

Study says parent perceptions of school meals influence student participation in school meal programs

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A new study suggests that the way parents view school meals can impact how likely their children are to participate in meal programs at school.

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* assessed the association between parent perspectives on the school meal program and student participation.

Researcher Monica D. Zuercher, Ph.D., 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: positive perceptions (e.g., liking school meals and thinking they are tasty and

healthy), perceived benefits to families (e.g., school meals save families money, time, and stress), and 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."

More information: Monica D. Zuercher et al, Parent Perceptions of School Meals Influence Student Participation in School Meal Programs, *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior* (2024). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jneb.2024.01.003](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jneb.2024.01.003)

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