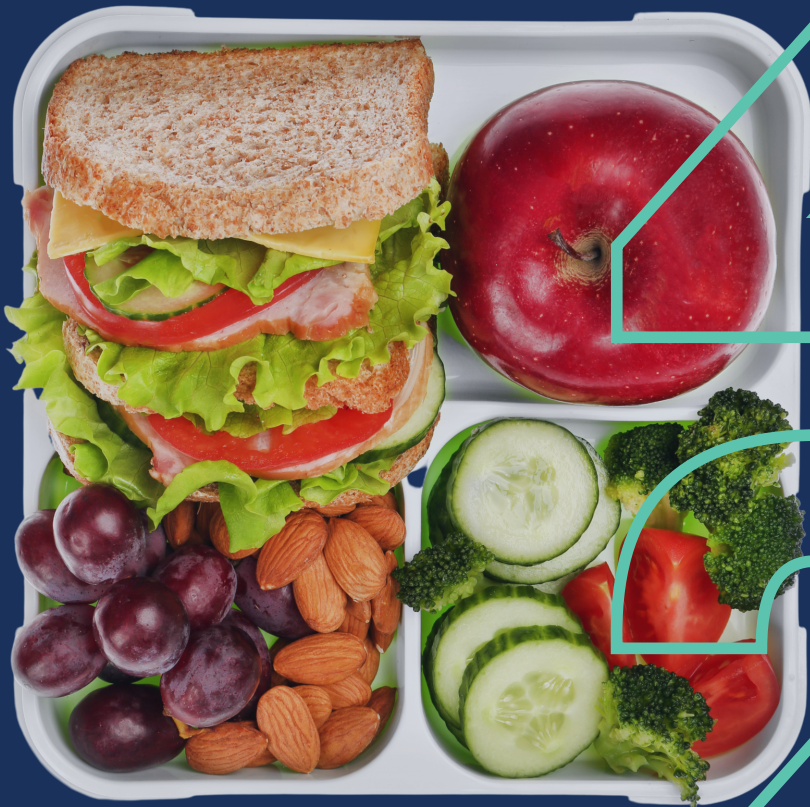




EAT REAL
WWW.EATREAL.ORG

SCHOOL FOOD SERVICE SURVEY SPRING



2021

INTRODUCTION

The 2020-2021 school year was unprecedented. We are beyond impressed and inspired by the ability of schools around the nation to adapt and find creative solutions to problems never faced before.

The pandemic brought a higher awareness of the role school meal programs play in their communities, prompting federal and state representatives to introduce legislation to make universal free school meals permanent. While a big win for child hunger, health, and wellbeing, it is not without its challenges.

After 13 months of navigating a pandemic and redefining school food, we surveyed the Eat REAL network of school food leaders to better understand their top concerns coming out of the 2020-21 school year and looking forward to 2021-22. With a 45% response rate, we received insights from leaders representing over 900 schools and 500,000+ students with diverse demographics.

Participants surveyed were asked to rank six of the most common concerns shared by foodservice directors and their staff, from budget to regulations. Their answers brought deep insight into the challenges school food service programs have faced and the additional support needed to continue to meet the rising need and food insecurity as we make our way to the other side of the pandemic.

We aim to amplify these voices and concerns to help continue the momentum of support school meal programs have gained during the pandemic. Too much stigma and misinformation surround school meals; Eat REAL is proud to partner with these important leaders in school food to raise awareness around the vital role their programs play in ensuring the health and well being of our children and planet.



TOP CONCERNS



01 — Budget

An overwhelming 75% of all survey respondents ranked budget as a top concern.

Budget/funding has always been a common struggle. During the pandemic, many school districts went into debt due to decreased participation, resulting in decreased funding. For others, the location closures, new packaging, and protocols also had a significant impact.



02 — Staffing

58% of respondents have concerns around staffing going into the next school year.

Like other foodservice sectors, finding and retaining staff has become more difficult for schools. School food service staff were among the critical front line workers, braving the risks of the pandemic to serve their communities.



03 — COVID-19 Adaptations

53% of respondents had concerns around the logistics of safely adapting meal planning, execution, and service.

There are still big questions going into the next school year: unknowns about the operations of the next school year, the number of children returning to school full time, and how universal free meals for onsite students will impact their programs.

“Many families and district personnel are unaware of the challenges of school food. Helping people see that it takes a team approach to make changes is important.”

-2021 survey respondent



TOP CONCERNS



04 — Supply Chain Impacts

44% of respondents saw the pandemic's impacts and increased demand on sourcing ingredients as a top concern.

Multiple districts noted variety had suffered due to impacts on farming, food manufacturing, distribution, and other factors along our food supply chain.



05 — Impacts on Scratch Cooking

39% of our respondents considered the changes they've had to make around scratch cooking a top concern.

The ability for districts to implement scratch cooking relies on many factors (e.g., facilities, budget, purchasing contracts, staff, operational flow etc.), and while a focus for many food service leaders, the pandemic impacted its feasibility. For several, the numerous complexities of serving packaged meals in a pandemic had to outrank this priority.



06 — Updates to Regulations/Policies

Overall ranking lower for our respondents, 28% saw these and potential future updates as a top concern.

USDA waivers for the 21-22 school year allowing schools to continue to provide universal meals for free to all children under age 18 were announced well ahead of the new school year, easing some critical concerns re: meal service policies.

92% of the Food Service Directors surveyed believe that Stakeholders' better understanding of current challenges to providing real food at schools would help increase support for improvements.



HOW DO WE HELP?

Unprompted and not listed among the topics asked to rank, 78% of our respondents commented on the need for more support - from parents, other district staff, the greater community, and state and federal government.

Our schools have the potential to become the critical drivers in ending childhood hunger and malnutrition. We need to remove the stigma of school meals and invest in these vital programs as they continue to improve and grow.

School meals can serve a student's best health interests and need to be recognized as an important part of the school day and not a disruption. Bureaucracy, budget, and other constraints are daily hurdles these programs tirelessly navigate. Awareness of the concerns, challenges, and dedication to creating these meals each day is an important first step in building the powerful programs we want and need for our children.

These dedicated heroes prioritize feeding our children above all else. School meal programs are evolving to become more nutritious and sustainable. We need to help ease the burdens in accomplishing these goals and create a better future for our children.



“Schools provide food security to our vulnerable children, we can be part of the solution to helping not only fight hunger but meet the health needs of our children.”

-2021 survey respondent

