


# Reimagining School Cafeterias



**A human-centered study on the current  
state and future of school food**







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We want to thank the many stakeholders and partners who have made the Reimagining School Cafeterias research project possible. First, we want to express our deepest gratitude to the many schools that welcomed us into their communities as part of the learning process and the students and stakeholders who shared their experiences and perspectives. We also want to thank the school and school nutrition department stakeholders, the FoodCorps staff and FoodCorps alumni from around the country who participated in other facets of the research process, and the community of funding partners who made this body of work possible. Finally, we want to give special thanks to the (tbd) collective for its partnership in this research project.

# Acknowledgements



# Introduction



Schools are—in a sense—the nation’s largest restaurant chain. But too often, our education system approaches feeding 30 million kids a day as a burden: lunch time is a drain on learning time, cafeteria culture is a drain on school culture, and good meals are a drain on the general fund.<sup>1</sup>

Through an interlocking set of initiatives, FoodCorps is working to map the school nutrition landscape and rethink its purpose based on a simple vision: treating school food not as a cost center to be minimized but as a value center to be leveraged. What if school food could show us a future where every child gets the nourishment they need to thrive? What if it could affirm children’s cultures and identities and invite their agency to the table? What if it could show children they are valued and cared for in a way that food—the currency of human connection—has uniquely done for eons?

FoodCorps believes in a future where every child, regardless of race, place, or class, gets the healthy food they need to thrive. When that vision is realized, quality food will be celebrated and served in all our nation’s schools, and food will play a powerful role in student development, school culture, and the health and vitality of local communities.

The research documented in this report seeks to amplify a unique and chronically undervalued perspective in the national conversation about school nutrition: the perspective of students themselves. Children are the customers of our nation’s school meal programs and deserve to be respected as such. Also documented in this

report are the perspectives of frontline cafeteria staff, teachers, administrators, and FoodCorps service members who witness and co-create the daily experiences students have in the lunchroom.

We invite you to listen to the voices of students and stakeholders that follow in these pages. And as we embark on new initiatives across the supply side of school nutrition, we hope you will join us in reimagining our nation’s 100,000 school cafeterias as places of joy, justice, health, and belonging.

Sincerely,

**Lucy Flores**

Director of Program Innovation  
Project Lead, Reimagining School Cafeterias  
FoodCorps

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Co-Founder and Chief Executive Officer  
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<sup>1</sup>U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, “National School Lunch - Participation and Meals Served”, <https://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/child-nutrition-tables>.



# Reimagining School Cafeterias

An elementary school cafeteria  
12:09 p.m.

Marcus, a fifth grader, races into the cafeteria, eager to move around after sitting all morning. “Tacos again?” he thinks as he stands in the line. He grabs a milk and inspects the jicama sticks, not quite sure what they are. He takes an apple instead, even though it has some brown spots, and hopes they have peach yogurt left.

Behind the serving line, Mrs. Donahue scoops taco meat as fast as she can to keep the students moving. Mr. Chan is new at the register and still learning to recognize the components of a reimbursable meal, so things are going more slowly than usual. When Marcus asks if there are any peach yogurts, Mrs. Donahue decides she has time to check in the back and is glad to find one, so he has something he wants to eat.

Marcus takes his assigned seat, clearing away a milk carton left from the period before, disappointed that he isn't sitting closer to any of his friends. Ms. Rodriguez, the vice-principal, walks between the crowded tables, constantly asking students to quiet down and reminding them to eat their food and not play with it. She wants the teachers to take a break, so she monitors lunch herself, but it's a lot of work for one person—and so loud! She's relieved when ten minutes later she dismisses the students. Marcus quickly takes a few bites of his apple before tossing it in the trash can and thinks, "Already? Lunch always seems so short."



# Reimagining School Cafeterias



Once a day, every school day, students, teachers, administrators, and cafeteria staff find themselves together in the cafeteria. Mealtime can be stressful, fun, chaotic, relaxing, or some combination, depending on where you are and who you ask.

FoodCorps believes that lunch time should be a positive experience, whether you're a student or a teacher, a school nutrition professional or a lunch monitor, or a principal. The cafeteria should be a welcoming place where children feel safe and supported and adults are enabled to do their best to care for them. The school community should look forward to lunch not only for time to relax and socialize but also for the healthy and appealing food.

About 30 million students eat lunch at school every day in the US, and almost 75 percent of them qualify for free or reduced-price lunches. Every student deserves a joyful, safe, and inclusive cafeteria that makes them feel respected, no matter their identity, and sets them up to thrive socially and academically. Adults also deserve a cafeteria that supports their physical and emotional well-being—one that makes it easier, not harder, for them to do their job. School nutrition staff should have the respect of others in the school community and the resources to best serve students. Teachers and administrators should get a chance to connect with students outside of the classroom.

Across the US, such cafeterias exist, and more are emerging. School districts are investing in architecture and design changes to create more pleasant eating environments for students. School nutrition directors and their staff are continually improving the nutrition and quality of school meals, offering students more choices and creating menus that reflect the culture of their communities. And every day, thousands of cafeteria staff tie shoes, satisfy special requests,

and offer hugs or friendly greetings to make the cafeteria a warm place for their students.

However, school communities face challenges to making lunch a time of joy, inclusion, and nourishment. For too many students, the rituals of the cafeteria may include bullying, shaming, and social anxiety. Tight budgets and strict regulations determine what is served and how. The lunch period's timing and staffing must fit within the school's constraints, which can mean lunch periods as short as fifteen minutes. Persistent plate waste translates to missed nutrition for students, with more than 25 percent of elementary school calories and nutrients going to waste across the nation.<sup>2</sup> Many different people share the cafeteria space, but within the busy school day, they aren't always able to communicate with one another to align their priorities and make decisions together.

That's why FoodCorps explored ways to overcome the challenges school communities face in making the cafeteria an inviting place—by listening to the stories, feelings, and opinions of students, meal nutrition staff, teachers, administrators, custodians, and others who participate in the mealtime experience.

Students were at the heart of this effort. Although their well-being is the central purpose of the lunch period, students are often

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<sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, "School Nutrition and Meal Cost Study: Volume 4 – Student Participation, Satisfaction, Plate Waste, and Dietary Intakes", <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/resource-files/SNMCS-Volume4-Summary.pdf>



left out of discussions about what happens in the cafeteria, and through this learning process, FoodCorps focused on their needs and desires. The process also prioritized listening to school nutrition staff, who often don't get the chance to share their opinions and participate in decision-making about the cafeteria. Centering on students and staff not only affirms the importance of their experiences and perspectives but also provides crucial information for truly understanding what is important to change in the cafeteria and how.

This report shares what FoodCorps heard from those who participated in the six-month listening and learning process. It brings together what these stakeholders see as the major elements of the cafeteria experience, from the food to the environment to the relationships. The thirteen Opportunity Areas highlight the issues most commonly mentioned from the viewpoints of various community members.

As these perspectives come together, a vision of the cafeteria as it is now and as it could be emerges. FoodCorps is in the process of developing low-cost and replicable strategies to help schools move toward this vision of a joyful and inclusive cafeteria. This strategy complements FoodCorps' new reWorking Lunch initiative, which aims to transform school nutrition systems from ingredient procurement to broader awareness-building of the connection between school nutrition and education. This report is intended to help cafeteria stakeholders see through the eyes of others in their community to build a base of understanding that supports future work together. It also paints the picture of what's happening in cafeterias nationwide—the shared challenges as well as the exciting opportunity to reimagine school cafeterias for the benefit of all.



# Research Process

From December 2017 through May 2018, FoodCorps conducted an immersive learning process in nine diverse school communities throughout the country, speaking with more than 300 students and 100 adult school community stakeholders. Although these nine schools do not wholly represent the 60,000 K-5 and K-8 schools in the US, they clearly demonstrate key similarities and differences across a range of school characteristics.

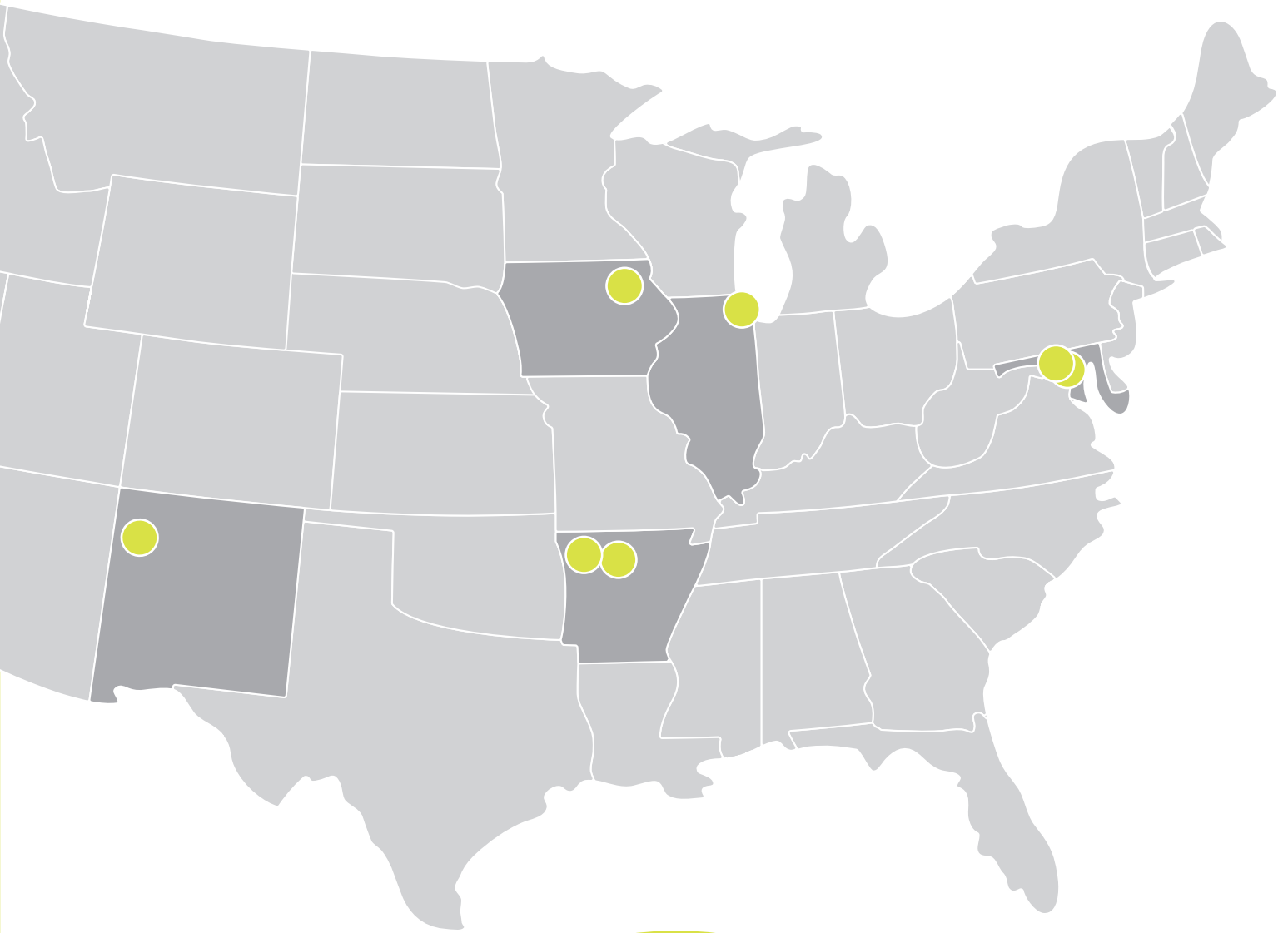
The goal of the process was to learn from school community stakeholders without guiding the conversation.

## FoodCorps chose these nine schools based on several criteria:

- Geographic diversity (by state and cultural region)
- Participation in the USDA Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program
- Percentage of students qualifying for free and reduced meals
- Racial demographics
- Location of meal prep (on-site or off-site)
- Lunch period before or after recess
- School setting (urban or rural)
- Scratch-cooking capacity
- Size of student population
- State and county political leaning in 2012 and 2016 presidential elections
- Presence of a salad bar
- Type of cafeteria space (cafeteria use only or multipurpose)
- Use of taste testing







## School Locations

- Chicago, IL
- Fort Wingate; Navajo Nation, NM
- Marshall, AR
- Springdale, AR
- Mt. Angel, OR
- Oakland, CA
- Postville, IA
- Washington, DC



# Methods



## Favorite/least favorite

Led activities in third-grade classrooms in which students drew and shared their favorite and least favorite aspects of their school cafeteria.



## Magic wand

Asked: If you had a magic wand, what is the one thing you would change about your school cafeteria?



## Small-group discussions

Met with small groups of fifth graders to hear their experiences with and perspectives on their school cafeteria.



## Mealtime observations

Observed breakfast and lunch during mealtimes.



## One-on-one conversations

Had one-on-one conversations with students, cafeteria staff, principals, custodial staff, teachers, district school nutrition staff, and other school community members in the places where they spend time at school.



## Lunchtime conversations

Ate school lunch with students and listened to what they shared about their experiences in the cafeteria.



## Conversation starter

Asked: What are the three words you would choose to describe your school cafeteria?

## **Additional Research**

### *Academic*

**Reviewed existing academic research on school cafeteria environments and experiences**

### *Behavioral science*

**Explored evidence-based behavioral science insights that could apply to school food environments and experiences**

### *Analogous fields*

**Spoke to local and national restaurant professionals about how they approach restaurant environments and experiences for customers; explored what school food looks like in other countries**

### *National experts*

**Learned from experts in school nutrition from around the country, including school nutrition directors, cafeteria managers, academic researchers, nonprofits, foundations, and the United States Department of Agriculture**

# Opportunity Areas

FoodCorps synthesized all that was shared during the listening process into more than forty areas of opportunities to improve the cafeteria experience.

This report shares the thirteen most frequently discussed issues, in order of how often they are mentioned, through the perspectives of school community members.

- 01 Lunch as Social Time**
- 02 The Menu**
- 03 The Cafeteria Environment**
- 04 Food Quality and Desirability**
- 05 Student Agency and Voice**
- 06 Role Modeling**
- 07 Presentation of Food**
- 08 Regulations and Compliance**
- 09 Home Culture and Context**
- 10 Food Waste**
- 11 School Food Community**
- 12 Staff Training and Development**
- 13 Length of Lunch**



# 01

## Lunch as Social Time

**“Lunch is time for social interaction. In classrooms teachers are always saying ‘shhhh!’”**

—District school nutrition director

**“Honestly, I feel like I’m barely holding it together.”**

—Cafeteria monitor

**“Teachers are too hard on us. Girls say we’re fighting when we’re just playing.”**

—School staff member

**“It’s so loud you can get a headache.”**

—Cafeteria staff member

For students, lunchtime is a break from a day full of classroom instruction; it’s a time to relax with friends: “It’s fun; we get to talk.” Teachers and school nutrition staff also recognized that “mealtime should be a time for friends and relationships,” as one teacher put it. But the effect of many students socializing, especially in cafeterias with poor acoustics, can be a very loud lunch time—potentially with “decibel levels over the OSHA limit,” reported one principal. And what some students see as playing and relaxing, other students and adults see as problematic behavior. The adults monitoring the cafeteria, often each responsible for many students, may turn to restrictive behavioral rules to maintain order.



*How might we*  
cultivate a cafeteria environment  
where students can socialize and  
relax without it feeling out of control  
for them or adults?



# 02

## The Menu



**“We do 30,000 meals a day in this district. This isn’t a restaurant.”**

—District school nutrition director

**“I wish our menu had greater cultural sensitivity and inclusion.”**

—Teacher

**“We have to use all the commodities [USDA Foods available at a minimum cost] up, so the food gets boring.”**

—District school nutrition director

Students suggested adding more variety and choices to cafeteria menus, noticing that they “get the same food every month.” They also requested foods that are familiar and taste like they expect, especially reflecting their cultural heritage. Cafeteria staff agreed that some foods may not turn out the way they should: “I’m Mexican and that is not enchiladas. It makes me sad.” However, menus must comply with complex nutrition, meal pattern, and procurement policies. To ease the burden on meal program staff, school districts often use a single menu across all schools, which repeats every few weeks and responds to the constraints of regulations and budgets.





*How might we*  
**provide students with a greater  
diversity of tasty, culturally appropriate  
meal options without adding to the  
workload of school nutrition staff?**



# 03

## The Cafeteria Environment

**“I would paint the cafeteria a different color every year.”**

—Student

**“It’s important to make sure the cafeteria is clean before and after.”**

—Custodian

**“District and student feedback surveys say that cafeterias are too crowded and tables are too dirty.”**

—Cafeteria staff member

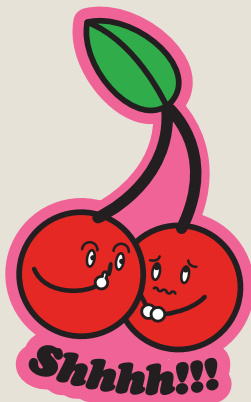
**“The flow of people isn’t great.”**

—Cafeteria staff member

**“The cafeteria could use more color.”**

—School staff member

The design of the cafeteria offers an opportunity to significantly influence the lunch experience: “A good meal in a depressing environment is a depressing meal,” noted one FoodCorps service member. In many schools, meals take place in multipurpose or outdated spaces, some used only temporarily for lunch. Most cafeterias have not been designed for inviting aesthetics, optimal flow of the lunch line, or comfortable arrangements of student seating. Instead, school community members described cafeterias as “crowded,” “dirty,” and in need of “more color” and “better lighting.”





*How might we*  
make the cafeteria space  
look and feel like an appealing  
place to eat?



# 04

## Food Quality and Desirability

**“The food sometimes makes my stomach hurt and makes me get sick.”**

—Student

**“I don’t mind the food, but it could be prepared better.”**

—Cafeteria staff member

**“The kids like and want fresh food.”**

—School staff member

**“It’s like a feeding. It’s not designed to be a great experience. We meet federal standards and give them calories—we meet that goal. But it’s not something I celebrate.”**

—Principal

**“Some of our recipes are great, but they’re not kid food.”**

—District school nutrition director

Students respond most positively to food that’s similar to what they eat at home or at restaurants. Often, school food doesn’t seem appealing in comparison; students question its safety, freshness, and preparation. One student suggested school food is “mushy, fake, and weird.” For adults, lunch is often more about whether students eat than whether they enjoy it, with calories taking priority over taste. As one principal explained, “90 percent of our kids are eligible for free and reduced price lunch. It’s about getting food into them.” Staff in the school, and even the cafeteria, might not see the school food as healthy, or even if it is, not as food that children want to eat.





*How might we*  
make meal options more  
appealing, culturally relevant,  
and delicious for students?



# 05

## Student Agency and Voice

**“We teach choice in the classroom, but we don’t give them it in the cafeteria.”**

—Teacher

**“Has anyone ever opened up the comment box? No.”**

—Cafeteria staff member

**“We’ve assigned seats in the cafeteria because of safety.”**

—School staff member

**“We like the big tables, especially when we can sit wherever we want.”**

—Student

**“I really haven’t asked them what they want.”**

—School staff member

Students would like more control over their cafeteria experience, especially what they eat and whom they eat with. One student spoke for many saying, “I’d like to sit wherever I want.” Students feel constrained when forced to take certain items or when their needs, such as special dietary considerations, aren’t honored. They also are frustrated that they do not get to give input on decisions that affect them. “They never ask us what we think,” said one student. Adults agreed that they do not often solicit student opinions or give students many chances to make their own decisions.



*How might we*  
**create meaningful opportunities**  
**for students to share their voices**  
**and exercise agency in the cafeteria?**



# 06

## Role Modeling

**“It’s important to get excited so students eat it.”**

—Cafeteria staff member

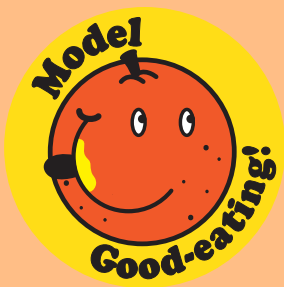
**“I try to taste it all, so I can share what it tastes like if they ask.”**

—Teacher

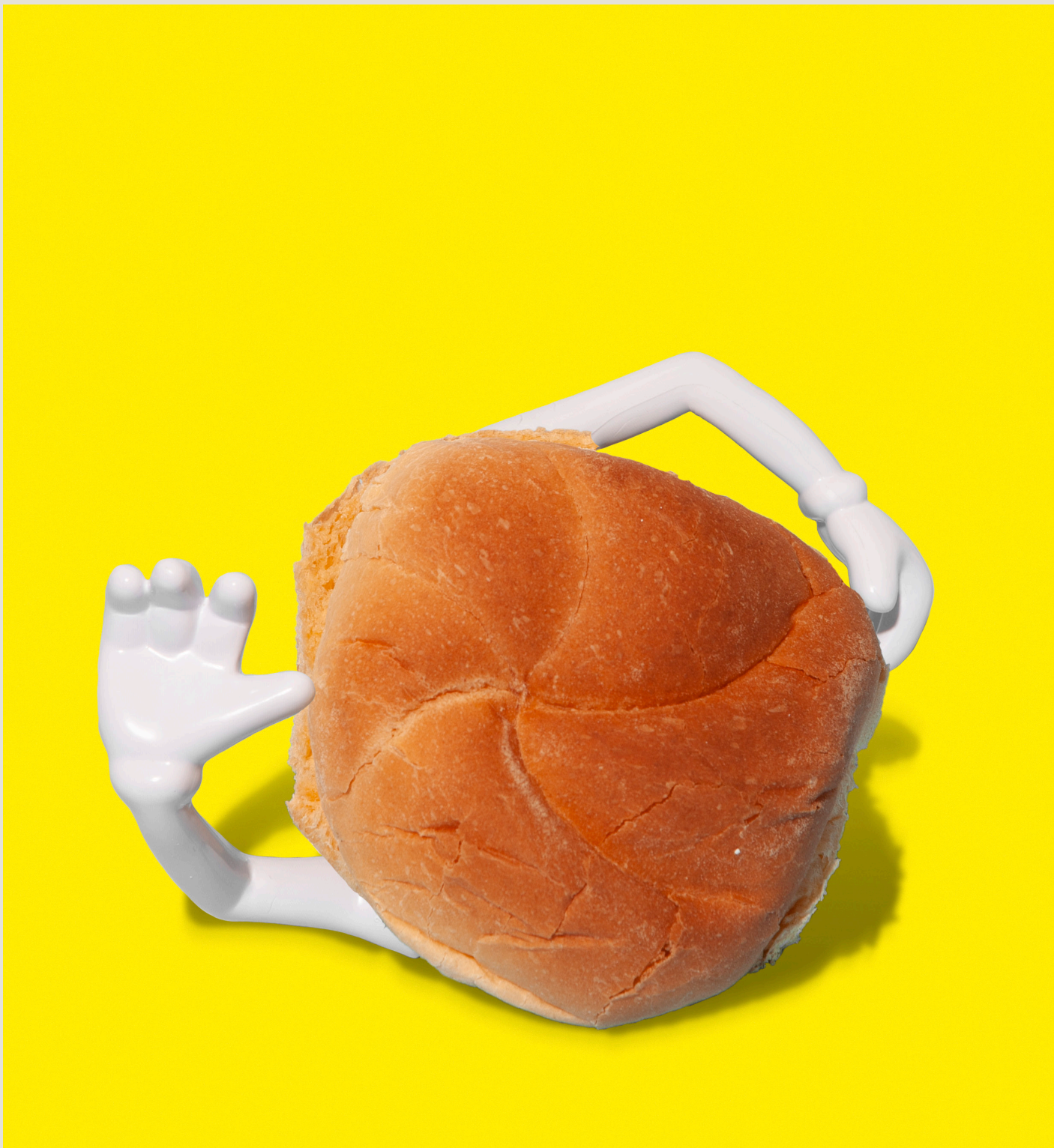
**“It’s important that I sit with students and model good eating.”**

—Teacher

Cafeteria staff and teachers noted that “kids eat more and eat better when an adult eats with them.” Adults in the cafeteria also see mealtime as an opportunity to learn to eat properly and to practice behavior that reinforces school values. “The cafeteria is the place where manners are taught,” said one principal. However, school staff also recognize that teachers “need 30 minutes duty-free,” which means that, frequently, teachers do not eat with their students.







*How might we*  
**make it easy and appealing for  
adults to serve as role models  
for students in the cafeteria?**

# 07

## Presentation of Food

**“Kids are so visual and choose with their eyes.”**

—District school nutrition director

**“I want food freshly bought. This food is wrapped in plastic and delivered on a truck. You don’t know how long it’s been there.”**

—Student

**“I just eat the fruit and the packaged food, not the food they make.”**

—Student

**“I have to peel their bananas and oranges for them, otherwise they can’t do it themselves.”**

—FoodCorps service member

**“Everything is packaged in plastic; it doesn’t feel prepared.”**

—Principal

“Presentation is key,” said one district school nutrition director. How food is presented and where it is located in the line—from the shape of the muffins to the placement of the fruit—influences what students put on their trays.

Students use visual clues to determine how and when food was prepared. For example, students, as well as adults, see plastic wrap as a sign that food isn’t fresh and hasn’t been carefully prepared. Some may prefer packaged foods that they recognize and trust. Certain styles of preparation may make foods hard for students to eat, and packaging “can be hard to open,” as one student noted—both of which get in the way of students eating and enjoying their lunch.



*How might we*  
**present meal options in a way  
that is visually appealing and  
encourages students to choose  
and eat healthy foods?**



# 08

## Regulations and Compliance

**“Kids don’t understand about government limits. We look like the bad guy all the time.”**

—Cafeteria staff member

**“We’re walking a fine line between the regulations and the community.”**

—District school nutrition director

**“It’s a challenge to do new—and the right—things and to meet national guidelines and operational efficiency.”**

—District school nutrition director

From the perspective of meal program staff, compliance with regulations “is huge and is really hard.” Participation in the National School Lunch Program is complicated, restrictive, and time-consuming, and states may add other requirements on top of federal rules. District school nutrition staff must spend their time crafting menus that comply with guidelines, doing the required accounting and documentation for reimbursement, and setting up systems to ensure they are following the many regulations. Others in the school community, especially students, may not understand these rules when they affect their cafeteria experience. “They can’t take two ketchup packets. It’s hard to explain to kids,” said one cafeteria staff member. At times, adherence to regulations may feel in conflict with the desire to make improvements to the meal program and even with the community’s local food culture and values.



*How might we*  
ease the burden of regulation  
compliance while ensuring that  
students receive the nutrition they need?



# 09

## Home Culture and Context

**“What we hear is, ‘Why is what I see different than what I see at home?’”**

—District school nutrition director

**“Fruits and vegetables can be too expensive at home, so we have to get it to the kids.”**

—Cafeteria staff member

**“A lot of parents are working two jobs and don’t have time to prepare lunch.”**

—Principal

According to cafeteria staff, students “want food that’s like what they eat at home.” Students may be used to types of foods and styles of preparation that reflect their cultural heritage and are different from what they see in the cafeteria. Meals at home may also vary from school meals in that serving a variety of fruits and vegetables is not necessarily a requirement. School and cafeteria staff suggested that unfamiliar foods are less popular than the foods students eat more often outside of school. Staff members feel their job is to both feed students healthy meals as well as help teach them why healthy eating matters.



*How might we*  
collaborate with our community  
to build connections between  
meals at home and meals at school  
in a way that improves school  
meal experience and quality?

# 10

## Food Waste

**“Too many students don’t eat enough; too much waste.”**

—School staff member

**“Because of school meal guidelines, students have to take it, but it ends up in the trash.”**

—FoodCorps service member

**“We have to take a fruit and vegetable to get past the lunch lady.”**

—Student

**“Milk is optional, but because it’s out, kids feel obligated to take it. They end up not drinking it and throwing it away.”**

—Cafeteria staff member

**“I don’t know what to do about waste; it’s hopeless.”**

—Cafeteria staff member

“Waste can be a big problem,” said one district school nutrition staff member, echoing the sentiments of many adults in the school community. Students may not eat much of what they take, ultimately throwing away large amounts of food. These may be foods they don’t like or foods they don’t want but that the guidelines require them to take (i.e., fruits and vegetables), so the school can receive federal reimbursement. More waste is created at the end of the day when staff “have to dump food that isn’t eaten.”







*How might we*  
**significantly reduce the  
amount of food that  
students throw away?**



# 11

## School Food Community

**“Culturally, schools need to embrace school food.”**

—Cafeteria staff member

**“Sometimes we get the support of teachers.”**

—Cafeteria staff member

**“Thinking is so siloed between principals and nutrition directors.”**

—District school nutrition director

**“I don’t have much engagement with my cafeteria staff.”**

—Principal

**“School food service departments are so not valued at the school.”**

—FoodCorps service member

The serving line divides the kitchen, the domain of the district’s school nutrition department, from the rest of the school, typically run by the principal. And as one principal pointed out, there may be “no existing platform for communication” between the two. School nutrition staff often feel disconnected from the rest of the school, and as a result, unsupported and underappreciated. “They couldn’t probably care less about my opinion,” said one cafeteria staff member. Many working in the cafeteria have been at the school for decades, often longer than other school staff, and are dedicated to their students whom they see every day—it’s frequently what they shared as the best part of their job.



*How might we*  
recognize the valuable role  
of school nutrition staff and  
better connect them to the  
broader school community  
and educational experience?



# 12

## Staff Training and Development

**“Any time you start something new, you have to do a lot of training.”**

—Cafeteria staff member

**“Our food service director is committed to supporting staff, who are underpaid, showing how important they are and offering professional development.”**

—District school nutrition director

**“Cafeteria staff need expertise. There are no standardized trainings, though.”**

—FoodCorps service member

Working in the school cafeteria “is more than just heating up food.” A district school nutrition staff member explained, “The more you know, the more you realize how much there is to know.” Yet cafeteria staff are often the lowest paid members of the school community with “little professional development” and limited opportunities for advancement. District school nutrition staff and other adults in the school community expressed a desire to elevate the role of cafeteria workers as culinary professionals and create more opportunities for them to continue learning.





*How might we*  
**create opportunities for cafeteria  
staff to engage in ongoing  
professional development?**



# 13

## Length of Lunch

**“There could be a little more time to eat.”**

—Student

**“We don’t have enough time. There’s one lunch lady for one hundred kids.”**

—Cafeteria staff member

**“They have ten minutes to scarf down breakfast.”**

—School staff member

**“Kids complain that there’s only ten minutes to eat, but they’re talking too much.”**

—Cafeteria staff member

In many schools, both adults and students feel like “the lunch period is too short.” Students often feel that they don’t have much time to eat. At one school, a staff member reported that “kids at the end of the line only get five minutes to eat.” While the average elementary school lunch period lasts 25 minutes, for many schools it may be as short as 15 minutes—and in that time, students have to get to and from the cafeteria, wait in line, and clean up. Students also want to socialize, which adults suggested takes their time and attention away from eating.





*How might we*

**effectively advocate for an increase in lunch time, or find other ways to decrease the time pressure students and staff feel during lunch?**



# The Big Picture

What do students, frontline cafeteria staff, school administrators, and other key stakeholders want us to know about the state of food in schools, and how would they reimagine their cafeterias if they had the power to do so?



# These are the themes that emerged as we listened, learned, and ate alongside them:

## 01.

Much of our school meal program was built to solve problems of the past century: alleviating malnutrition for soldiers heading into a world war and creating a market for crops America's farmers couldn't sell. School nutrition still reflects this tension between quantity and quality. In too many places we still see heat-and-serve kitchens and windowless cafeterias that should be recognized as parts of our crumbling national infrastructure and rebuilt to meet the needs of our time.

## 02.

Nowhere in our food system are the constraints of time and money more pronounced than in schools: large-scale food service, whether in hospitals, airplanes, or prisons, is inherently challenging. In the case of schools, hundreds of children often must be fed in twenty-minute periods, with many schools starting lunch service before 10:00 a.m. on ingredient budgets limited to about a dollar per meal.

## 03.

Students want their voices to be heard, and their perspective on school nutrition is clear: they need and value the break from academic learning that lunchtime provides, and they want a cafeteria experience that gives them agency and choice and reflects the families and cultures they come from.

## 04.

The cafeteria is a place where education's power structures bump into one other, and more relationship-building is needed: the sneeze guard that separates the kitchen from the cafeteria marks the border between the domain of the food-service team (which reports up to a district-level child nutrition director) and the academic team (which reports to the principal). Too often, these players are working at cross purposes to each other and responding to conflicting structures for incentives and accountability.

After immersing ourselves in school cafeterias from Arkansas to the District of Columbia to the Navajo Nation, we have come to see school cafeterias as places for not only eating but also for building community, connection, identity, agency, values, and culture. As a society, we have long recognized the power of homes and classrooms to shape our children's lives. At FoodCorps, we have learned through this project that there is another space that deserves our collective attention. The lunchroom represents a forgotten "third place" in our nation's education system—a place where students can gather with others for the simple purpose of conversation and connection, build relationships across lines of difference, and leave feeling wholly nourished.



# What You Can Do

FoodCorps looks forward to sharing more learning, resources, and opportunities to get involved in the coming months.

To stay tuned, sign up for updates at [foodcorps.org/get-involved/sign-up](https://foodcorps.org/get-involved/sign-up).

## Students

Your voice matters!

If you have questions, concerns, or ideas to share, raise them with your school community leaders: student council, principal, cafeteria manager, or school nutrition director.

### Don't know how to get in touch?

Ask your teacher or another school staff member for support. You could say something like, "I want to share my feedback about \_\_\_\_\_. I care because \_\_\_\_\_."

## Parents

Getting involved is a wonderful opportunity to partner with school and school nutrition staff.

To learn more about your school's meal program and cafeteria, consider the following:

Have lunch with your child(ren) in the cafeteria to better understand their experience.

Meet with school cafeteria staff to learn how parents can support them. Parents can be powerful allies to school nutrition staff in elevating the importance of school meals.

Getting involved is a wonderful opportunity to partner with school and school nutrition staff.

If you have questions, concerns, or ideas to share, consider contacting the following: Principal, cafeteria manager, school nutrition director, PTO, or PTA.

### Don't know how to get in touch?

Ask your school principal for guidance, or you can visit your school and district website for contact information.

## School Staff and School Nutrition Staff

There has never been a better time for school staff to collaborate with the school nutrition department on a shared vision of the cafeteria!

### Ways you can consider working together

Join students in the cafeteria for a meal — either breakfast or lunch — to learn more about the student experience.

Involve cafeteria staff in school spirit days. Is there a specific food theme that can be incorporated?

Celebrate National School Lunch Week and National School Breakfast Week as a whole-school community.

Honor cafeteria staff members on School Lunch Hero Day, which takes place annually in May.

Inquire with the school nutrition department about its catering packages for staff trainings or meetings—this supports the school nutrition department (and often lowers the cost!).

Use school nutrition departments as resources for school celebrations and fund-raisers.

Host a welcome breakfast for teacher and/or principal training to help them understand how school nutrition fits in with the educational community.

