**Parent Perceptions of School Meals Influence Student Participation in School Meal Programs**

*An article in the Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior suggests that the way parents view school meals can impact how likely their children are to participate in meal programs at school.*

**Philadelphia, April 15, 2024** – Since the implementation of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act in 2010, school meals in the United States have significantly improved. Several factors have been reported to impact student participation in school meals, including parental perceptions of school breakfast and lunch. A recent research article in the *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*, published by Elsevier, assessed the association between parent perspectives on the school meal program and student participation.

Researcher Monica D. Zuercher, PhD, MS, Nutrition Policy Institute, Division of Agriculture and Natural Resources, University of California, explained, “Because on average school meals offer better nutrition than other sources of food consumed by American children, maximizing meal participation is a priority.”

This study involved 1,110 parents, guardians, and caregivers in California with at least one child in grades kindergarten through 12th grade attending a public or charter school in the state. The sample reflects the characteristics of California school students with regard to race and ethnicity, region, and free or reduced-price meal eligibility. Parents responded to an online survey sharing their feedback on school meals during the school year 2021-22 when school meals were free for all students nationwide. The survey comprised 10 screening questions (e.g., state, county, ethnicity, race, type of school, household size, and
household income) to determine eligibility and collect demographic data, followed by 34 questions assessing various aspects of school meal programs. The survey was designed to gather 15 parental perceptions of school meals and was available for self-administration in English or Spanish using Qualtrics software, accessible online via various devices.

Three groups of parental perceptions were identified: (1) positive perceptions (e.g., liking school meals and thinking they are tasty and healthy), (2) perceived benefits to families (e.g., school meals save families money, time, and stress), and (3) negative perceptions (e.g., concerns about the amount of sugar in school meals and stigma associated with low family income or embarrassment). More positive parental perceptions about school meals and their benefits to families were associated with greater student meal participation. In contrast, more negative parental perceptions were associated with reduced student participation in school meals.

Dr. Zuercher commented, “Parent perceptions of school meals appear to influence student participation in school meal programs. Working to ensure parents are familiar with the healthfulness and quality of school meals and the efforts schools are making to provide high-quality, appealing meals may be critical for increasing school meal participation rates.”

Notes for editors
The article is “Parent Perceptions of School Meals Influence Student Participation in School Meal Programs,” by Monica D. Zuercher, PhD, MS; Juliana F.W. Cohen, ScD, ScM; Christina A. Hecht, PhD; Kenneth Hecht, LLB; Dania Orta Aleman, PhD, MPH; Anisha Patel, MD, MSPH, MSHS; Deborah A. Olarte, PhD, RDN; Leah E. Chapman, PhD, MPH; Margaret Read, MA; Marlene B. Schwartz, PhD;

The article is openly available at https://www.jneb.org/article/S1499-4046(24)00004-6/fulltext.

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Full text of the article is also available to credentialed journalists upon request; contact Eileen Leahy at +1 732 406 1313 or jnebmedia@elsevier.com to obtain a copy or additional information. To schedule an interview with the author(s), please contact Monica D. Zuercher, PhD, MS, Nutrition Policy Institute, Division of Agriculture and Natural Resources, University of California, at mdrobles@ucanr.edu.

An audio podcast featuring an interview with Monica D. Zuercher, PhD, MS; and other information for journalists are available at www.jneb.org/content/media. Excerpts from the podcast may be reproduced by the media with permission from Eileen Leahy.

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