

## **Executive Summary: Bexley School District Lunch Survey**

The Bexley Health and Wellness Committee, in cooperation with researchers from Ohio State University and with guidance and assistance from Bexley District administrative and foodservice officials, devised and administered an online survey of households with children attending Bexley elementary and middle schools. The survey gathered perceptions of Bexley plate lunch offerings, descriptions of how household decisions are made about children's lunch options and reactions to possible changes to plate lunch offerings.

During March 2012, 267 respondents representing 472 Bexley students provided complete survey responses, a sample which represents nearly one in four of the targeted households. The sample features households with children attending each school complex, with incomes greater than Bexley city averages and with racial diversity less than that of the Bexley school population. About 30% of respondents report that their children eat plate lunch several times a week, about 40% report less frequent plate lunch consumption and about 30% report that their children never eat plate lunch. In addition, 53% report being aware of the 2010 Ohio law, SB 210 or Healthy Choices for Health Children Act, which has motivated changes in Bexley foodservice policies.

### **Insights**

Respondents perceive that Bexley plate lunches have become healthier over the past two years and now regularly feature healthy items. 86% agree that Bexley plate lunches have become either much healthier (20%) or somewhat healthier (66%) in the past 2 years. While only 6% characterize current plate lunches as 'very healthy', 41% agree that there are many healthy items offered weekly while 43% agree that there are a few healthy items offered each week.

In order of importance, drivers of household choices about children's lunch options are (1) taste/whether the child will eat the lunch, (2) health and (3) price and convenience. For respondents marking the lowest income category, price is of greater importance, though taste and health continue to dominate food choice decisions. When asked about the importance of factors driving current plate-lunch purchase frequency, 74% said whether their child likes the plate lunch offering was very important while 56% marked that healthiness was very important. The percent marking other factors as very important were much lower, including limiting their child's line waiting time by packing a lunch (24%), the convenience of not having to pack a lunch (20%), and the cost of buying plate lunch (16%).

When asked if certain lunch changes would increase willingness to buy plate lunch, the most highly rated responses were to offer more fresh, whole foods; to offer more entrees made from scratch; and to improve the taste of the food. Changes to health, convenience and cost were rated lower. When presented with a hypothetical weekly lunch menu and asked to select the days their child would likely buy plate lunch, the biggest driver of choice was the perception that the child would eat the lunch, followed by perception of the lunch's healthiness and then price, though, among those who buy school lunch daily, price is of equal or greater importance.

For all questions and scenarios discussed above, separate analysis was conducted for respondents who marked the lowest household income category of less than \$75,000 per year. In each case

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price was a more important driver for these households than for households in other income categories. However, taste and health remain the key drivers regardless of income category. For example, for the question asking the importance of factors driving current lunch purchasing decision, 39% of households reporting the lowest income category reported that cost was a very important issue, while 65% reported that whether the child will eat the lunch is very important and 53% reported that healthiness was very important.

Children exert a strong influence in household decision making about school lunches. When asked about children's relative input when deciding which days school lunch would be purchased, 56% responded that children have more influence over the decision than adults, including 48% whose youngest child was in grades K-3. This may reflect a parental understanding that, it is the student who must choose to eat the food and that uneaten food, regardless of its healthfulness, provides no nutritional or economic value.

### **Implications**

The relative importance of the taste/palatability of lunch and the important role of children in decisions concerning plate lunch purchases suggests that the dominant driver of plate lunch sales is student perception of the taste of plate lunch items. Research suggests that among the most effective ways to increase children's perceptions of the palatability of healthy foods is through repeated trial. Hence, the survey results are consistent with continued support of 'Try it Tuesdays' as an effective pathway to stimulate purchases of healthy school lunch offerings.

The consistent, relative importance placed on taste/palatability and healthfulness of the plate lunch offering over the cost of lunch among respondents of all income categories suggests that pricing may be an avenue to cover additional costs needed to heighten the perceived taste and healthfulness of plate lunch offerings needed to further stimulate plate lunch demand, though the effects on frequent lunch buyers and lower income families may require more detailed study.

### **Other Considerations**

About 75% of eligible households did not respond to the survey. These non-respondents had lower incomes and greater racial diversity than respondents, and may hold different attitudes, opinions and intentions concerning plate lunch offerings that could alter the findings above.

Actions that would increase the uptake of lunches may exacerbate lunch line wait time, which is currently rated as a mid-level concern of parents. Increased wait times further limit the time available for students to consume lunch, which limits the amount of food actually consumed. More research into streamlining lunch service to minimize lunch line wait times and extending eating time at lunch may be necessary, particularly if plate lunch demand increases.

### **More Information**

For more information, including the survey instrument, detailed statistics and reports contact Brian Roe ([roe.30@osu.edu](mailto:roe.30@osu.edu)).