



Californians Overwhelmingly Support Recent School Meals Overhaul; Students Say Lunches Are Getting Better

Sacramento, CA – Students who say school lunches are getting better outnumber those who think meals are getting worse by more than a 3-to-1 ratio, according to a poll released today by The California Endowment. The survey is the first to ask California students what they think about the national school meal nutrition standards that took effect this academic year.

The nutrition standards, which were developed by experts at the Institute of Medicine and United States Department of Agriculture, include:

- Increased produce options, ensuring that students receive both fruits and vegetables every day of the week;
- A ban on unhealthy trans fats;
- Portion size guidelines and calorie limits based on the age of children served;
- Increased emphasis on whole grain products;
- Limits on the types of milk served, with an emphasis on low-fat (1%) and non-fat varieties; and
- Reductions in sodium levels to be phased in over several years.

After being read a short description of the standards, 82 percent of students say they support the changes. In a separate survey, parents reported even stronger approval, with 91 percent expressing support. However, parental awareness lagged behind that of students. Before being read a description of the standards, only 36 percent of parents said they were aware of the changes made this year, compared to 73 percent of students.

“These are blockbuster results that validate the hard work of developing and implementing these updated nutrition standards. Students like the healthier meals, packed with fresh fruits and vegetables and whole grains. And it’s not just about taste. Healthy meals help students succeed in the classroom and teach them the benefits of a healthy diet. That’s why we say ‘Health Happens in Schools.’ If today’s students eat better and live healthier, we all benefit over the long run, in lower obesity and diabetes rates, reduced health care costs, and improved academic performance,” said Judi Larsen, Program Manager for The California Endowment.

The polls specifically asked students and parents if the new calorie limits should be continued or eliminated. The calorie limits have been widely discussed in the national media, ever since a group of Kansas high school

students posted a YouTube video suggesting that meals prepared under the new guidelines are too small. California students and parents strongly reject this argument. Students support retaining the calorie limits by a margin of 64 percent to 31 percent. Parents agree, by a margin of 56 percent to 34 percent.

“It is simply not true that students are rejecting the new school lunches, either because they’re too small or for any other reason,” said Dave Metz, a partner at Maslin, Maullin, Metz, & Associates, the public opinion research agency that conducted the survey on behalf of The Endowment. “To the contrary, there is overwhelming evidence that California students and parents prefer the new lunches and want the nutrition standards retained.”

Parents and students also agree that school lunches served today are better than those served in the past, with students detecting greater changes. Fifty percent of student respondents say meals are better now, fifteen percent say meals are getting worse, and 35 percent think they are about the same. Among parents, 37 percent say lunches are better now, twenty percent think they are worse, and 28 percent say meals are unchanged.

The survey also showed that parents and students favor extending the school lunch standards to foods served outside the school meal program, such as snacks sold in school stores and snack bars. These foods, often called “competitive foods,” are not currently required to meet the same nutrition standards as school meals. Parents support extending nutrition standards to competitive foods by a margin of 66 percent to 32 percent. Students support the same proposal by a margin of 65 percent to 28 percent.

Although the survey generally offered good reviews of school lunches, nutrition directors may be concerned that fewer than half of student respondents reported eating the entire meal when they get school lunches. Sixty percent say they usually eat only some of the lunch and throw away the parts they don’t like.

“We encourage school nutrition directors to talk with their students, find out what they like, and adjust their recipes and preparation methods to account for local tastes and preferences. The new school meal standards are highly flexible and invite creativity and experimentation, so school chefs should keep trying new approaches until they develop healthy options that kids embrace,” added Judi Larsen.

A chart pack with key data from the surveys is available by contacting Jeff Okey at jokey@calendow.org. The parent survey had a sample size of 600 and interviewed California parents with children currently enrolled in public schools in California. The student survey had a sample size of 509 and interviewed California students age thirteen and older who are currently enrolled in public schools. Surveys were completed between October 4 and October 13.

###

***The California Endowment** is a private, statewide health foundation, which was established in 1996 to expand access to affordable, quality health care for underserved individuals and communities, and to promote fundamental improvements in the health status of all Californians. Headquartered in downtown Los Angeles, The Endowment has regional offices in Sacramento, Oakland, Fresno, and San Diego, with program staff working throughout the state. The Endowment challenges the conventional wisdom that medical settings and individual choices are solely responsible for people's health. The Endowment believes that health happens in neighborhoods, schools, and with prevention. For more information, visit The Endowment's homepage at www.calendow.org.*