

**GENYOUTH.**  
FUELING POTENTIAL. EMPOWERING PLAY.

# Fueled by Students

**Unlocking the Full Potential  
of School Meals**

2025 Youth Insights on School Nutrition



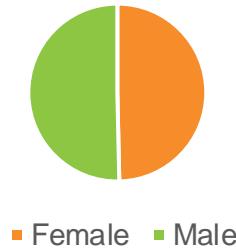
## Youth Insights Survey on Nutrition

# Methodology and Demographics

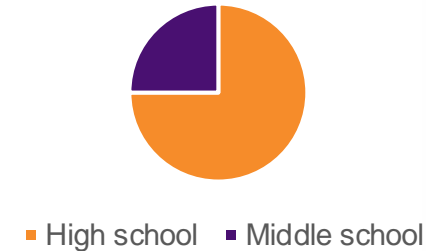
### Survey Design and Methodology

- Online survey conducted **November 8 to December 5, 2024** with a weighted, nationally representative sample of **1,028 students**, ages **13-18** from public, private, and parochial schools
- Survey design was informed by a GENYOUth **advisory committee** and **Youth Council members**

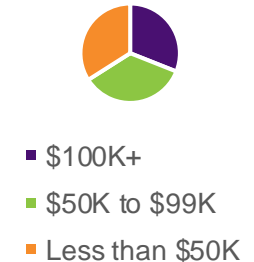
#### Gender



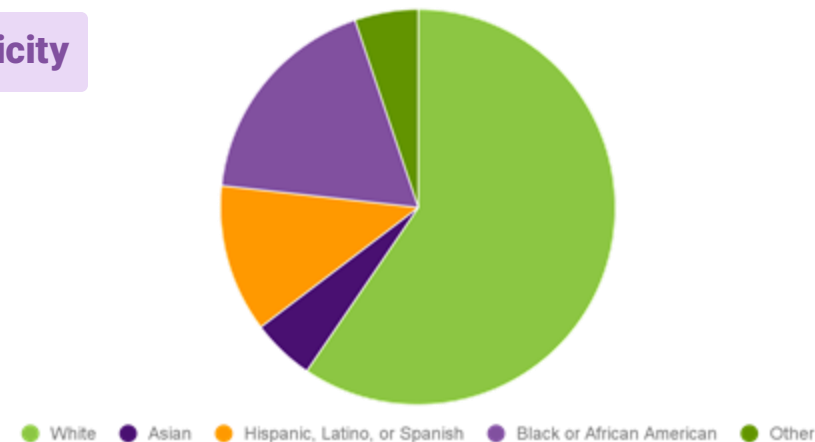
#### School Level



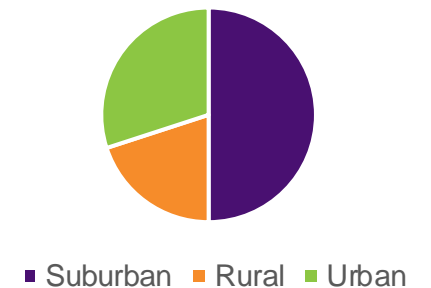
#### Household Income



#### Ethnicity



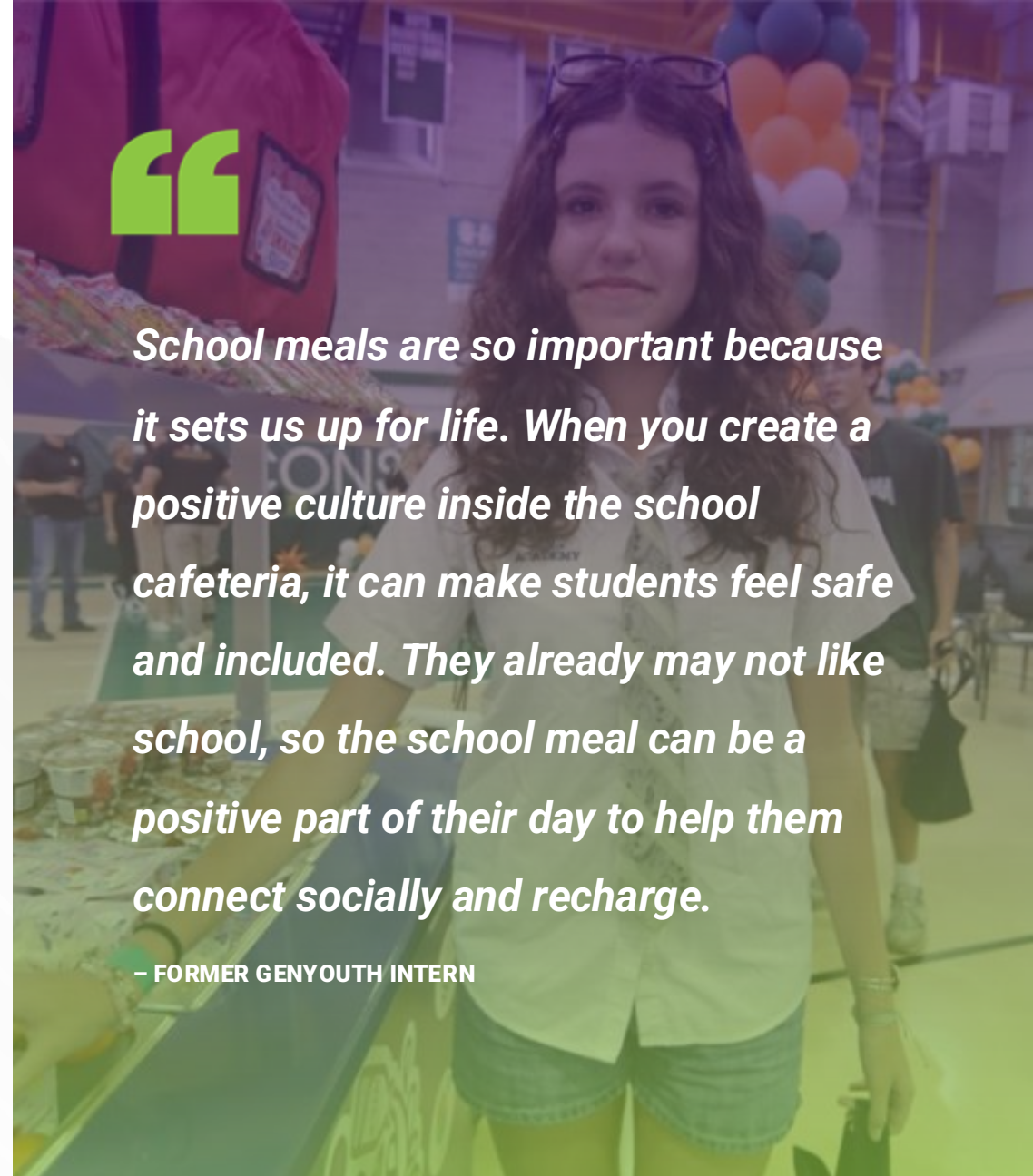
#### Home Location



# School Nutrition Programs are working

A gap exists in student nutrition and well-being and school meals are filling this critical need

-  **Nearly 80-year history:** improving child nutrition and supporting domestic agriculture
-  **Constant evolution,** keeping up with nutrition science.
-  **Creativity at the local level:** menu planning, farm to school programs, scratch cooking, global flavors
-  **Opportunity** to meet the demands of today's students



*School meals are so important because it sets us up for life. When you create a positive culture inside the school cafeteria, it can make students feel safe and included. They already may not like school, so the school meal can be a positive part of their day to help them connect socially and recharge.*

– FORMER GENYOUTH INTERN





# Students as customers in the school meal program

About 30 million students participate in school meal programs daily

At least weekly consumption of school-provided meals	Food Insecure Youth	Food Secure Youth	All Youth
Breakfast	77%	54%	59%
Lunch	92%	83%	84%



81%

of food-insecure students say school meals are as healthy as, or more healthy than, home meals, compared with 66% of food-secure students.



# School nutrition programs foster nutrition security

Access to school meals are a lifeline for food insecure teens who skip meals more regularly

Skipping meals	Food Insecure Youth	Food Secure Youth	All Youth
Breakfast at least weekly	60%	57%	57%
Lunch at least weekly	42%	27%	30%
Dinner at least weekly	26%	10%	13%



59%

59% of food insecure youth say school meals help them meet the recommended servings for all five food groups

# School nutrition programs are critically important to foster nutrition security among teens



**30% of teens** indicated they experience at least one of the USDA criteria for food insecurity, with 18% who meet or exceed the definition of food insecure as aligned with the classification by the USDA



More teens report **not feeling self-conscious** about getting a free school lunch in states with free meals for all (45% vs. 37%)



**Those teens who are marginally food secure\*** have critical gaps that school meal programs can fill—Only 16% have access to after- or before-school meals/snacks, but 76% would use the service if available

\* Marginally secure youth experience one or two USDA-defined indicators of food insecurity (students classified as food insecure experience at least three indicators).

# The next generation of students & nutrition

## Demographics:

- U.S. student population more ethnically and culturally diverse than ever
- Changing dietary needs and preferences

## Evolving context and “customer” expectations:

- Expectations around food quality, variety, and choice
- Expectations for fresh, sustainable, quality, customizable food
- “Fast casual” restaurants and meal delivery services make instant gratification and fresh options the norm
- Many students reject processed, reheated, or bland cafeteria meals

“

*Most restaurants have Yelp or some way to post customer reviews. It's interesting we don't have it at schools so students could share what they'd like more. This would give the people who make the food data to help them think about how to make things better. That would be cool.*

– STUDENT

# The Experience of School Meals

Student dissatisfaction centers around both the food itself and the overall cafeteria experience.



**50%** say that their lunch at school is the meal they enjoy the least in their day



**44%** of students say that their school lunches are not about enjoying food; it's just about consuming calories quickly



**52%** of food insecure students say they dread the lunch period



Students are most dissatisfied with school meals that lack:  
The availability of new and different food options (61%)  
Culturally diverse food choices (60%)



*So what I would like to see, a dream, would be “restaurant-like” bowls with all the nutrients in one meal. So all your vegetables, all your protein, all your grains in one place. That way you can't pick and choose and make it more appealing. If this could be part of school lunch somehow, it would be amazing.*

– STUDENT



# What youth want out of their school meal experience

What would “help a lot to make lunch period a more fun and enjoyable experience” for youth, especially those who are food insecure?

	Food Insecure	Food Secure
If I didn't have to worry about being bullied or hassled	<b>40%</b>	<b>22%</b>
If I didn't feel self-conscious about getting a free school lunch	<b>31%</b>	<b>17%</b>
If teachers/coaches ate lunch with us	<b>27%</b>	<b>10%</b>
If the food was healthier	<b>37%</b>	<b>24%</b>
If I could modify what was served to better suit my tastes	<b>54%</b>	<b>55%</b>
If I had more control over what I was being given to eat	<b>48%</b>	<b>44%</b>
If my school made more of an effort to make lunch period special or interesting	<b>38%</b>	<b>30%</b>



*Staff members typically like to engage with students during lunch. The principal might come over to somebody who's sitting by himself and ask 'how you doing mentally?' It creates a connection with staff.*

– STUDENT



# Time to eat is a key factor in satisfaction

**Time to eat is important** – they want to socialize and have a break with their friends.

But, **37% of youth** have just 20 minutes or less to actually eat their lunch after they get their meal

ACTIVITIES DURING LUNCH PERIOD	ALL YOUTH
Socializing with friends	<b>83%</b>
Solo leisure activities	<b>28%</b>
Studying	<b>21%</b>

SATISFACTION	20 MINUTES OR LESS TO EAT LUNCH	MORE THAN 20 MINUTES TO EAT LUNCH
The length of my lunch period	<b>38%</b>	<b>51%</b>
The time I have to socialize with friends	<b>49%</b>	<b>60%</b>
The time it takes to get through the food line	<b>40%</b>	<b>57%</b>



# Student engagement can drive greater satisfaction of school meals

POSITIVELY RATE SCHOOL FOOD BASED ON:	ENGAGED STUDENTS*	NON -ENGAGED STUDENTS
Variety of choices available	68%	36%
Cultural diversity	62%	32%
Overall healthiness	69%	42%
Freshness	73%	44%
Visual appearance	76%	43%
Taste	73%	43%

	ENGAGED STUDENTS*	NON -ENGAGED STUDENTS
Satisfied with school-provided breakfast	77%	60%
Satisfied with school-provided lunch	77%	51%
Agree: On most days, I consider lunch at school to be a positive food experience	90%	73%
Agree: My lunch at school is the meal I enjoy the most in my day	68%	39%

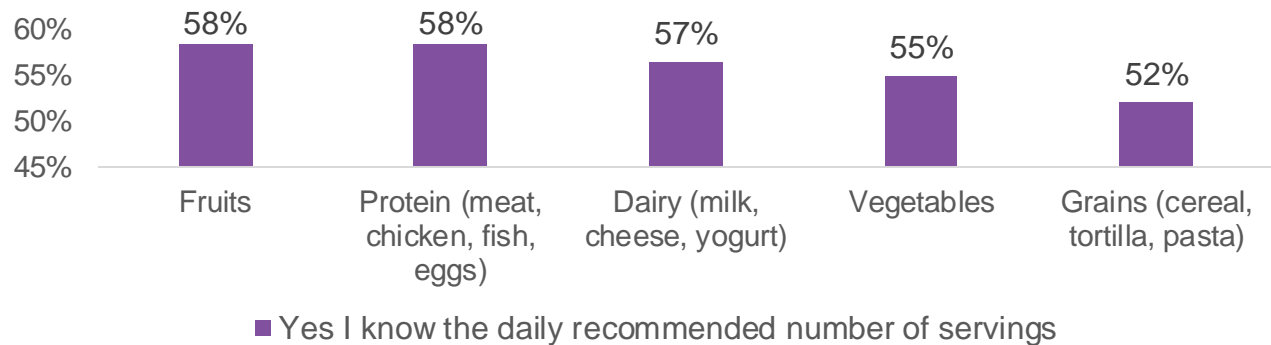


Only 17% of students say that they have a chance to give their input into menu planning and food choices for school-provided meals.



# School meals provide a natural opportunity for nutrition education

Just over half of teens know the daily recommended number of servings for the major food groups



60%

**Only 60%** of those who eat school-provided meals say they eat everything in the meal

Of those who don't eat everything, vegetables (52%) are most commonly not eaten



*In my school, I can't think of a time when they've actually just talked with us about how important eating healthfully is.*

— STUDENT









**Let's seize the opportunity to meet this moment with youth perspectives as a centerpiece.**



# Key Takeaways

## School Nutrition Programs are working.

-  Play crucial role in fighting childhood hunger and improving nutrition for all students
-  Opportunity to achieve more!
-  Serve as a living textbook for healthy habits
-  Support social and emotional well-being

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**Thank You**

Download the report at  
[genyouthnow.org](http://genyouthnow.org)

