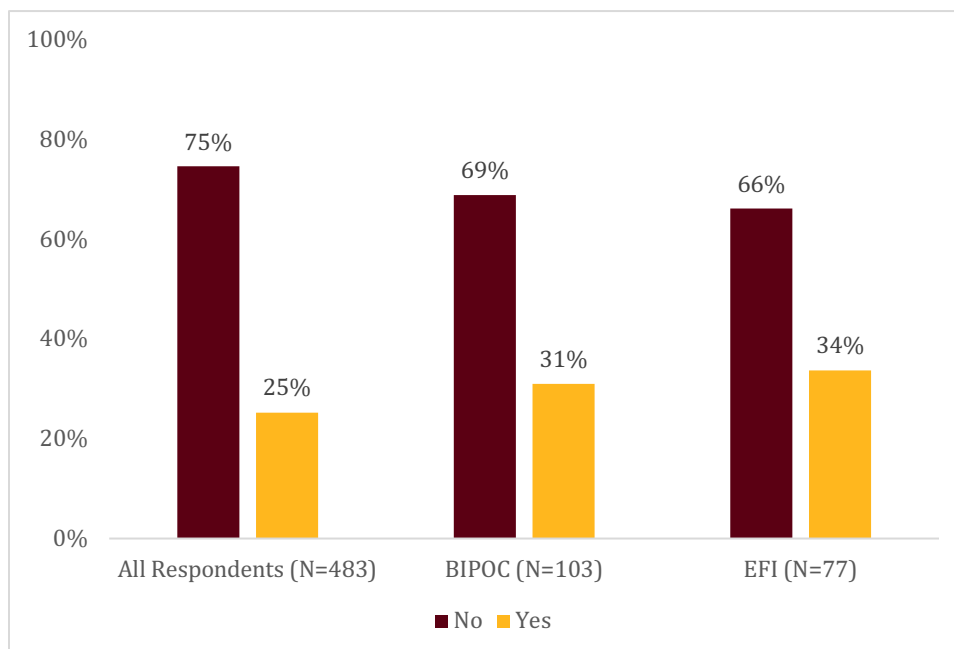


Figure 6

This school year (2023-2024), do you usually (at least 3-5 days per week) eat breakfast at school?



Students who responded that they did not eat school breakfast regularly during the 2023-2024 school year were asked to indicate why they did not participate. They were asked to choose all the reasons that applied to them. The intention was to understand barriers to participating. There were 361 responses to this question. The most common reasons for not participating were that students chose to

eat breakfast at home (59% of all respondents) or that they chose to not eat breakfast (38%); one-third of students chose not to eat school breakfast because they did not like the food served at their school. Table 1 depicts the pre-set response options and response rates among the three respondent types.

Table 1

In the last question you mentioned that you do not usually eat breakfast at school every day. What are some reasons? (check all that apply)

	All Respondents (N=483)	BIPOC (N=103)	EFI (N=77)
My school does not serve breakfast	1%	1%	0%
My school sometimes runs out of food before I get served	4%	7%	8%
The breakfast location is too far from my homeroom/first period class	5%	7%	8%
I am not allowed to bring breakfast food into the classroom	6%	7%	6%
The line to get school breakfast is too long	7%	11%	16%
School breakfast is only for kids who need it	8%	9%	16%
School breakfast isn't healthy	14%	13%	14%
My friends don't eat school breakfast	14%	9%	24%
My bus arrives too late/I arrive too late to get breakfast before school starts	17%	20%	24%
I don't like the food served at school	33%	38%	43%
I don't usually eat breakfast	38%	45%	51%
I usually eat breakfast at home	59%	51%	31%

School Breakfast Barriers

Listening session participants also discussed barriers to eating school breakfast. The main barriers shared were that students arrived too late to get the meal, students did not like the meal choices, students could obtain the meal but did not have time to consume it and were not allowed to bring it into the classroom,

School Breakfast and Bus or Late Arrival

Some students highlighted how the time allotted for breakfast was impacted by bus arrival times. Late arrivals made it difficult for some students to eat breakfast or have enough time to finish breakfast. Additionally, some students shared the process of entering the school building subtracted time away from their breakfast time. One student shared, "At our school, we got to go through a security check, we got to get patted down, do all that before we go to [breakfast]." A student in Northern Minnesota described that he was never able to eat school breakfast because his bus arrived too late, but some of his friends were able to get it. "Some of my friends took the bus, and they would be able to like eat it but also some buses that arrived later just didn't have the time to do that." He also mentioned that he had participated in the free breakfast because he was now able to drive himself to school and could arrive early enough to get it. Another student mentioned a similar feeling about school breakfast:

I honestly didn't eat breakfast ever, like I didn't. I didn't eat it before I went to school, 'cause I didn't have time cause I would wake up late. And then my bus also got there, usually pretty late too...so I just I wouldn't eat breakfast really.

Other urban and suburban students described that if they arrived late, some schools allowed students to eat breakfast. One student in an urban school said their first period started at 8:15 but breakfast was served until 9 a.m., allowing students who arrive late to eat. Another student described, “So sometimes we have late buses and stuff. So, they still serve to the kids that are late to school.” While suburban listening session participants said breakfast was not served after school started.

Food Quality Feedback

Students also mentioned that food quality and lack of variety were barriers to eating school breakfast. Some described “overly processed” foods, meals they perceived as unhealthy, while others said the food that should be warm was cold or they were served non-breakfast food like garlic bread which did not appeal to them first thing in the morning. Breakfast foods that students across all listening sessions liked included cereal, potstickers, pancakes, breakfast cookies, cinnamon rolls, muffins, and sausage.

Students requested more scratch-made food. One listening session group talked about food like their “grandma” makes, such as fresh scrambled eggs, meat like bacon or sausages, and fresh pancakes. One student described the food quality at her urban school. “Yeah, I wish all schools had breakfast like [Urban School] because what he makes for his stuff, the grandma’s thing, [you know] the grandma made stuff.” She described that she enjoyed the breakfasts because they tasted fresh and homemade. However, many students felt the breakfast meals were undesirable. One said they got the meal just to drink the juice and they threw the rest away. Multiple students requested having more dry cereal choices.

School Breakfast Process

Students in the listening sessions also focused on the process of breakfast. Those who attend larger schools described long lunch lines split into two: one for hot breakfast meals and another for cold meal options. In smaller schools, students described a “grab-and-go model” especially for schools that did not have a traditional lunchroom. Larger schools could also have a grab-and-go model, though feedback from the listening sessions suggest it is less likely. One point of contrast between larger and smaller schools observed by the students was the level of convenience accessing breakfast. Students attending smaller schools experienced easier access to breakfast, at times, even if they missed the breakfast cutoff time. Students from larger schools mentioned that even when grab-and-go was an option, barriers persisted because they were not allowed to bring food into the classroom.

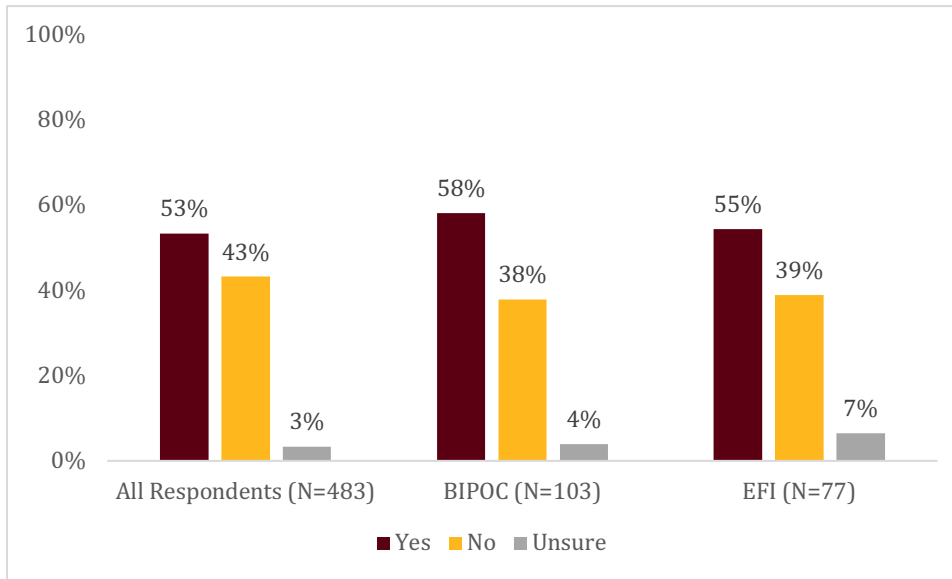
Location of breakfast service was also discussed as some students mentioned a desire for eating breakfast in a secluded place that either allowed them to escape the noise of other students or focus in for the day. Some students shared that they were allowed to bring food into their classrooms, while others were not. At schools that allowed it, the type of class was an indicator of whether or not food could be brought in. Science or physical education classes might not allow it.

School Lunch Feedback

The survey and listening sessions included a series of questions about students' lunch experiences including any changes they noticed between the 2022-2023 school year and the 2023-2024 school year during which the Free School Meals for All program was implemented.

Figure 7

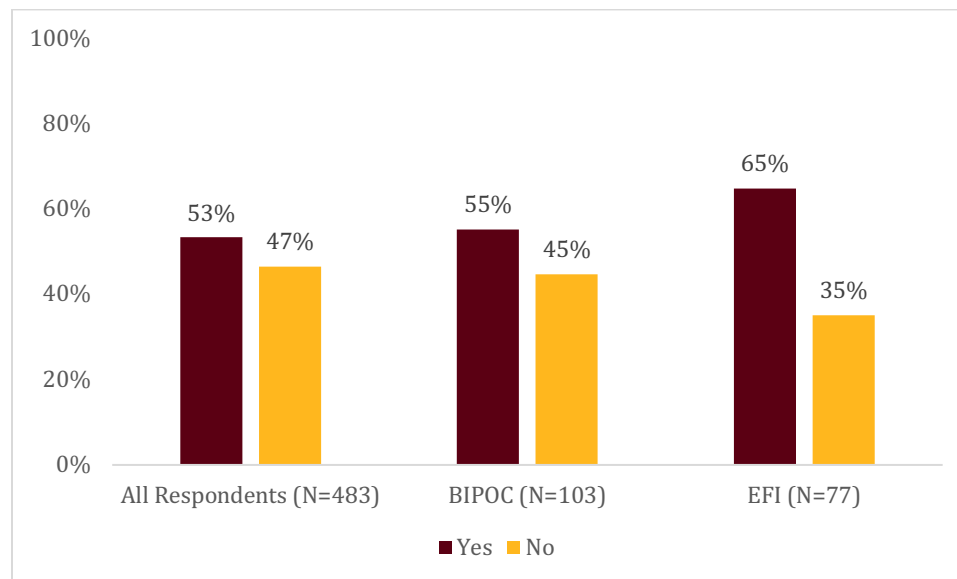
Last year during the 2022-2023 school year, did you usually (at least 3-5 days per week) eat school lunch?



Students indicated the frequency of eating school lunch during the 2022-2023 school year prior to the launch of the Free School Meals for All program. They were then asked about the frequency of consuming school lunch during the current school year (2023-2024) to help inform if the program affected school lunch consumption rates. During the previous school year, prior to the Free School Meals for All program, 53% of all respondents (58% of BIPOC students and 55% of students with lived experience) indicated that they did eat school lunch on a regular basis. The rates of students who have lived experienced with food insecurity increased their school lunch consumption during the first year of the program by 10%; the group of all respondents remained the same rate for both years (53%) and BIPOC student consumption decreased among survey respondents during the first year of the Free School Meals for All program.

Figure 8

This school year, do you usually (at least 3-5 days per week) eat school lunch?



Students who indicated that they did not eat school lunch during the 2023-2024 school year were asked a follow up question with pre-set reasons to help understand any barriers to school lunch consumption. The question allowed them to choose all the reasons that apply to them. Of the students who indicated they do not eat school lunch, the top reasons were that they did not like the food served (47% of all respondents; 74% of respondents who have experienced food insecurity), students were not in the school at lunchtime (33% of all respondents; 50% of BIPOC respondents; 33% of students with lived experience). Long lines were a deterrent for 22% of all respondents who indicated they do not eat school lunch 3-5 times a week, 26% of students who have experienced food insecurity, and a lower rate of students who identify as BIPOC (9%).

A number of students reported not being in the school at lunchtime, ranging from 33% (EFI & the general population of respondents who reported not eating school lunch regularly) and half (50%) of students who identify as BIPOC.

Table 2

In the last question you mentioned that you do not usually eat school lunch. What are some reasons? (Select all that apply)

	All Respondents (N=275)	BIPOC (N=46)	EFI (N=27)
I don't like the food served at school	47%	33%	74%
I am not in the school at lunchtime	33%	50%	33%
Lunch lines are too long	22%	9%	26%
I don't like being in the lunchroom during the lunch period	19%	22%	26%
I am busy doing other activities during lunch (like tutoring, academic help, sports, clubs, etc.)	11%	17%	26%
There is not enough time to eat school lunch	10%	20%	22%
My friends don't eat school lunch	8%	4%	15%
My school sometimes runs out of food before I get served	5%	2%	15%
School lunch is only for kids who need it	3%	4%	7%

Student listening session participants also described barriers to eating school lunch. Long lines were a key barrier across the listening sessions. One student stated that “the lunch lines be [sic] ridiculous!” A student said the menu may affect the number of people eating school lunch that day. They shared that their school has a 20 minute lunch period, and they have two lines to get their food, and “if [the menu] is something bad, there’s not usually that much [of a line]. They also said that during the peak times, it is difficult to get the food due to long times. Another student offered a description of their lunch time experience,

They excuse us by table. So, like, sometimes you'll be like the very last in line, or sometimes you'll be the first. But depending on that time...the line will take up to 15 min. Then you sit down, and you only have like 10 min to eat your whole lunch.

Other barriers discussed included food that did not appeal to their tastes or due to the food quality. Some listening session participants felt that the food temperatures were not appropriate, describing salad or fruit that should be cold, but are displayed next to the hot food and the heat lamps and therefore, was warm. There were also consistent comments, specifically about chicken sandwiches that were cold or too tough to bite.

Foods that Appealed to Listening Session Participants

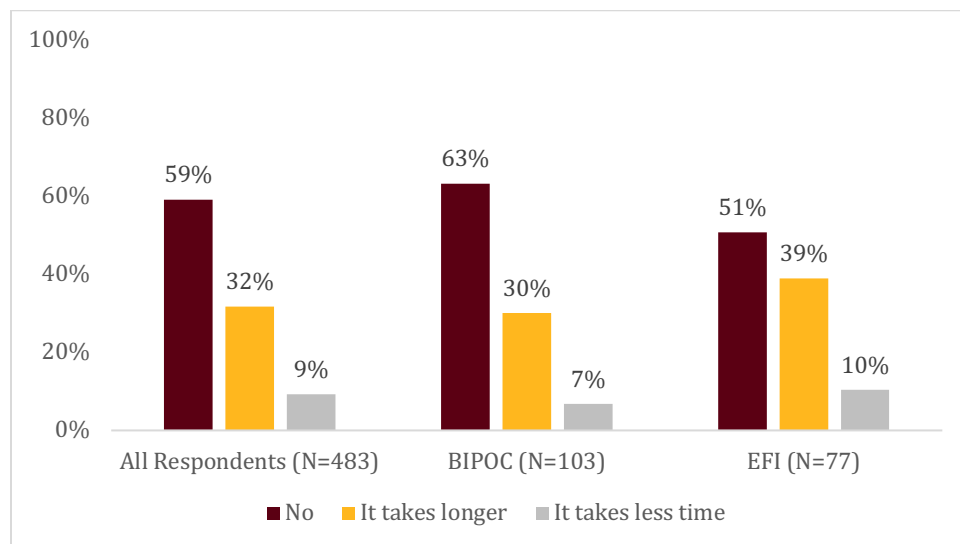
There was consensus around pizza, burgers, and sandwiches that were appealing to students. Students also felt the overly processed types of food served were less appealing than scratch-made food. A student who attended an urban school appreciated “food with flavor” that tasted homemade. She especially enjoyed the sambusas. Many listening session participants asked for more cultural food, especially spicy options including burritos, stir fries, tacos, and Indian food options.

The survey solicited student feedback regarding the process of picking up their lunch. Figure 9 depicts responses regarding the amount of time it took students to get their meals during the 2023-2024 school year in comparison to the previous year (2022-2023) prior to the inception of the Free School Meals for All program. Some students (ranging 7% to 10%) perceived that it took less time to get their

meal during the current school year (2023-2024). Most students (ranging from 51% to 63%) felt there was no change in the amount of time to get their meal and others felt it took longer this year to get their meal (ranging from 30% to 39%).

Figure 9

Changes to the amount of time it takes to get a meal?

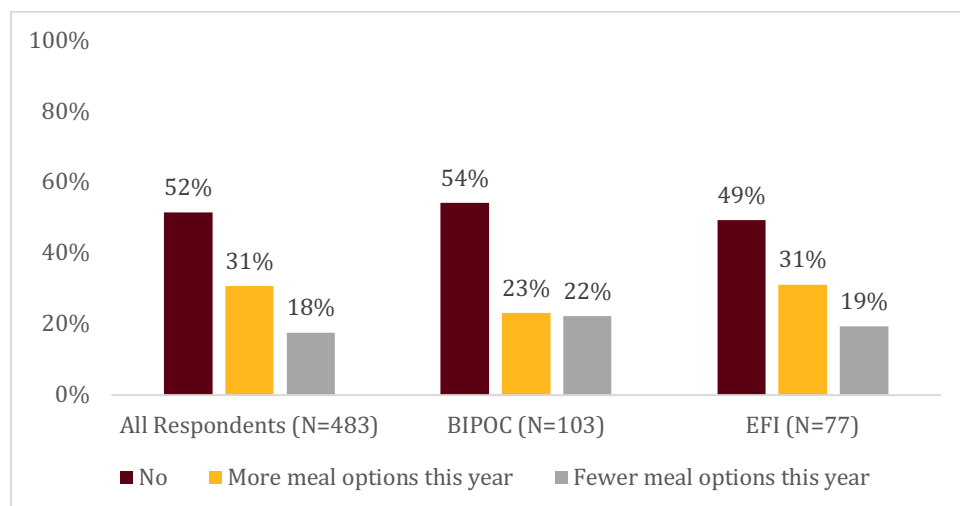


Food Quality, Portion Sizes, and Meal Preferences

The survey and listening sessions asked a series of questions about the changes to meal options, food quality, and perceptions of how students feel the food meets their needs and tastes. When asked about changes to the types of school meal options (see Figure 10), about half of respondents (ranging from 49% to 54%) felt there was no difference in the types of meal options served during 2023-2024 versus previous years; some students felt there were more options (ranging from 23% to 31% of respondents) and a smaller group felt their school offered fewer options (ranging from 18% to 22%).

Figure 10

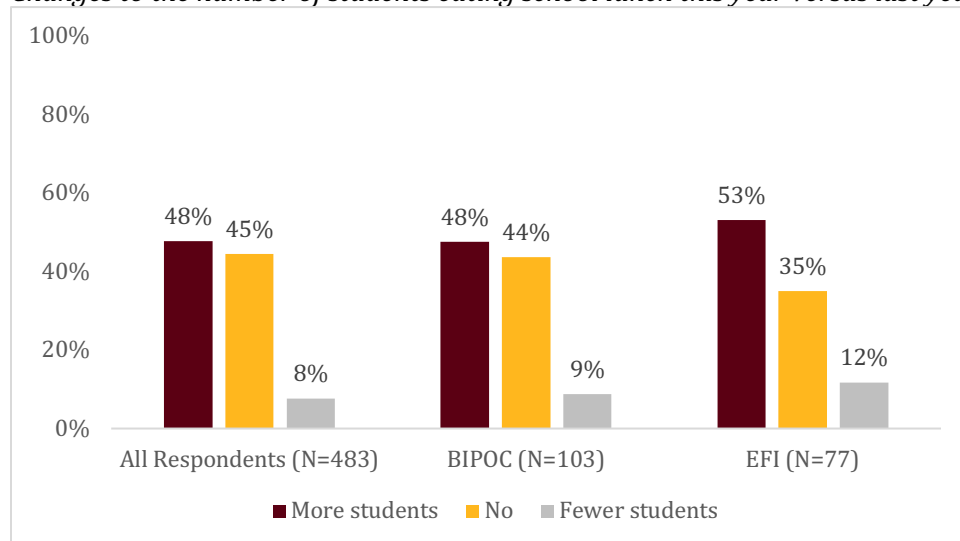
Changes to the types of school meal options?



Students perceived that more students were eating school lunch this year (responses ranging from 48% to 53%) while others felt that there was no difference in the number of students eating school lunch (ranging from 35% to 45%). Some students observed fewer students eating school lunch (ranging from 8% to 12%).

Figure 11

Changes to the number of students eating school lunch this year versus last year

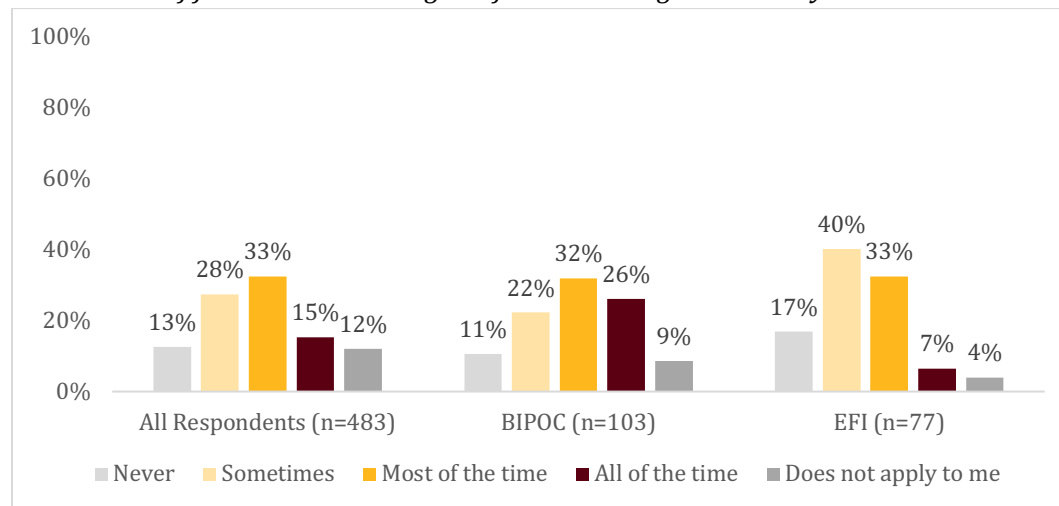


Many students expressed that portion sizes generally do not meet their needs; some students (responses ranging from 13% - 17%) indicated the portion size never was enough for them; in particular, 17% of students who have lived experience with food insecurity felt that the amount of food served was not enough to fuel them throughout the day. The students who chose “does not apply to me” did not eat school lunch.

Listening session participants observed more of their friends and students in general eating school lunch. They did not feel there was more noise in the lunchroom or any other changes in the lunchroom climate.

Figure 12

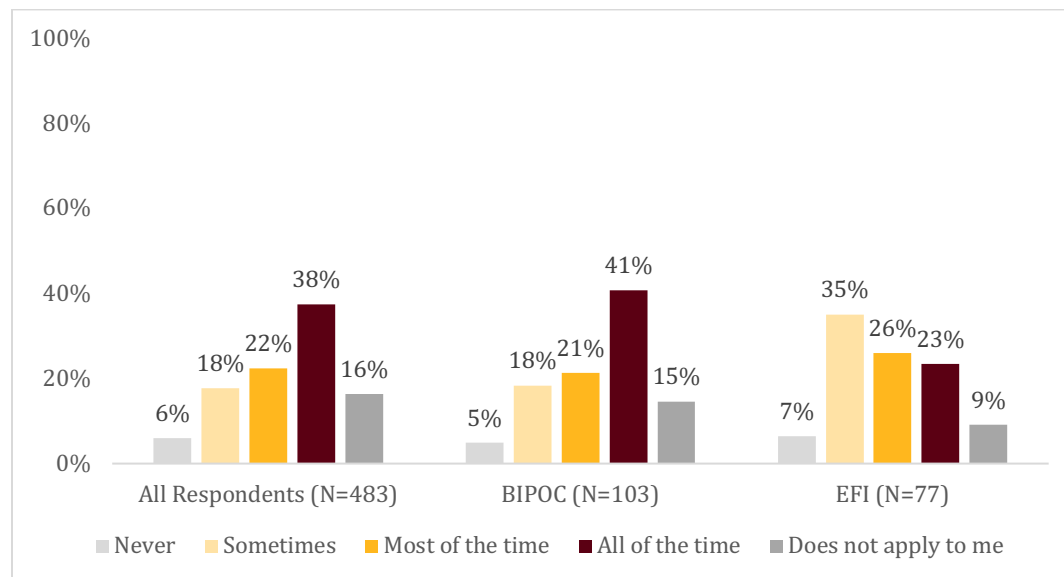
The amount of food served is enough to fuel me throughout the day.



Listening session participants were also split between enough food and not enough food. Some students described that their school had a table where students who could not eat all of their food could share it with others. They said there were always options on the table like fruit, but for the students who felt they wanted larger portions, they wished they could have a second burger or chicken sandwich instead of fruit.

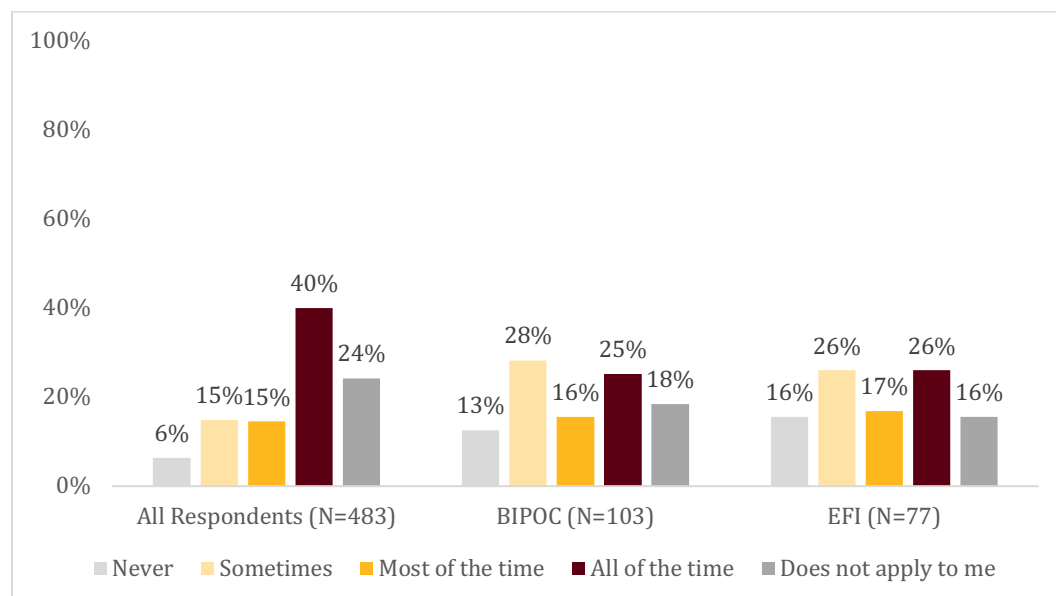
Students were asked about food allergies (see Figure 13) to which the majority of survey respondents felt the meals served met their needs most of the time (responses ranging from 21% to 26%) or all of the time (responses ranging from 23% to 41%). A smaller group felt the meal options did not meet their dietary requirements relating to food allergies (responses ranging from 5% to 7%), creating a barrier for those students who were unable to engage in the Free School Meal program due to food allergies and dietary needs.

Figure 13
The meal options meet my dietary needs (like food allergies)



The survey and listening session included a question about the school meals meeting students' cultural preferences. Survey respondents indicated that most students felt meals served met their expectations, while a smaller group of students felt the question did not apply to them (ranging from 16% to 24%). Fewer students (ranging from 6% to 16%) felt the meals served never met their cultural preferences.

Figure 14
The meal options meet my cultural preferences

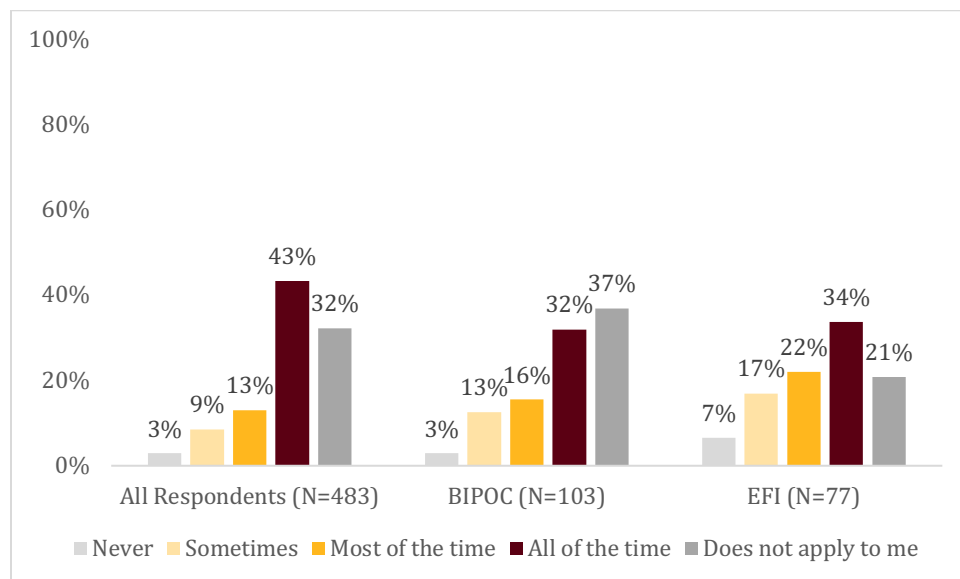


When asked if school meal options meet their religious needs (see Figure 15), a small number of respondents (ranging from 3% to 7%) indicated that meals do not meet their needs. While this is a

small minority, it presents a barrier to students who cannot consume the meals served due to religious needs.

Figure 15

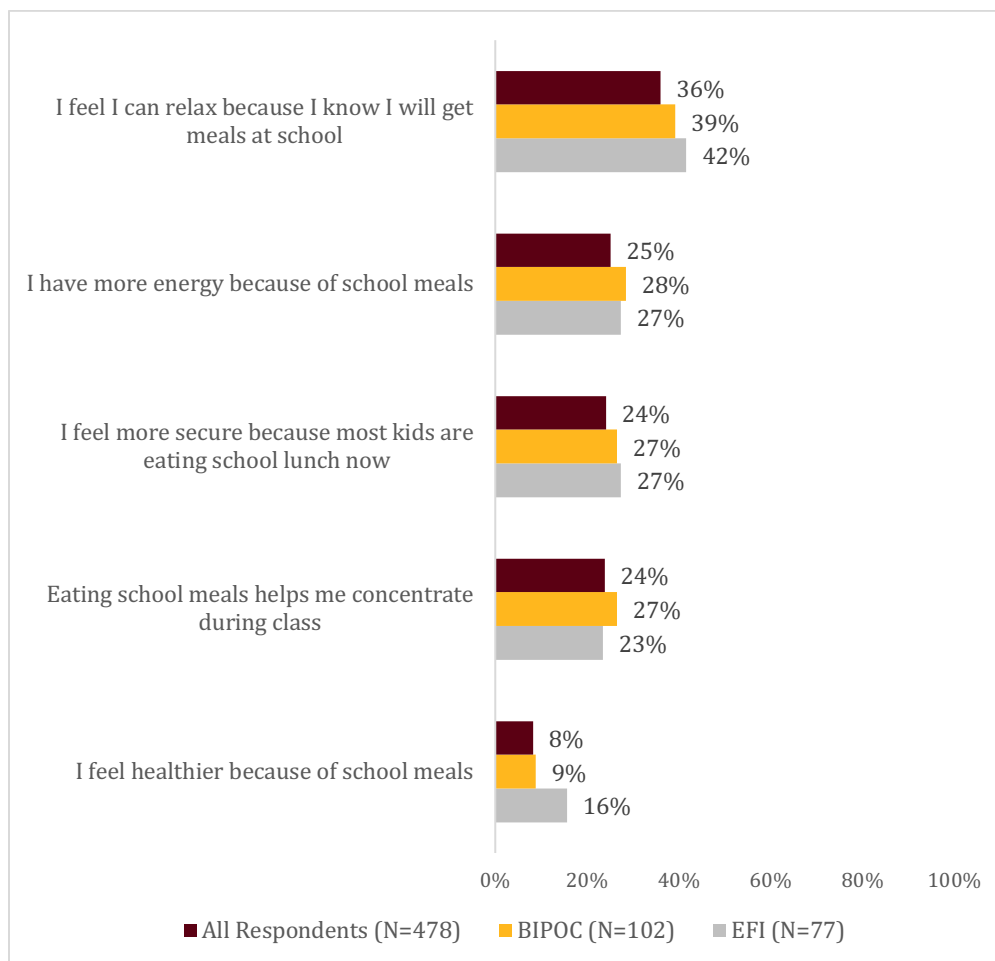
The meal options meet my religious needs



Survey respondents and listening session participants discussed the effects of the Free School Meals for All program on them and their families. Students responded to a survey question about how the program affected their school day. The question allowed students to select all pre-set options that applied to them. The highest response rate was “I feel I can relax because I know I will get meals at school” with 36% of all respondents, 39% of BIPOC, and 42% of students who had lived experience indicating this effect. Other areas with positive effects included feeling more energetic (responses ranging from 25% to 28% of respondents), feeling more secure because most kids are eating school lunch now (ranging from 24% to 27%) and indicating that eating school lunch helped them concentrate in class (ranging from 24% to 27%.) Some students felt that eating school meals did not affect their school experience (responses ranging from 28% to 36%).

Figure 16

To what extent do you feel school meals positively affect your experience during the school day? (select all that apply)



Note: some students felt that eating school meals does not affect their school experience (ranging from 28% to 36%; and some students chose “other” citing they were not in the building or did not school eat lunch and therefore, were unsure how the Free School Meal program affected them.)

The students who participated in the listening sessions were primarily low-income, students of color. They felt the Free School Meals program benefitted all students, not just those who had experienced food insecurity. Generally, students felt that universal school meals helped reduce the stigma of lunch barriers and helped students bolster inclusivity. Additionally, students highlighted the financial impact free school meals has on families by allowing them to spend the money earmarked for meals on other necessities. Some listening session participants felt free school meals helped them worry less about packing food at home. One participant described what it was like when someone did not pack a lunch prior to the Free School Meals for All program:

But like, say they come to school, and they didn't like pack a lunch, then they could get a free [school meal] you know, because there's always like possible situations that they might need it right? Accessible is a good thing.

I think it's a good thing because not a lot of people can afford lunch. When we had to pay for lunch...a lot of people are going through situations and not a lot of people eat when they're at home. So, I think having free lunch at school is good for a lot of people.

...When my older siblings went to high school, they couldn't eat lunch because they always had to pay for the food [they] always brought food home and I feel like it's a good thing now because every kid can't get [food at home.]

I believe, like, even though equalness is not always fairness because it's free to everyone. So even the kids like below the poverty line will get free meals, and the kids above it will still also get free meals. But [Free School Meals to All] benefits the kids really do need it.

A listening session participant felt that the Free School Meal program helped “absolutely stopping hunger” in “adults,” recognizing that high school students have a lot of nutritional needs since they are growing into adulthood.

Students commented on observing more students eating school lunch. One listening session participant observed more students eating hot lunch versus cold lunch. “I have noticed, like, kids in the past that I knew who usually ate cold lunch, have been starting to eat hot lunch, like more people have been taking advantage of the situation put in front of them.”

Student feedback was inconsistent concerning the physical/health impacts for students. Though a couple of students found students to have more energy after lunch, they were uncertain if it was directly related to the meal. One student shared positively impacted student health outcomes as, “you don't get to worry about going hungry [going] to your next classes afterwards. So you could continue to learn [and not worry] about an empty stomach.”

I think that is a good thing, you know. I think A lot of people who grew up like me, and I'm [don't want] to call out, but like people who like grew up out in [Community], they tend to be more poor, you know and I think that it's a good thing for people to have access to [free school meals], and to not have to like necessarily like pay for school food...I think it's a good thing, I'm all for it.

You don't need to worry about going hungry to get to your next class[es]... So you could continue to learn and not worry about an empty stomach.

I also think it [having access to free school meals] means maybe for students who struggle financially in their families that they might not be eating any other meals than what they eat at school. I think that that's important. So it doesn't lead to other health issues or mental functioning issues. I know a lot of the time it's hard to do tests or do exams on an empty stomach.

I think it means a lot because some kids may not have the food at home that they have at school. So some people look forward to eating at school.

School is something that you need to go to in the first place. That's mandatory. Why would you make somebody pay for lunches after making them go to school? That should already be funded in the first place.

Conclusion

This report contains preliminary feedback gathered during the first Free School Meals for All program year. Students offered feedback through a statewide survey and four listening sessions. A second 2024-2025 survey will be administered in the spring 2025 to see if any student perceptions have changed.

The information in this report will be included in a final report submitted in the fall 2025. The comprehensive report will include feedback from parents and guardians, and school or district nutrition staff.