



Minnesota Free School Meals Program Evaluation – School Nutrition Staff Perspectives

July 2026

**Prepared by Leah Garnder
The Food Group**

Free School Meals Program – School Nutrition Staff Perspectives

Introduction

The Food Group conducted a statewide evaluation of the effectiveness of the Free School Meals Program as codified by the Minnesota Legislature and signed into law by the Governor in March 2023. This legislation provided permanent funding for free breakfast and lunch for all Minnesota students attending public, private or charter schools participating in the National School Lunch Program. Several private schools do not currently participate.

The purpose of this report is to gather feedback from school nutrition staff on the program's impact, areas for continued improvement and best practices that may be applicable from one school district to another. This report is part of a larger evaluation that includes student and parent survey and listening session feedback.

Methods

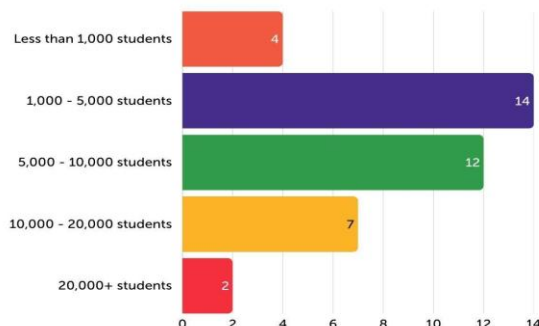
The Food Group worked with partners including the Hunger Free Schools coalition and the Minnesota School Nutrition Association to design a survey to gain insights from school nutrition professionals about the benefits, challenges and overall impact of the Free School Meals Program from their perspectives.

The survey was conducted using Microsoft Forms from September – October, 2025. There were 39 responses. The survey provided the option for respondents to offer their names and contact information for possible follow-up questions and case studies. Based on the survey's findings, The Food Group conducted three follow-up interviews to produce case studies on breakfast after the bell, best practices to minimizing food waste, and the benefits of participating in the Farm to School program.

Survey Demographics

The survey included a mix of school districts of all sizes, ranging from 4 with less than 1,000 students to 7 with over 10,000 students and the majority somewhere in between.

1. What is your district's student population?

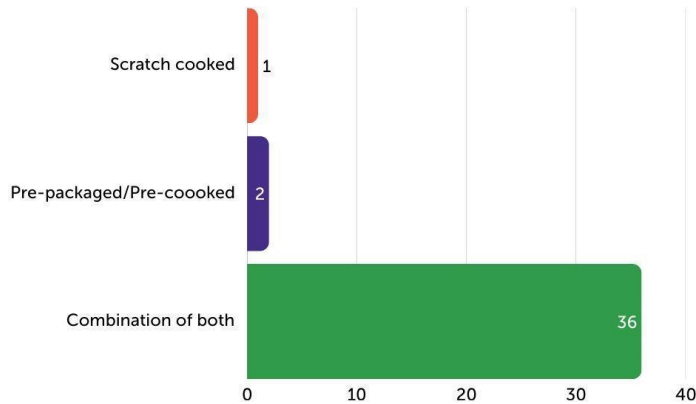


Survey Results

Service Model

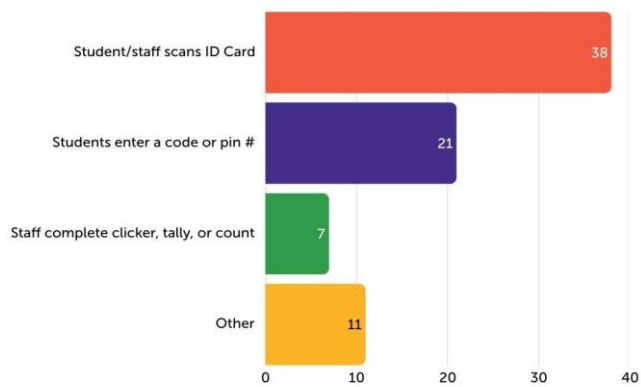
While one district indicated that their food preparation is exclusively from scratch and two districts said their meals are all pre-packaged, the vast majority (92%) utilize a combination of both scratch cooking and pre-packaged items.

2. Type of Food Preparation



Although all families are entitled to free meals, districts still must track each transaction to determine which meals will be reimbursed through the federal government's Free and Reduced-Price Meals program and which will be reimbursed through the state's Free School Meals Program. Most districts (57%) have students enter a code or pin number to track transactions, while some (29%) scan ID cards instead. Given challenges described later in this report with long lunch lines, there may be an opportunity to improve efficiency by more districts considering switching to scanning ID cards.

3. How do students complete meal transactions? (check all that apply)

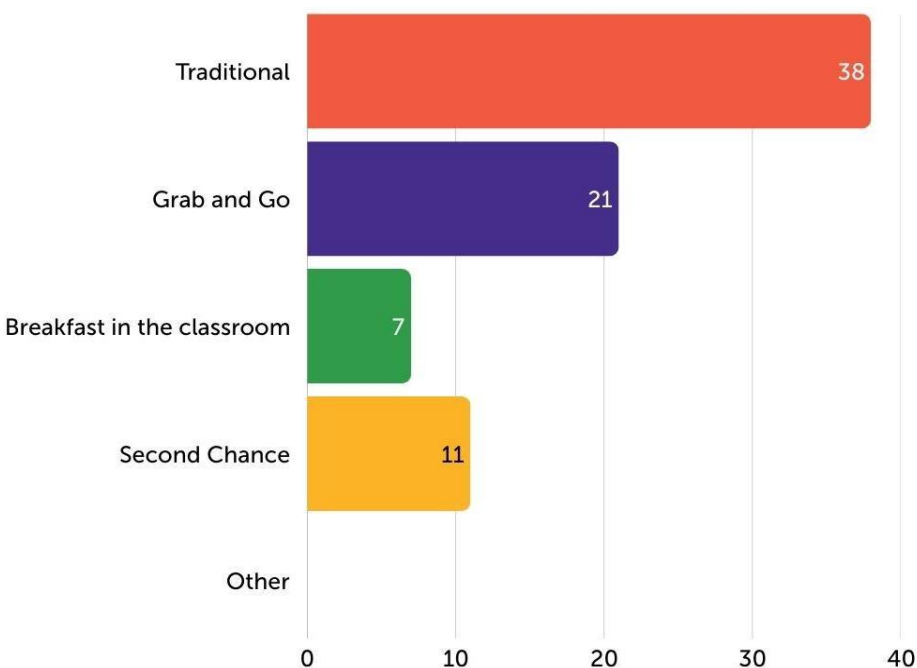


School Breakfast

While school breakfast participation saw a 40% increase in the first year of Minnesota's Free School Meals Program, there is still room for improvement to ensure all students interested in receiving breakfast have that opportunity. About half of districts (49%) indicated that they offer a "traditional" breakfast—served in the cafeteria, before the start of the school day. The next most common service model was to offer a "grab-and-go" breakfast (27%) which typically means that students are served from a cart or kiosk and are allowed to bring their items into the classroom. Another 14% of districts offer breakfast in the classroom and 9% offer a "second chance" breakfast which is served after the start of the school day, often during a midmorning break.

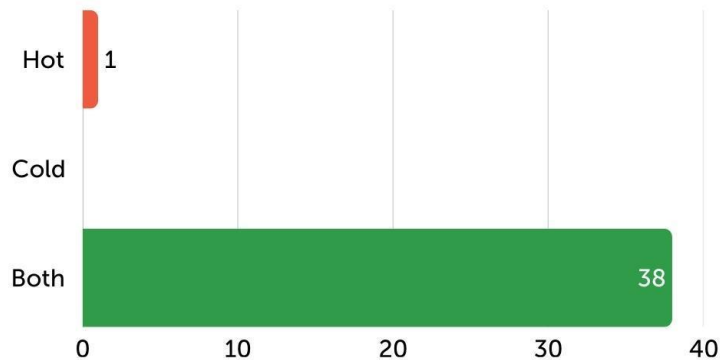
There may be room to improve access by more districts considering an alternative to their traditional meal service through a best practice known as "breakfast after the bell" which will be explored further as a case study.

4. What model does your school use to serve breakfast? (select all that apply)



Regardless of the exact model, the vast majority of districts (97%) offer a combination of both hot and cold breakfast items.

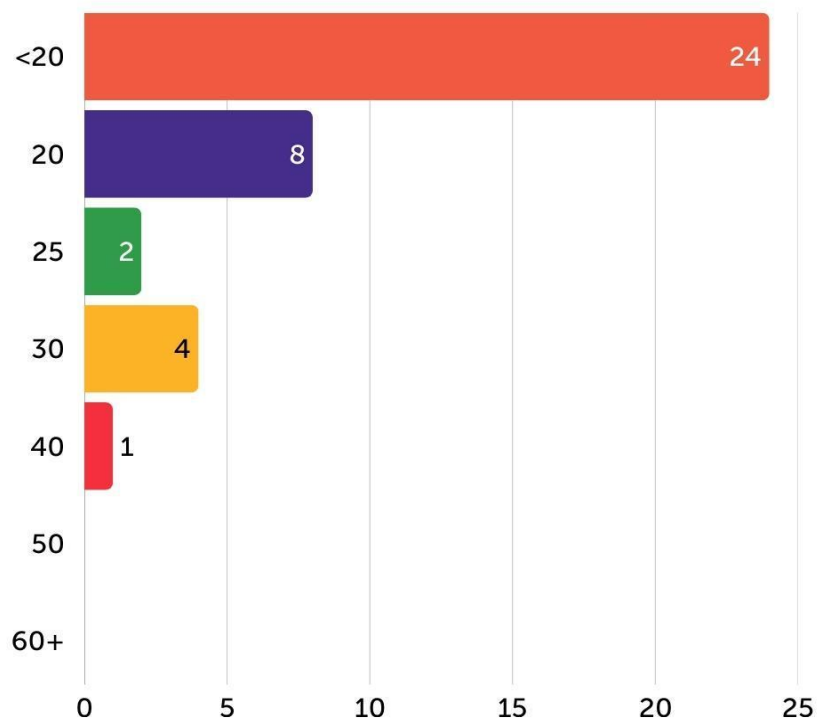
5. Type of breakfast foods served



Most respondents (62%) said that students get less than 20 minutes to eat their breakfast, followed by 20% having 20 minutes, 5% having 25 minutes, 10% having 30 minutes.

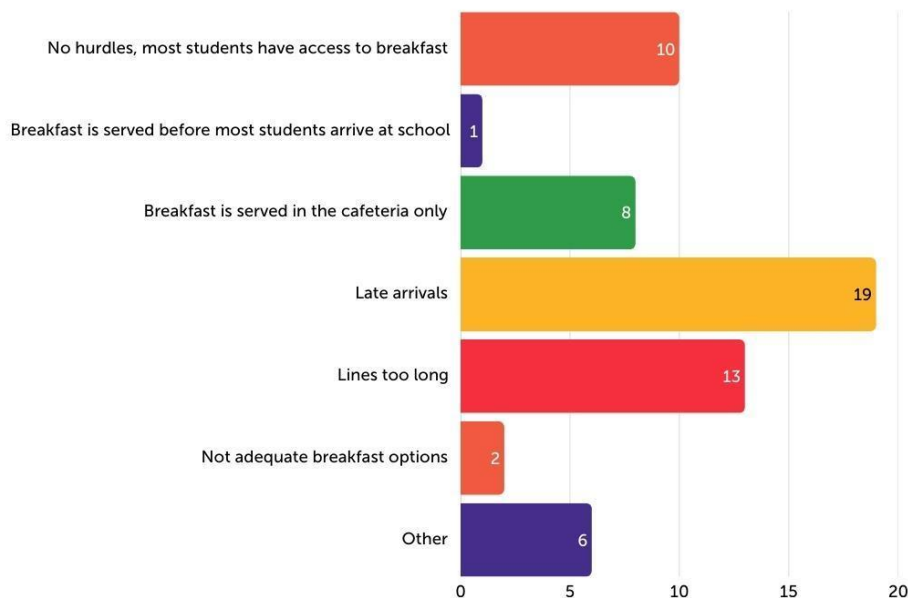
When asked about one aspect of breakfast service that works well, common themes included the use of carts and kiosks, offering pre-bagged or grab-and-go items and offering fewer options to ensure quick service.

6. How many minutes do students get to eat breakfast (pick closest option)?



When asked about what challenges students were experiencing that kept them from accessing breakfast, staff commonly noted challenges with late arrivals, long lines, and breakfast only being served in the cafeteria.

8. What, if any, challenges do you see students in your school experience that keep them from eating/accessing breakfast?



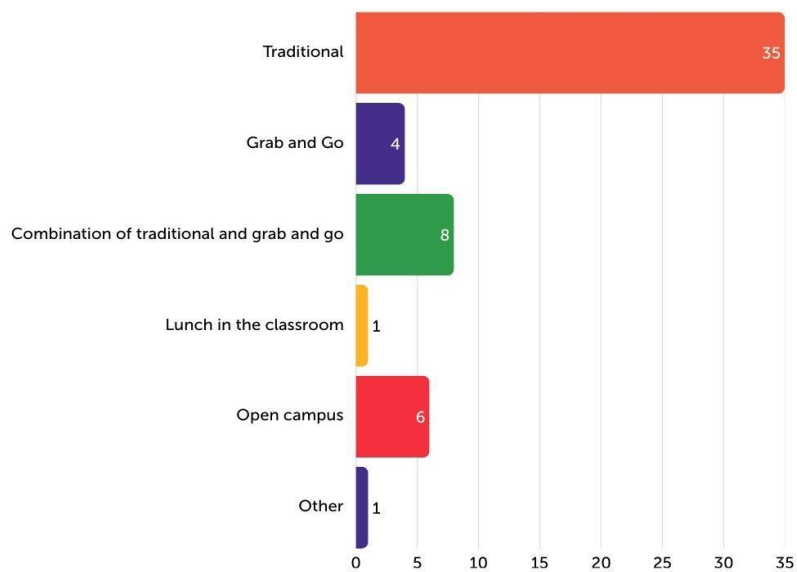
When asked what staff would like to see to overcome those challenges, common themes were giving students more time for breakfast and/or offering breakfast-after-the-bell alternatives. Additional comments included the need for more staff, resources and service stations.

School Lunch

While school lunch participation saw a 15% increase in the first year of Minnesota’s Free School Meals Program, it is still important to explore remaining barriers and challenges to ensure all students are benefiting from the program.

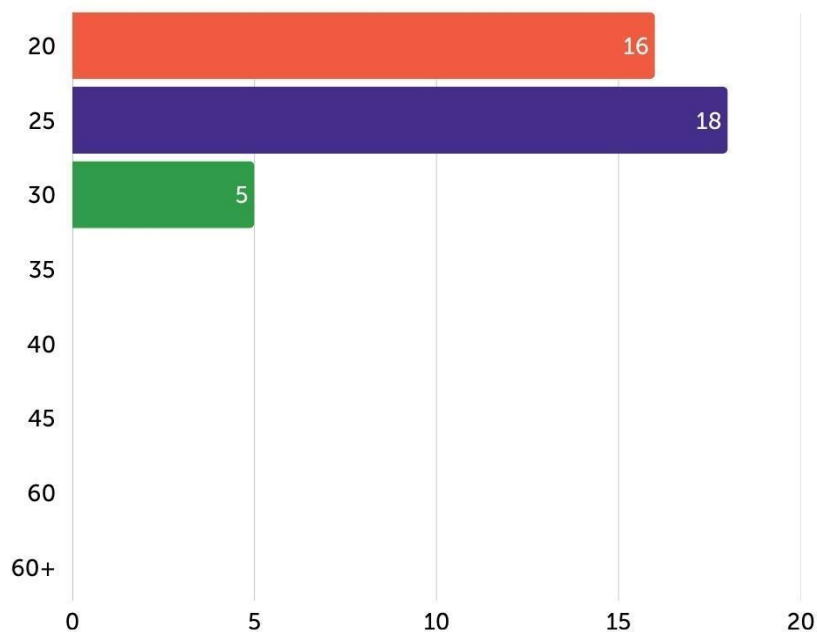
The majority of respondents (90%) indicated that they offer a “traditional” lunch model—meaning that lunch is served in the cafeteria—while 10% offered a “grab-and-go” lunch and another 20% offered a combination of the two. A few respondents also noted having an open campus where students can leave to get lunch and one noted serving lunch in the classroom.

10. What model does your school use to serve lunch?
(Select all that apply)

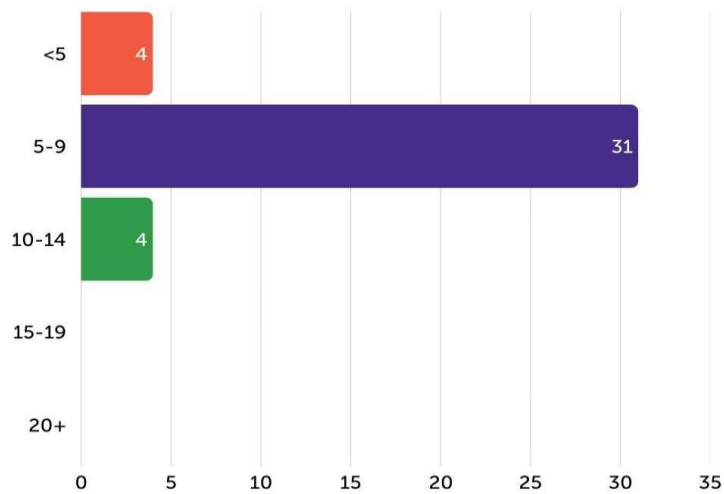


Most respondents offered either a 25-minute lunch period (46%) or a 20-minute lunch period (41%) while the rest (13%) offered 30 minutes.

11. How many minutes is each lunch period
(please select the closest option)



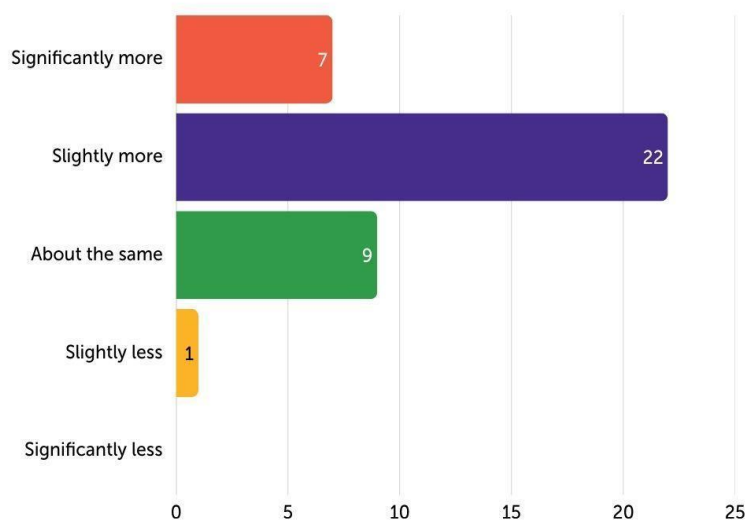
12. How long on average does a student spend in the lunch line:



When considering how much time is adequate for a lunch period, it is important to consider how much of that time a student is spending in line for their meal versus how much time remains for them to eat. The majority of respondents (79%) noted that students spend an average of 5-9 minutes in line.

Most respondents (56%) noted that the amount of time students are spending in line has increased slightly, while 18% noted a significant increase and 23% said it was about the same as before the Free School Meals Program.

13. Has the time that students wait in lunch lines changed since implementing the Free School Meals Program (FSMP)?



When asked about efforts made to help students get through the lines with enough time to eat, the most common responses were using multiple lines, offering grab-and-go items, having more staff, allowing for more time overall, and scanning badges v. having students enter pin numbers.

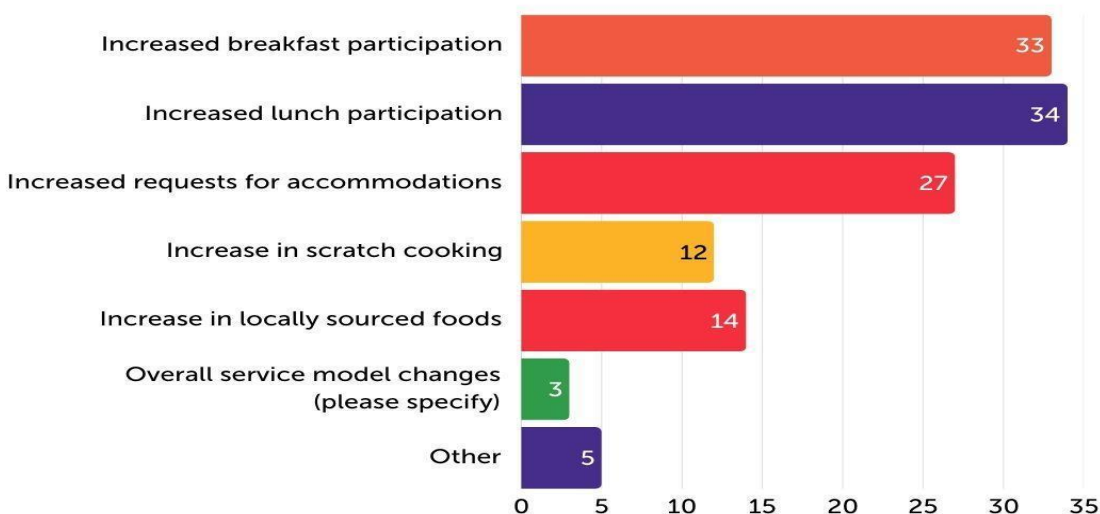
When asked to share one aspect of their lunch service that works well, the most common responses were having multiple lines, multiple meal options, good staff and teamwork, and not having to address students having insufficient funds. Other responses include having a 30-minute lunch period, having delicious and fresh food, knowing student likes and dislikes and menu planning.

Regarding one aspect of their lunch service that does not work well, the most common responses were not enough staff, long lines, having too many students coming at once, and feeling rushed with not enough time for students to enjoy their meals. Other responses include the lunch periods not being long enough, having outdated spaces, and having the number of choices offered competing with the speed of service.

Overall Changes

Respondents were asked about any significant changes to their meal services since the start of the Free School Meals Program. The majority of respondents noted increased participation in breakfast (85%) and lunch (87%) as well as increased requests for accommodation with special dietary needs (69%). In addition, 36% noted an increase in locally sourced foods and 31% noted an increase in scratch cooking.

17. Have there been significant changes to your meal services since the FSMP started in the fall of 2023 in any of the following ways (check all that apply)?



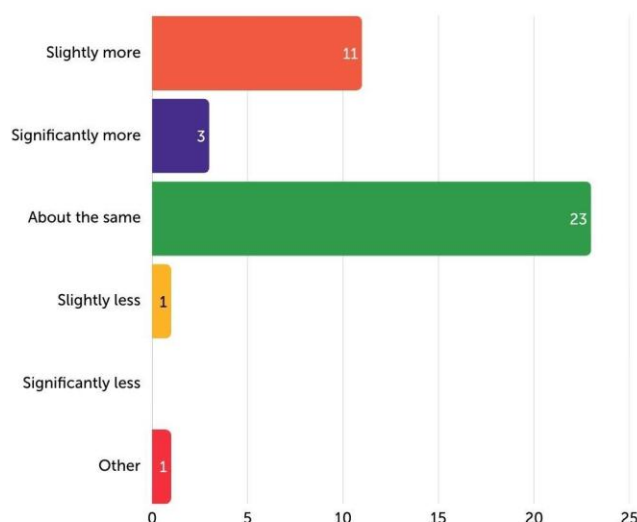
When asked about one challenge nutrition staff have experienced since the start of the Free School Meals Program, many respondents noted having long lines, too many students at once, and a lack of both sufficient time and staff. Other responses include needing equipment upgrades, confusion about free meals versus a la carte items for sale, food costs, finding local foods, food waste and a lack of community awareness about nutrition standards that need to be met.

When asked about one benefit nutrition staff have experienced since the start of the Free School Meals Program, by far the most common responses were having more students participating in meals and not having to collect payments and/or deal with meal debts. Some also noted having increased revenue to be able to invest in equipment, no longer having stigma in the lunchrooms, happier students and more food choices.

Respondents were also asked what staff or families have shared with them regarding the impact of the Free School Meals Program. By far the most common responses were that families are thankful for the free meals and find it to be a financial relief. Some also noted concerns about long lines, meal quality and staffing. Teachers said they felt the meals were helping students concentrate better.

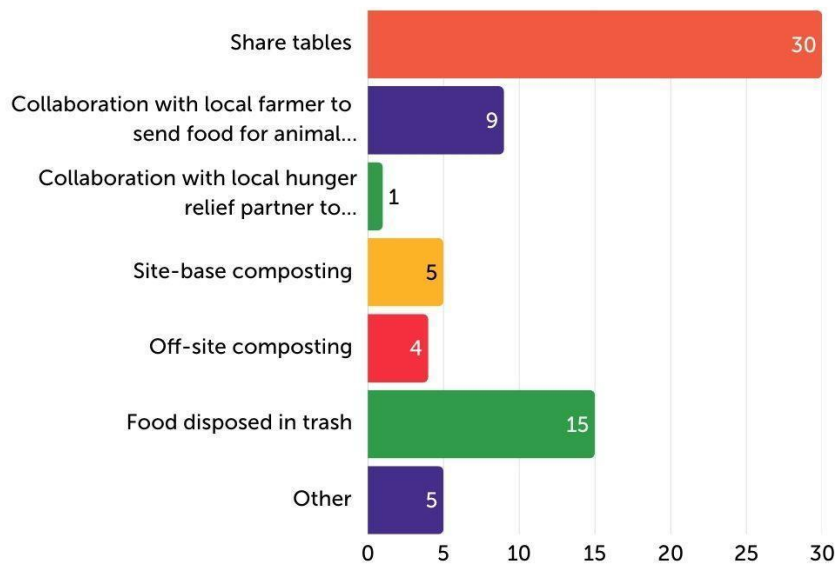
When asked about if schools are experiencing a difference in the amount of food waste per student since free school meals began, most respondents (59%) said that the amount of food waste was about the same while 28% said it was slightly more and 8% said it was significantly more.

21. Has your school or district experienced a difference in the amount of food waste per student since participating in the free school meals program?



Those that noted more food waste were asked how they manage it, and most respondents (77%) said they use share tables, 38% said it is disposed of in the trash, 23% said they collaborate with a local farmer, 23% said they compost either on or off-site, and one said

22. If you have experienced more food waste, how does your school or district manage food waste?

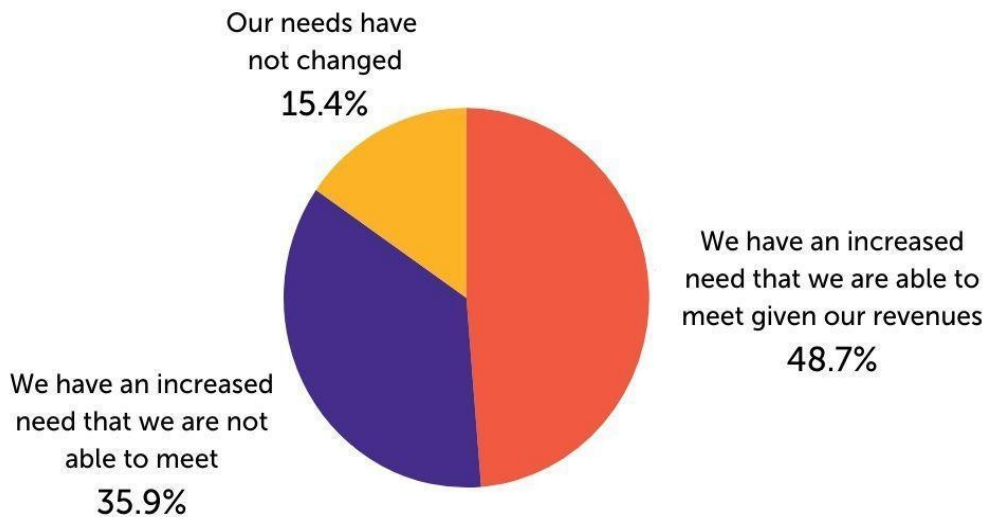


they collaborate with a hunger relief partner to rescue food.

When asked about barriers to the above options, many noted a lack of staff capacity to manage a partnership with either a local farmer or hunger relief provider. Some mentioned concerns about liability and a need for more education about share tables. Some also noted more education being needed regarding offer versus serve models so everyone is aware of what students may not need to take if not interested.

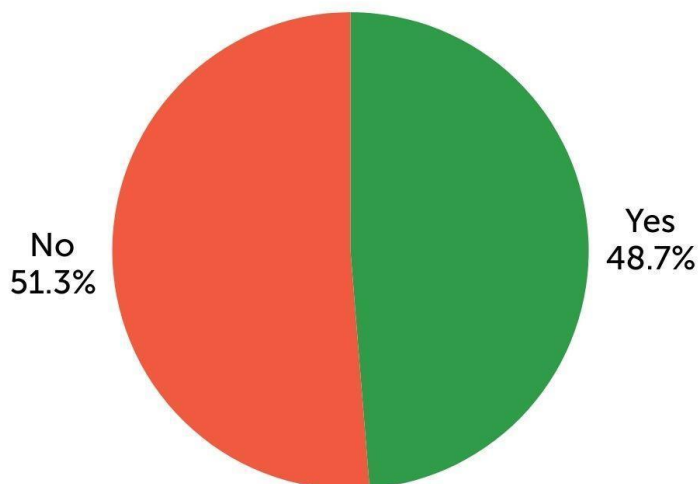
In terms of changes in space or equipment needs for food preparation, about half (49%) said that they have been able to meet increased needs with increased revenues while 36% said they have insufficient revenue to meet increased needs and 15% said their needs have not changed.

24. How has your need for workspace and/or equipment for food preparation changed since the implementation of the FSMP?



When asked if they have enough food service staff to serve all students now participating in school breakfast and lunch, the results were split with 51% saying they do not have sufficient staff and 49% saying they do. For those noting a need for more staff, some noted that the barrier is a lack of applicants and the number of additional staff needed ranged from 1-30.

25. Are there enough food service staff to serve all students participating in school breakfast and lunch?



The last question asked school nutrition staff about any additional support they would like to have to be more successful in their work. Again, the top response was additional staff followed by additional resources, space and equipment. Other topics mentioned include more support from district leadership, more time, administrative help, closing campuses, less dietary requirements, the ability to offer an additional service line, recipes for scratch cooking, access to more healthy and affordable foods and more tools and best practices from other districts.

A Case Study on Breakfast After the Bell

Patty Buell, Food Service Director at Pequot Lakes School District, is a big fan of what is commonly called “Breakfast After the Bell”. Often offered to reduce barriers to a traditional breakfast service model, Breakfast After the Bell services typically involve one or more of the following options:

1. Breakfast in the Classroom (delivered to and eaten in the classroom)
2. “Grab and go” (picked up from the cafeteria or kiosks on the way to class)
3. Second chance breakfast (after first period, often in a “grab and go” style).

While the Pequot Lakes School District has high participation in traditional school breakfast for elementary and middle school students, getting high school students to participate was a challenge. As a result, they have experimented with a variety of different models over the years.

Although they tried breakfast in the classroom and using carts, they found that the easiest option was offering a second chance breakfast to all high school students after their first period. Students are given time to come pick up their breakfast from the main service area, which they are then able to take with them to class.

The benefits of using a second chance option from their perspective is that it requires minimal additional labor. As Patty says, “It’s already set up!” It’s just a matter of extending the time period for allowing breakfast service to take place.

When asked if staff have noticed any benefits of improved access to breakfast and lunch for their students with increased participation, she noted that in addition to benefiting performance in the classroom, less students have been going to see the school nurse due to “tummy aches”.

In terms of advice for other districts considering Breakfast After the Bell options, Patty’s advice is to start small. It is important to have buy-in from staff at all levels. Once something is in place, adjustments can be made but the impact will speak for itself.

A Case Study on Best Practices in Minimizing Food Waste

Spencer Fischer, Nutrition Director with District 196, has a long list of ways his team minimizes food waste while serving an average of 21,000 students lunch each school day. At the top of his list is the concept of their “offer versus serve” model. Although there are federal nutrition standards that dictate overall calorie requirements and the inclusion of fruits, vegetables, whole grains and milk, students still have choices about what exact foods they want to make up their meal.

To address the fact that some students may not want to eat everything they receive, while others may want extras, they use “share tables” to balance out their offerings. For example, some students may not want the milk that is commonly served as part of a meal, in which case they can leave it in a cold well for other students to take. Other students who bring lunches from home can then get a free milk from this share table. For students who are hesitant to eat all their fruits and vegetables, a popular choice is to take packets of dried fruit, which can come in handy as a snack when they get hungry later.

The District 196 nutrition services team is also regularly working to have their menus evolve based on what is popular with students. Their team of chefs and managers meet multiple times each year to discuss ideas and develop recipes. Students are engaged in taste tests to confirm what will be well received and ideas to leverage new trends. For example, when talking with students about a popular fast food chicken restaurant, it became clear that having the right sauce was a key driver of interest – so the team was able to replicate that experience in the cafeteria. Now that bento or Mezze boxes are trending, the team is working to add that to the menu.

Despite team’s best efforts, some amount of food waste is inevitable when serving thousands of students. Since lunch is prepared in batches spanning the various lunch periods, some adjusting is possible from one batch to the next to reduce waste. Some foods are also able to be reused within the same week. However, when unexpected events come up such as school being cancelled for a snow day, they are often able to quickly get perishable items to local food shelf partners. Finally, they work with Dakota County to compost any additional items that cannot be used.

A Case Study on Farm to School

Minnesota began investing in the Farm to School program in 2013 with demand steadily increasing ever since. The program reimburses schools for local purchases through smaller “First Bites” grants, larger “Full Tray” grants as well as support for equipment.

If you want to see an example of success, look no further than the Hutchinson, Litchfield and Dassel- Cokato School Districts who work together and benefit from having a dedicated Farm to School Coordinator. Since they first received a grant in 2020, the districts have purchased over \$1 million in local foods including carrots, cucumbers, cherry tomatoes, beef, dairy, maple syrup, honey and dry beans. As their program has grown, they have invested in new equipment including industrial processors, better oven technology, vacuum sealers and bulk milk dispensers.

Acknowledging that getting started can be overwhelming, they offered the following myth-busting tips:

1. There is no “right way” to do Farm to School. What’s best varies by community.
2. Districts can buy produce from farmers and growers – no special license is required.
3. It’s a good idea to start with “low touch” fresh produce items. Think lunchbox peppers, cherry tomatoes, and cucumbers.
4. For a smoother transition, pick produce with a longer shelf-life and student familiarity. Think carrots.
5. Don't reinvent the wheel. There are so many passionate people you can find support from, including at the [Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy](#) and the [Minnesota Department of Agriculture](#).

In addition to benefiting farmers and local economies, Farm to School is a win for Hutchinson, Litchfield and Dassel- Cokato schools. As students have become more connected to where their food comes from, they are discovering new tasty and healthy foods, leading to increased school meal participation.