



2025 Minnesota Universal School Meals Program Evaluation – Family Perspectives

May 2025

Data collection, analysis, and preliminary synthesis were conducted by the Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement (CAREI) at the University of Minnesota.

The final report was prepared by The Food Group, incorporating portions of CAREI's work.

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 public schools chose not to participate in the program.

The purpose of this report is to share parent/guardian's perceptions of the Free School Meals for All (FSM) program during 2024 & 2025, gather formative feedback for continuous improvement, and document outcomes based on survey and listening session data. The parent/guardian perspectives report was meant to address evaluation questions 1 – 5, however, due to the cancellation of funding this report is simply a draft and cannot adequately address the questions alone.

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?

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 partnership to spread the word to attract participants across Minnesota. The 2024 family-focused evaluation consisted of a statewide family survey including data of participant responses about their experiences in both 2023 and 2024 and four community-based parent/guardian listening sessions with two individual interviews for parents/guardians unable to attend the group listening session(s). 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 Parent/Guardian perspectives evaluation.

2024 Family Survey

The 2024 family survey, directed towards parents/guardians, was conducted using Qualtrics, a University of Minnesota licensed web-based survey platform. Community partners helped spread the word to attract survey respondents. Parents/guardians who completed the survey were offered a \$10 electronic gift card incentive. The survey was conducted in April and May 2024. There were 544 respondents to the survey. After removing responses that did not provide an email address, there were 500 responses to the survey. There was one email that appeared in the dataset twice. Their first response was used and the second was dropped, leaving 499 valid responses. Of the 499 responses, 498 of them were in schools that participate in the program. The survey requested respondents include their name for the gift card fulfillment. All identifying information, including the parent/guardian'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 parent/guardian who identify as Black, Indigenous, people (parent/guardians) of color, BIPOC (self-reported by respondent, n=199). Of these 498, 199 indicated they were a race other than only White. Respondent data were also disaggregated by parents/guardians who indicated they have lived experience with food insecurity at home. Food insecurity (n=424) was determined based on if their student was eligible for free meals during the 2022-2023 school year OR if their student had to skip meals because of the cost of meals. Disaggregation of the survey data allowed the evaluation team to examine the effects of the Free School Meals for All program on BIPOC families and families with lived experience of food insecurity in comparison to the general population of respondents.

2024 Family Listening Sessions

Listening sessions for parents/guardians were hosted by three community-based partners. Two of the sessions included one-on-one interviews conducted via Zoom, a web-based meeting platform. Community partners conducted outreach to engage parents/guardians who identify as parents/guardians of color and/or parents/guardians who have lived experience with food insecurity. Each participant received a \$100 electronic gift card for participating. All participating parents/guardians have students who attend/ed schools that participated in the Free School Meals for All program.

Listening sessions were conducted between October 2024 and March 2025. 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

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.

Of the 498 parents/guardians whose student(s) attended a participating Free School Meal institution, the largest percentage of respondents identified as White (59.9%, N=299) followed by Black or African American (23.6%, N=118), Multiracial (8.2%, n=41), Hispanic/Latino (6.6%, n=33), and Asian (1%, N=5).

Family Survey Results

Participating Schools - Overall

Table 1

Did your student qualify for free school meals during the 2022-2023 school year?

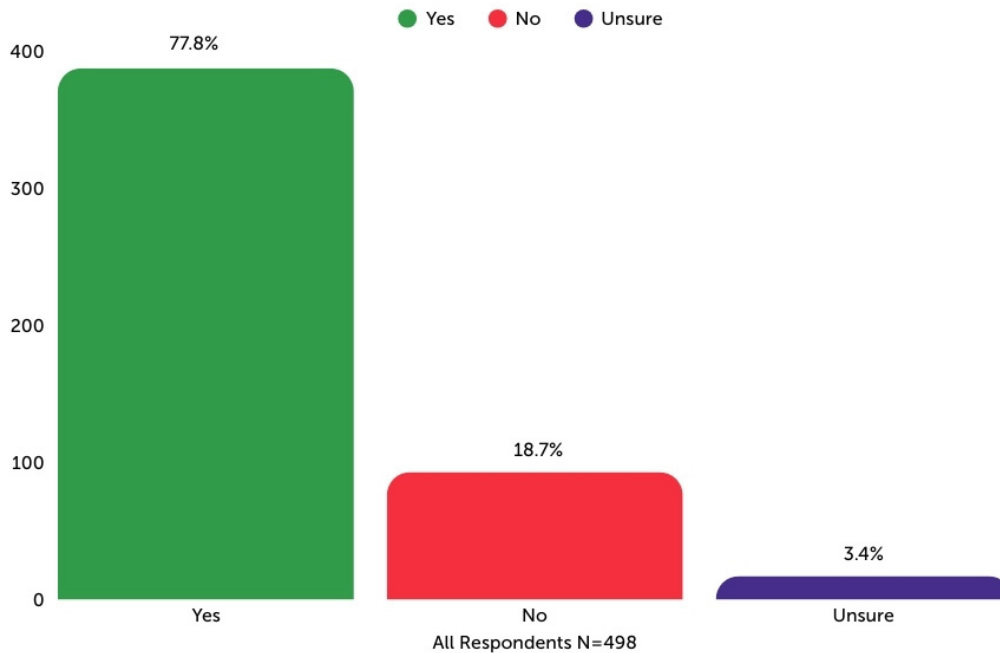
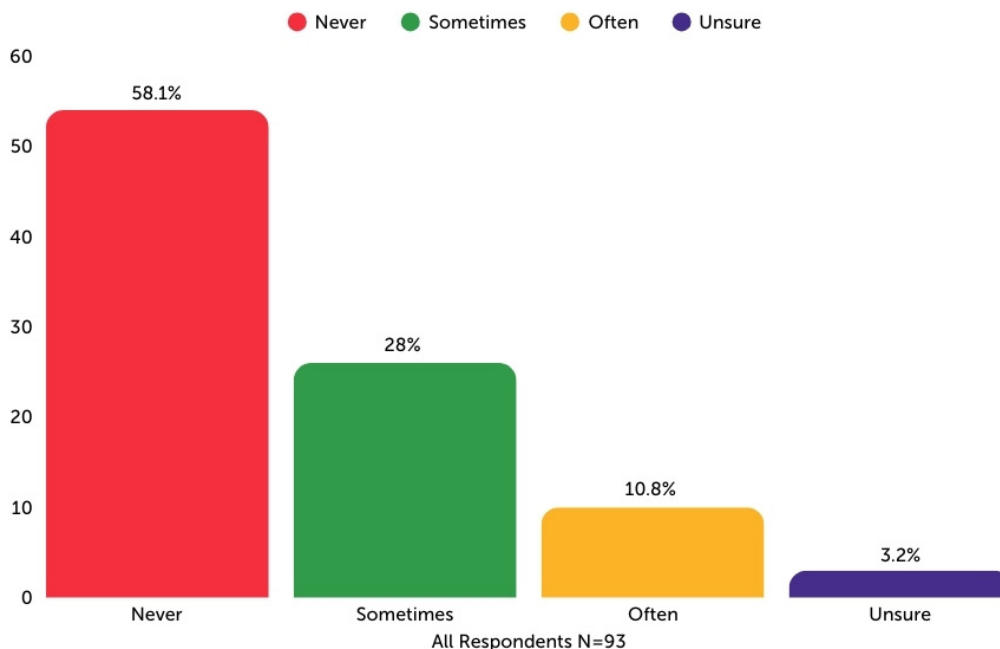


Table 2

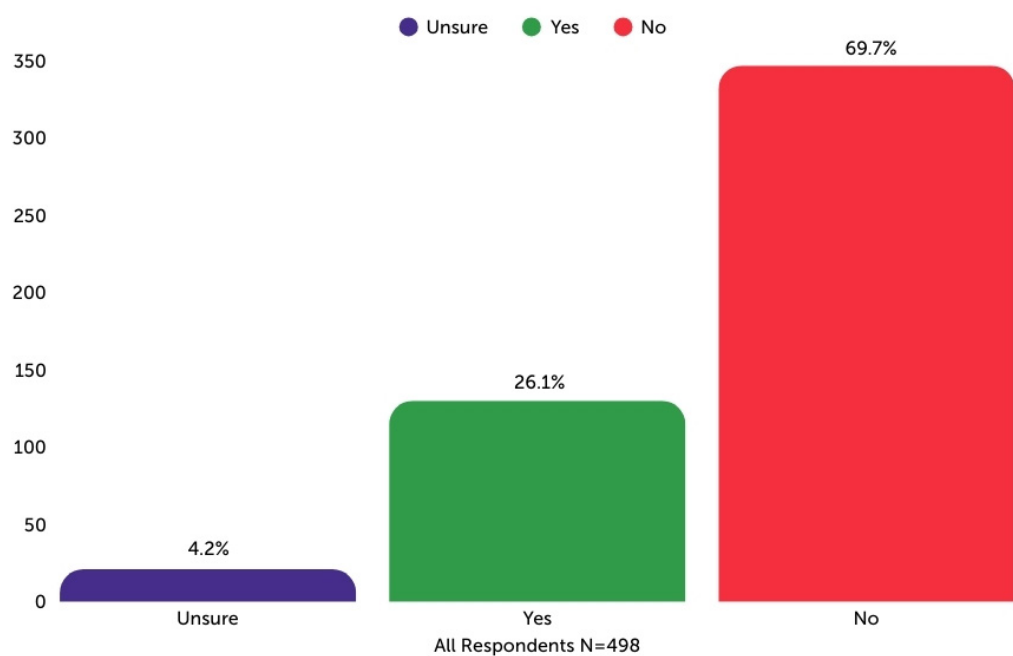
You said your student did not qualify for free school meals in 2022-2023. How often, if ever, did your student have to skip breakfast or lunch because they forgot lunch money or because of school meal costs?



The survey first asked about family qualifications for the FSM program during the 2022-2023 school year. More than three quarters of all respondents (77%) shared that their student(s) were eligible for the free school meal program (Table 1). For those families of all respondents that identified they did not qualify, 38.8% of families felt their student(s) missed out on a meal because of school meal costs or forgetting their lunch money (Table 2). This rate increases to 70.8% when examining the data of BIPOC families, and 100% of families who've experienced food insecurity (EFI).

Table 3

Prior to the current school year (2023-2024), were you aware of your student being denied a school meal or given an alternative meal (like a cold sandwich instead of a hot meal) due to insufficient funds in their account?



Next the survey asked about parent/guardian’s knowledge of students receiving alternative meals due to insufficient funds in their account (Table 3). This was similar across all three disaggregated demographics of which 26.1% of all respondents were aware, followed by 28.6% of BIPOC families, and 28.5 % of families with food insecurity lived experiences. This phenomenon was raised during the parents/guardians listening sessions as many felt the FSM program plays a crucial role in diminishing stigma and social divides across different socioeconomic groups that contribute to barriers causing students to receive an alternative meal.

Table 4

How often does your student eat breakfast at school this year?

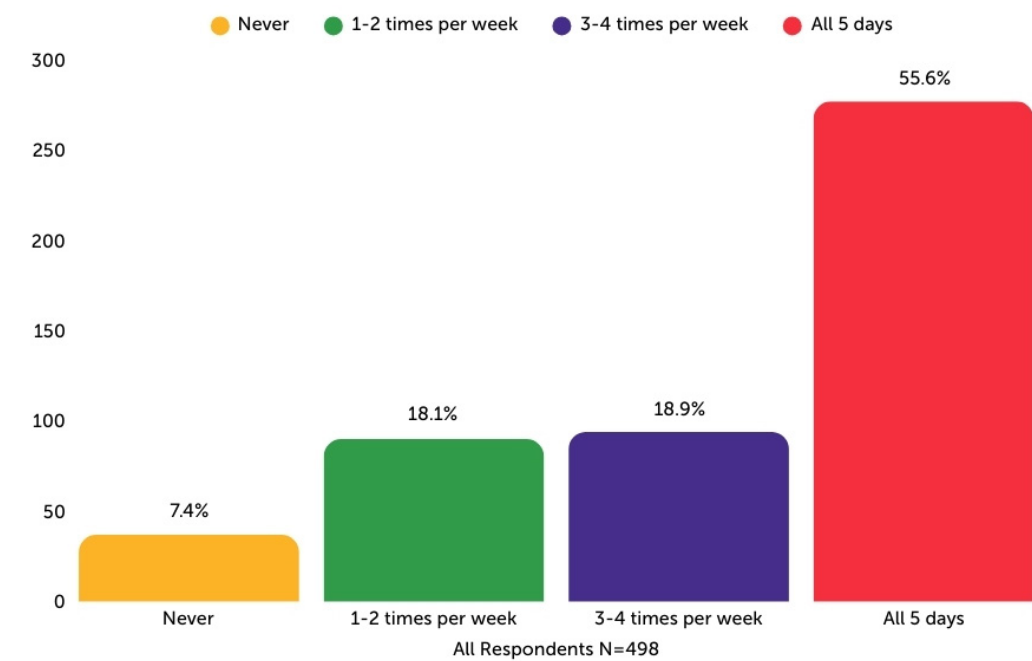
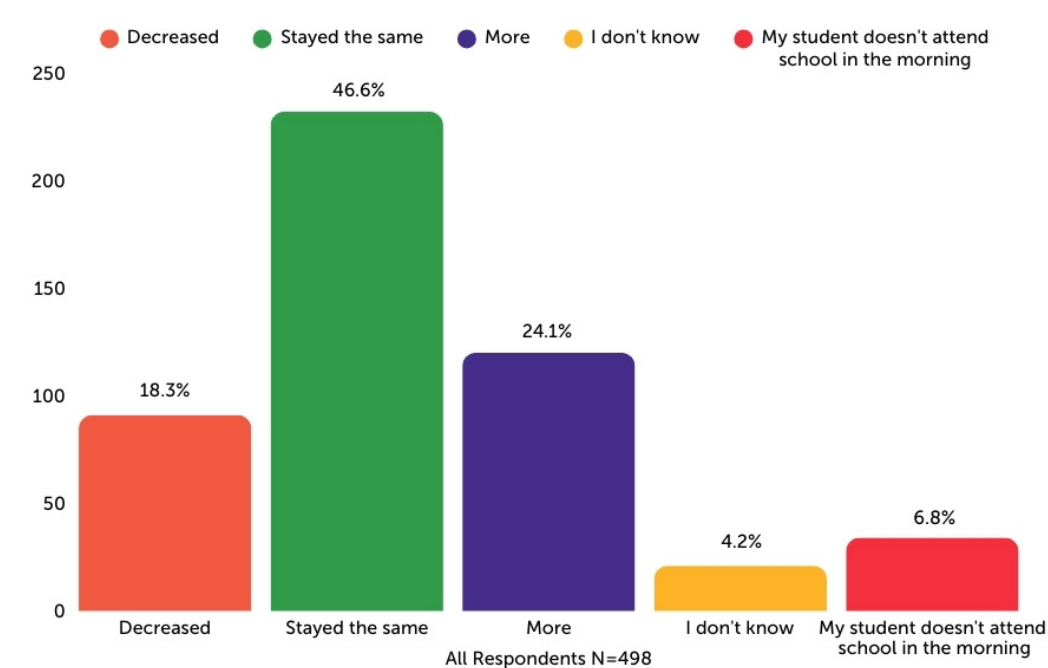


Table 5

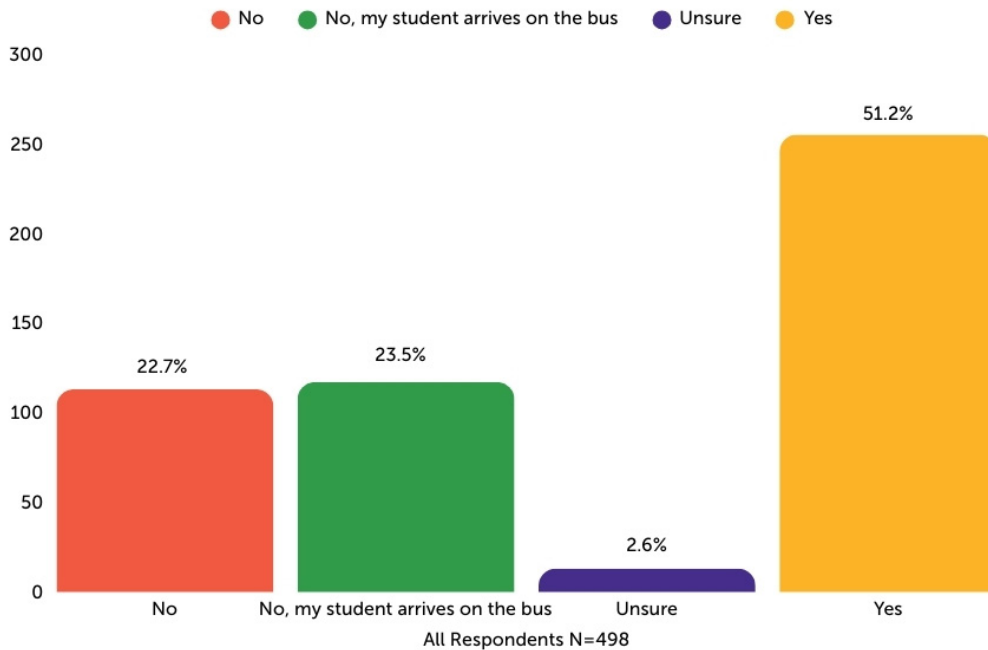
Has the number of days your student eat breakfast at school changed from last year?



Next the survey attempted to gauge how often students ate breakfast at school before the FSM (Table 4). Since the implementation of FSM, 24.1% of all respondent families indicated an increase in eating breakfast at school, 18.6% by BIPOC families, and 22.9% by families with lived experience with food insecurity (Table 5). Of interest, some students began eating less at school during this time as 18.3% of all respondents' students' breakfast use decreased. This is further explored later in the report (see Table 9).

Table 6

Would you send your student to school earlier if you knew they would get a healthy free breakfast?



The survey also ascertained if parents would be interested or willing to send their student to school earlier. Of all respondents 51.2% indicated they would send their student to school earlier to receive a healthy free breakfast which remains consistent across the three survey demographics. However, 23.5% of all survey respondents (19.6% BIPOC & 23.1%EFI) indicated they would not be due to bus arrivals. Parents/Guardians in the listening sessions echoed similar sentiments as they were frustrated or disappointed that the bus consistently ran late and did not allow time or opportunity for their students to get breakfast (Table 6).

Table 7

How often does your student eat school lunch this year?

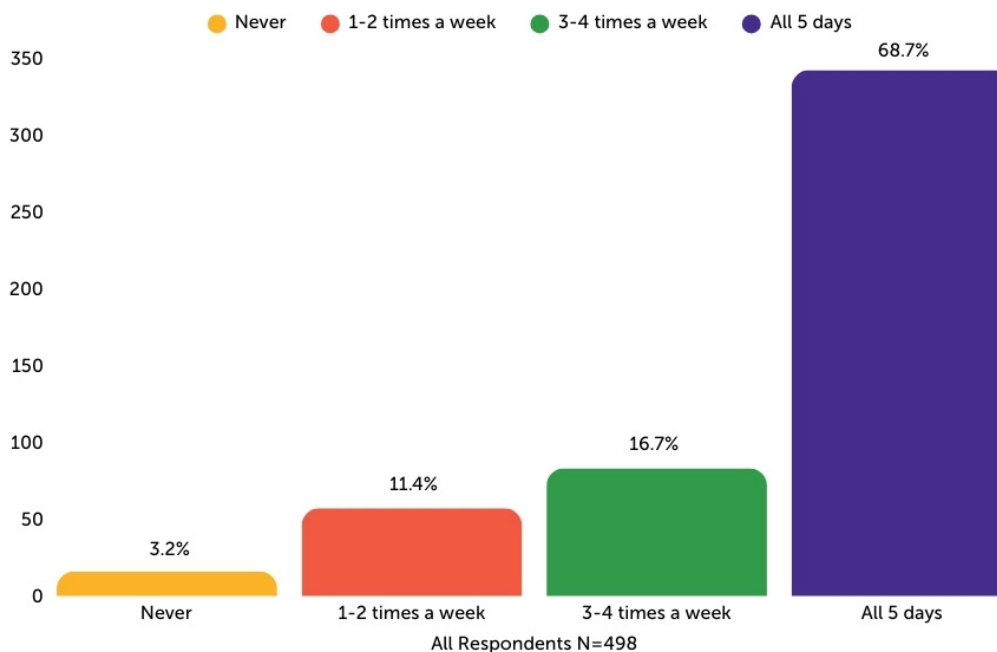
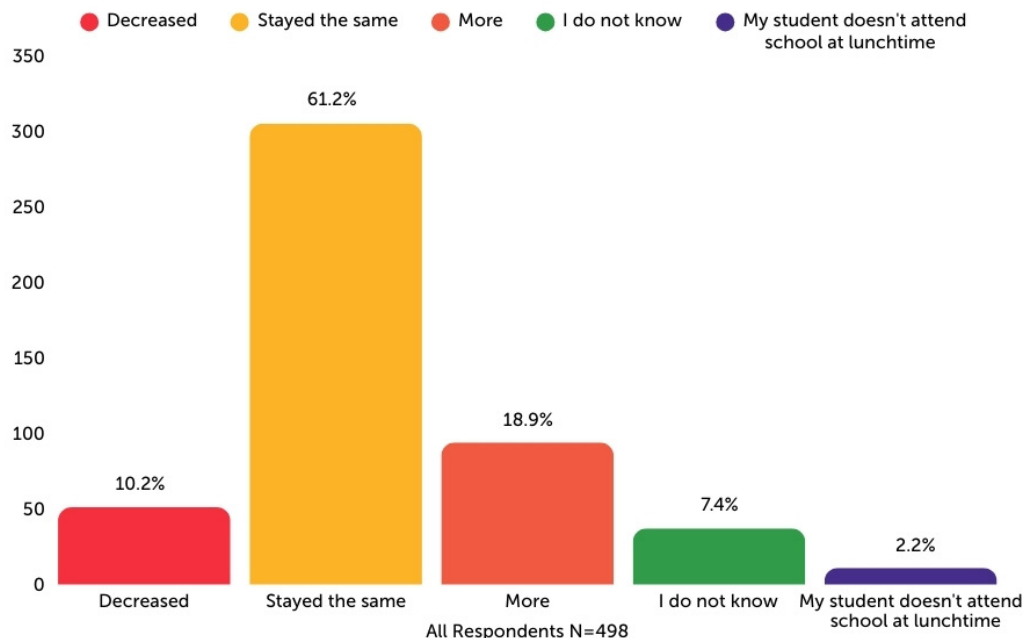


Table 8

Has the number of days your student eats lunch at school changed from last year?



Similar to breakfast, the survey attempted to gauge how often students ate lunch at school before the FSM (Table 7). Since the implementation of FSM, 18.9% of all respondent families indicated an increase in eating lunch at school, 18.6% by BIPOC families, and 16.7% by families with lived experience with food insecurity. Of interest, some students began eating less at school during this time as 18.3% of all respondents' students' breakfast at school decreased.

One rationale that consistently surfaced in the listening sessions which may contribute to the decline in breakfast and lunch by some families is the food quality. Although the FSM program is generally viewed as beneficial for food security, there are significant concerns about meal quality, portion sizes, and dietary options. Parents frequently report their children feeling hungry after meals, which they believe to often be made up of canned or processed foods, lacking fresh fruits and vegetables. While student feedback indicates that meals are decent, many students of respondents describe the food as poorly seasoned and insufficient in portion sizes (15.1%), with inadequate accommodations for dietary restrictions. Roughly a quarter (26.7%) of parents shared that the food options did not meet the dietary restriction of their student(s), About 12% of respondents shared the meals do not meet the student's religious needs, and almost half (49.4%) of respondents shared their students simply do not like the meal options.

Another concern raised that could contribute to the drop in lunch and breakfast participation is the time allotted for students to eat. The meal service timing is problematic for some parent/guardian respondents. They shared their students often have too little time for breakfast or lunch due to tight schedules and long lunch lines. However, according to some participants, time may not be a factor in the decrease of lunch and breakfast participation as mealtimes are impacted by longer lines at some high schools due to increased participation.

Suggestions for improvement include offering more diverse ethnic options, seeking student feedback on meals, and ensuring that food is freshly prepared.

Table 9

You indicated your student do not eat school lunch every day. What are some reasons they do not eat school lunch? - Selected Choice

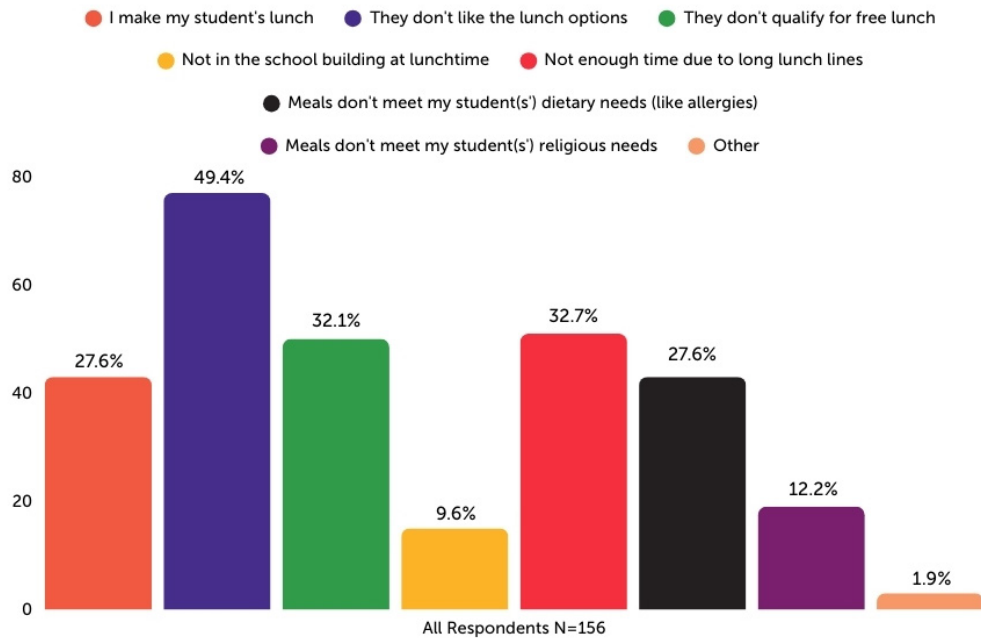


Table 10

The portion size meets my student's needs - Selected Choice

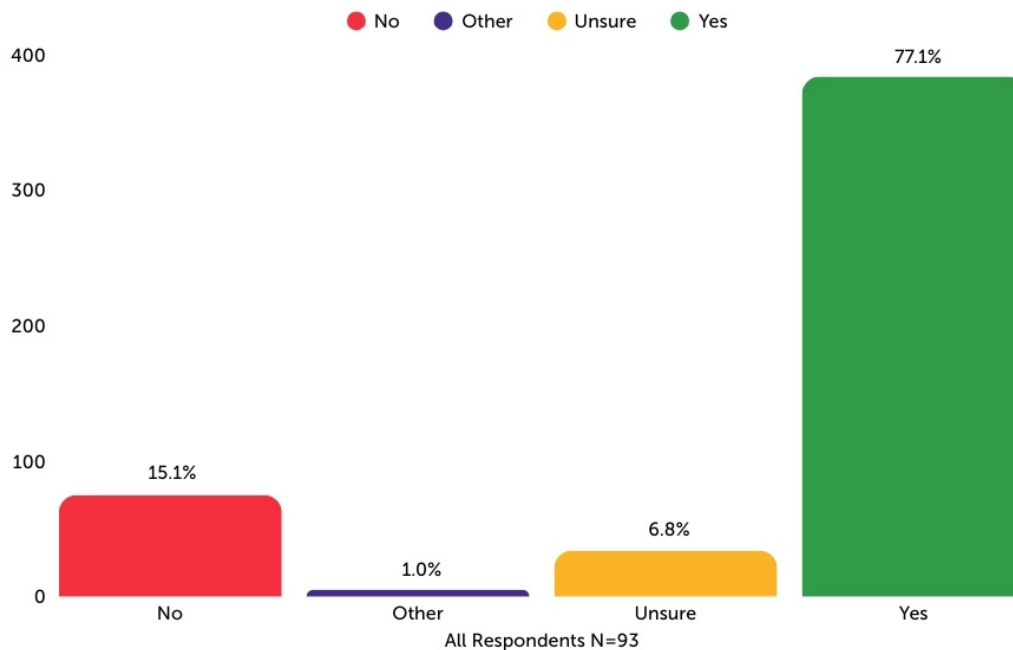


Table 11

In what ways, if any, has not preparing breakfast or a lunch for your student to bring to school affected you? (Select all the apply) - Selected Choice

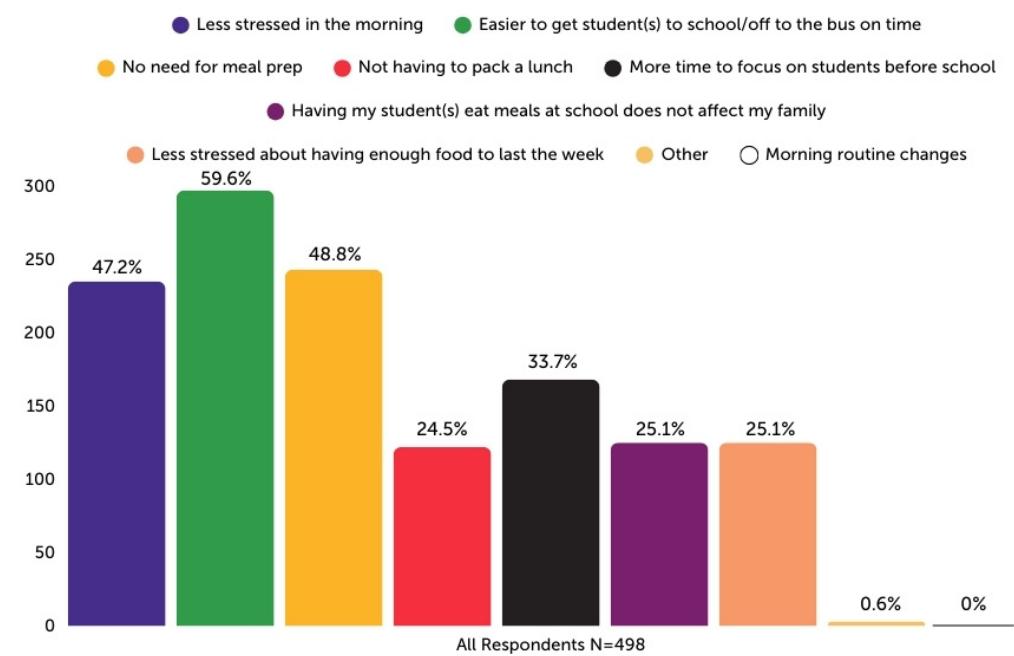


Table 12

In what ways, if any, has not having to pay for school breakfast and lunch for your student impacted your family? - Selected Choice

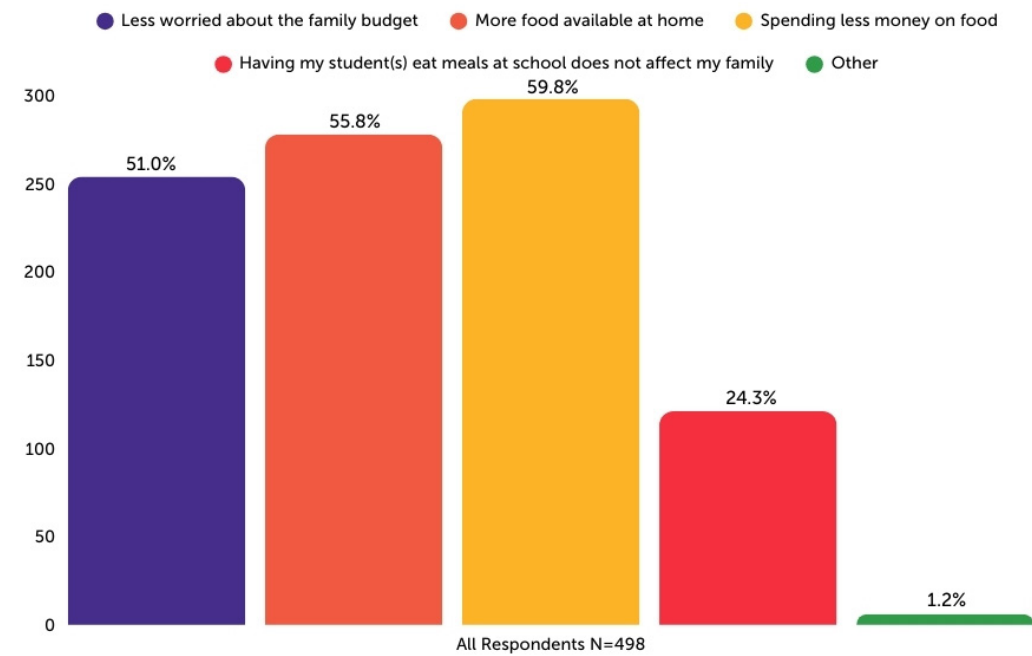
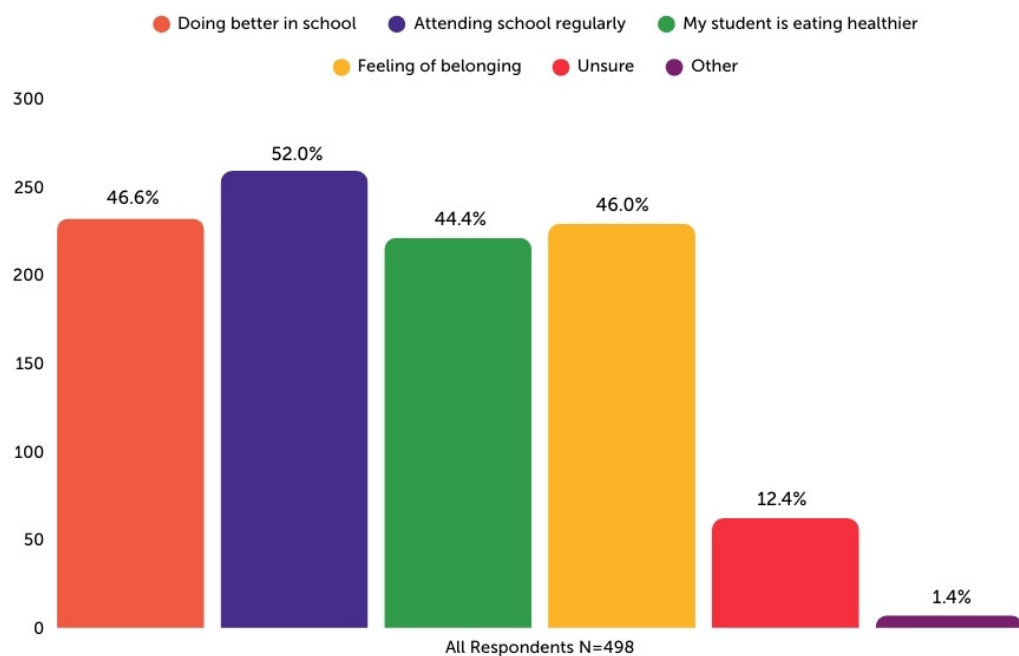


Table 13

Having access to free school meals has contributed to my student:
(Select all that apply) - Selected Choice



Overall perspective

Based on the parent/guardian survey results combined with the data from the listening sessions, participants recognize or at least acknowledge benefits associated with the FSM program. Participants share that the implementation of FSM for all students in Minnesota is very important, noting that it guarantees access to nutritious food and alleviates financial strain on low-income families. This aligns with survey results where many respondents reported relief from worry about family budgets (51%), spending less money on food (59.8%), or retaining more food at home (55.8%). The program has supported household finances by eliminating the cost of school meals, allowing families to allocate those funds toward other means.

Additionally, participants highlight how having both breakfast and lunch provided for students at school is especially valuable for families struggling to afford these necessities. FSM has eased financial and logistical burdens on families, allowing parents to shift their focus to other priorities. Approximately half of survey respondents reported benefits such as relief offered in bus logistics (56.9%), saved time on meal prep (48.8%), and an overall less stressful mornings (47.2%). These top three benefits were consistently reported across various demographic groups.

In general, listening session participants shared that students having access to breakfast and lunch through FSM fosters improved concentration and engagement among students who may lack adequate food at home. This is consistent with survey results, where 46.6% of all respondents indicated their student performed better in school during the implementation of FSM. These numbers are even higher among BIPOC families (51.3%) and families who experience food insecurity (50.2%).

Suggestions for Success

While the primary impact of FSM - feeding students - has been viewed positively by both survey respondents and listening session participants, there remains potential for enhancement. Specifically mentioned in this report are limited time for eating and food quality concerns to ensure equal access to nutritious food, thus fostering a supportive educational atmosphere and addressing issues of food insecurity and financial hardship for families. However, overall, the provision of free, healthy, and plentiful meals for all students is consistently identified by respondents as a valuable aspect of the program.