



FEEDING CHICAGO'S KIDS THE FOOD THEY DESERVE

The Lunch Ladies' View of Meals at Chicago Public Schools



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We are the 3,200 frontline workers who prepare over 77,000 school breakfasts and 280,000 school lunches each day for the children of Chicago in over 600 schools. We are also the grandmothers, grandfathers, mothers, and fathers of thousands of Chicago Public School students.



photo: USDA

Over the last two years, great changes have been made to fulfill the CPS goal of “providing healthy, nutritious and appetizing meals that will ultimately contribute to our children’s success in the learning environment.” Media attention and public debate has questioned whether these changes are working for the children of Chicago.

Serving on the frontline, we have a unique perspective on these changes. We see the schoolchildren of Chicago every day. We put food on their plates, and we see what gets left in the trash.

In December 2011, we talked to each other and asked questions about how well CPS food service changes are working. Our conversations led to a confidential survey of 436 lunchroom workers who have a combined 3803 years of experience on the CPS lunch line.

The results of our survey reveal the inside story of the struggle our schools face in getting children in our communities the food they deserve.

Survey Says: We haven’t had enough input in the changes.

75%
of those surveyed
reported not having any
input on the new
recipes and food

As workers who prepare and serve these meals, we often get to know the students we see on a daily basis. We care about what we do and the children we serve. We have an opportunity to encourage them to eat well and to make healthy food choices. This is just one of many ways we feel we contribute to kids’ well being in our jobs.

Despite our vital role, our relationships and our experience, 75% of us reported not having any input on the new recipes or food we serve to CPS children.

We acknowledge the efforts made to improve the nutrition of the food served in Chicago’s public schools: a majority of cafeteria workers surveyed consider the new food CPS is serving to be healthy.

But that’s not the whole story.

Survey Says: Kids aren’t eating the food. We don’t see principals eating it either.

42%
of those surveyed
felt students are
eating the new food

The meals we serve are vital to our communities. Many students rely on school meals as their primary source of food, and these meals can account for half of students’ daily calories. That is, if the kids eat the meals.

In our survey of people who see not only what food kids eat but also what is left on the line and in the trash, only 42% of respondents reported that

CPS students are eating the new food. Who benefits from healthy but uneaten food?

In February 2011, the *Chicago Tribune* reported that participation rates in the CPS lunch program “dropped to as low as 70% since the district switched to healthier options, even though 86% of students get lunch free or at reduced rates.”

Unfortunately, school principals do not seem to be leading kids by example. Fifty percent of survey respondents reported rarely or never observing that the principals at their schools eat school lunches from the cafeteria.

We take pride in ensuring that kids are properly nourished. Additionally, we are concerned about the impact any continued decline in participation rates could have on our jobs and schools. Lower participation rates could impact staffing as well as the funding reimbursements CPS gets from the federal government.

To be clear, we support the introduction of healthier food into Chicago’s cafeterias. That said, we believe that if CPS is going to succeed in improving the healthfulness of the food while increasing participation rates, they must incorporate our input, experience and skills.

Survey Says: We want to cook food, not just reheat it.

There are two models for food preparation and service in CPS schools. Some schools use a traditional cooking method to prepare food onsite in the school kitchens. Other schools use a frozen food model where food is prepared off-site, frozen, and reheated at the school. An overwhelming 73% of respondents said that food at cooking schools was superior to frozen food schools.

We want CPS to commit to the cooking school model so we can use our talents to cook fresh food for the children of Chicago. We call on the Board of Education not to transition any more schools from cooking to frozen food schools and ensure that all new school construction projects are planned with full-size kitchen facilities capable of real cooking.

Survey Says: We have a lot of potential.

We want to do the best job possible to provide for the children in our communities. We need proper training in the preparation of healthy food options, and 62% of those surveyed reported wanting training on healthy food.

CPS has worked with food service provider Chartwell’s to provide some workers training on healthy food. Only 26% of our coworkers who responded have received this training. Of those who did, 66% felt it was helpful in their job. More of us should have the same opportunity!

A recent poll conducted by the bipartisan team of Hart Research and American Viewpoint, which was commissioned by the Kids’ Safe and

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of those surveyed reported rarely or never observing the principals at their schools eat lunches from the cafeteria

73%

of those surveyed thought food at cooking schools was superior to frozen food schools

62%

of those surveyed want more training about healthy food

Healthful Foods Project, indicates that a majority of the public support extra training. According to the poll, 70% of voters support providing school cafeteria workers with more training to help them cook safe and healthier meals, while 59% favor helping schools pay for new cafeteria equipment that will help workers prepare healthier meals.

Survey Says: CPS should encourage us to talk to students and parents about concerns.

If the food in our lunchrooms really shouldn't be eaten – if there are quality or safety problems – we would be the first to know. No one has a better vantage point on food safety than those of us who are preparing it and serving it.

We have an important role as watchdogs of our kids' food, and we believe CPS should actively encourage us to inform students and parents about any concerns we may have in the future. Such encouragement would be in the direct interest to the health of the public. Currently, only 39% of respondents felt they could report concerns about food safety or quality to students or parents without being disciplined. Fearful workers are not likely to speak up if the time comes.

39%
*of those surveyed
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Our Vision: Feeding Chicago's Kids the Food They Deserve

Ultimately, the Board of Education is responsible for the welfare of CPS students. Some progress has been made to introduce healthy food into the menus of these schools. However, as our survey highlights, major problems affecting both Chicago's kids and our jobs remain.

We stand ready to work with Chicago Public Schools to solve these problems. Accordingly, we recommend that CPS do the following:

- 1) Actively solicit and incorporate our input as it improves school food. We have a unique perspective and a lot of experience.**
- 2) Make a commitment to cooking, which means CPS needs to agree to:**
 - Avoid replacing cooked food with frozen food
 - Build full-size cooking kitchens in all new schools
- 3) Help us reach our full potential as caretakers for Chicago's children. We want comprehensive training on cooking, serving and eating healthy food.**
- 4) Encourage us to keep students and parents informed if we feel there is a problem with food quality or safety in our cafeterias, and ensure that we are protected by our collective bargaining agreement if we do so.**

Certainly there are many other changes that can be made to improve food at CPS, but if we can take these steps, we know we'll have made a lot of progress towards getting the best food possible to Chicago's schoolchildren.