



Cafeteria Customer Service Survey Report

Preliminary Findings of a Student Survey of LAUSD Cafeteria Meals

December 2005

**Sponsored by the
Healthy School Food Coalition**

Background and Introduction

The Healthy School Food Coalition (HSFC), established in 2001, is a grassroots organization of committed parents, teachers, students, cafeteria workers and community members seeking to mobilize the school community to improve access to affordable and healthy foods for children and youth on school campuses. In the span of three years, the Healthy School Food Coalition has grown from a handful of members to a broad, ethnically diverse organization of several dozen active members representing 23 schools in the Los Angeles Unified School District. These schools are located in predominantly low- to moderate-income neighborhoods and rely on federally funded free and reduced-price student meal programs. The HSFC played an integral part in the successful passage of the Healthy Beverage (2002) and Obesity Prevention Motions (2003), and continues to be a vehicle for community members to effectively engage and work closely with their school board representatives and other district officials.

Since its inception, the primary issue of importance for members of the HSFC has been the nutritional value, quality and appeal of the meals served in the cafeterias. Through the HSFC, students and parents have shared with board members and food service representatives recurring problems with the food at their schools: problems such as undercooked meat, moldy bread, expired milk, human hair in the meals, and even instances where cafeterias have run out of food. Currently there is no system in place for community members, especially students, to report or record incidents of this nature at their school sites. Students are often told that they should report their concerns to the school principal or cafeteria manager. The truth is, most students feel intimidated and are afraid of speaking to any school site official about their school food concerns; even if they did feel comfortable, many feel discouraged in doing so because they believe nothing will be done to resolve the problem. That is why in early 2005 the HSFC decided it was time to begin tracking and recording food related problems at schools in order to capture the full extent of the situation. We also felt this project was a way to begin validating the incidents students experience on a daily basis and to develop positive solutions to improve cafeteria service. The Cafeteria Improvement Motion is an important step in this direction.

In August 2005, the HSFC formally launched its Cafeteria Customer Service Survey Project. The survey tool used was designed by 12 students from Belmont High School. The purpose of the survey was for students to document specific incidents or problems that occurred with the meal served during lunch. Students completed the surveys based on anonymity, providing only their grade level and the name of their school. Over a period of four months, 189 surveys were completed at 21 schools. This report will provide you with our preliminary findings.

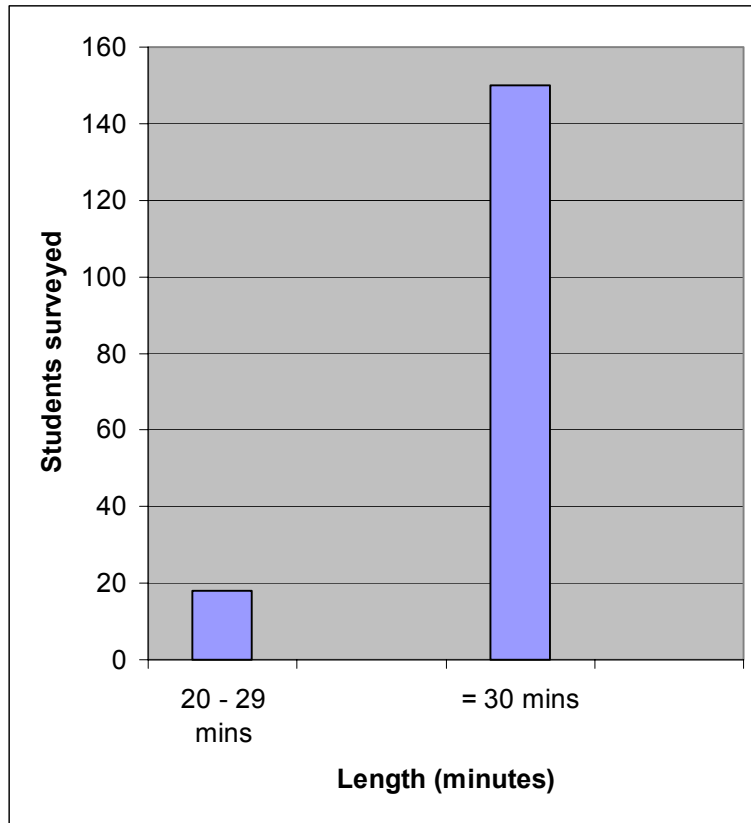
We continue to have completed surveys sent to us everyday. We plan to continue this project in 2006 and expand to 20 additional schools. A full report will be issued in the spring of 2006.

Surveys Were Completed at the Following Schools:

Belmont High School
Central High School
Fairfax High School
Jefferson High School
John Marshall High School
Manual Arts High School
South Central High
Berendo Middle School
Virgil Middle School
Carver Middle School
Griffith Middle School
LA Academy Middle School
Horace Mann Middle School
Commonwealth Elementary School
Hoover Street Elementary School
Grant Elementary School
Western Avenue Elementary School
Magnolia Elementary School
Norwood Elementary School
Union Avenue Elementary School
49th Street Elementary School

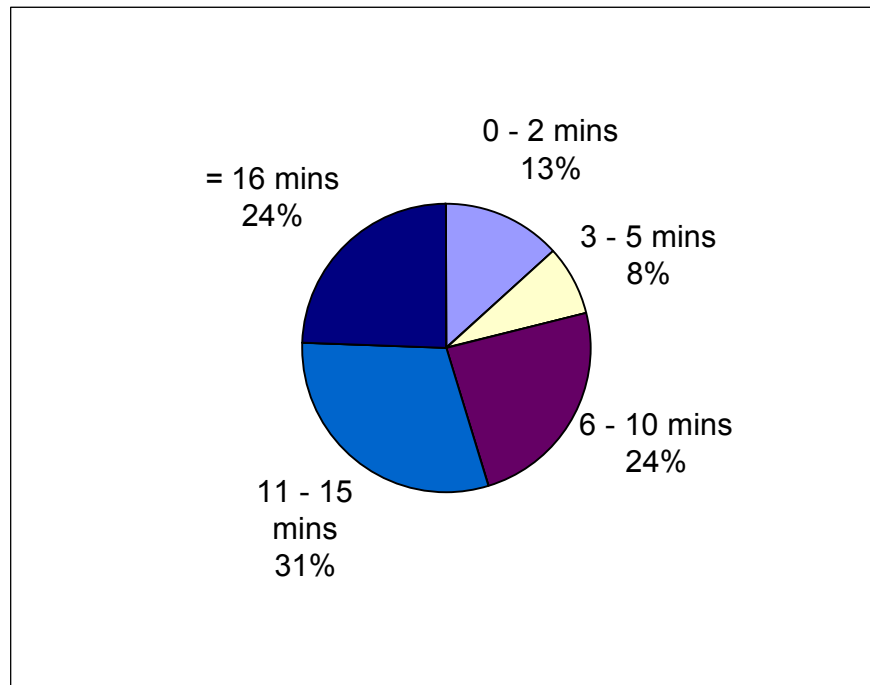
189 students from grade levels 3 to 12 completed surveys.

How long is your lunch period?



Of the 168 students who answered this question, 90% reported that their lunch periods are 30 minutes or more and 10% reported that their lunch periods are 20-29 minutes.

How long did you wait in line?



The majority of the students that answered this question reported that they spent a large portion of their lunch period standing in line. Out of 181 students, nearly a quarter of students who answered the question reported waiting in line for 16 minutes or more; this is over half of their lunch period. 13% reported waiting in line for 0-2 minutes; 8% reported waiting 3-5 minutes, 24% reported waiting 6-10 minutes, and 31% reported waiting 11-15 minutes.

"I spent all my time in line and then I made the mistake in giving the wrong ticket for the wrong date. I didn't get to eat."

Jefferson High 10th Grader

**Problems with the way lunch was served today-
Please check all that apply:**

| Problem | Students that checked these options |
|----------------------------|--|
| Moldy bread, hamburger bun | 47 (24%) |
| Overcooked meat | 44 (23%) |
| Warm milk | 45 (23%) |
| Uncooked meat | 43 (22%) |
| Cold, frozen meat | 37 (19%) |
| Warm apple/orange juice | 29 (15%) |
| Expired milk | 27 (14%) |

A significant number of students reported problems with the food or beverage they received on the day they took the surveys. Problems included moldy bread or buns, warm milk, overcooked meat, uncooked meat, cold or frozen meat, warm fruit juice and expired milk: 24% of students experienced moldy bread or buns, 23% experienced warm milk, 23% experienced overcooked meat, 22% students experienced uncooked meat, 19% experienced cold or frozen meat, 15% experienced warm apple or orange juice and 14% experienced expired milk.

“Today the food had human hair in it. You can’t exchange it. You have to buy the food again.”

Manual Arts High 12th Grader

“The milk was chunky.”

Belmont High 9th Grader

Today the Following Occurred:

| Problem | Students that checked these options |
|---|-------------------------------------|
| The bell rang before you were able to finish your lunch | 104 (55%) |
| Salad/vegetables were not available | 46 (24%) |
| Cafeteria ran out of food | 45 (24%) |
| The bell rang before you were able to get food | 39 (21%) |
| Cafeteria staff were not wearing gloves and/or hair net | 17 (9%) |

Many students reported problems with the length of the lunch period, availability of salad or vegetables and adherence to food safety requirements: 21% of students answered that the bell rang before they were able to get their food, 55% answered that the bell rang before they were able to finish their lunches, 24% said salad or vegetables were not available, 9% reported that cafeteria staff were not wearing gloves and/or hair net and 24% said the cafeteria ran out of food.

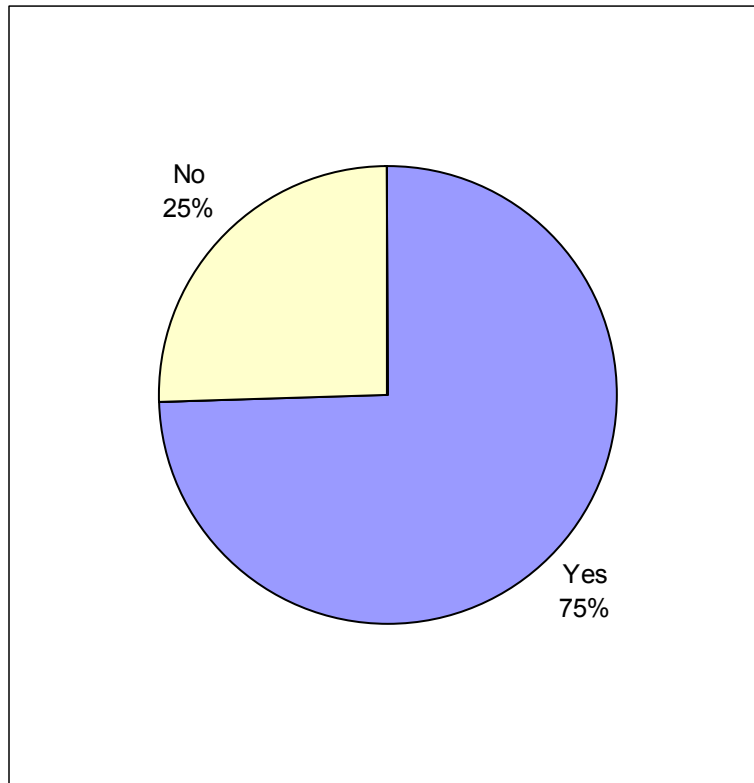
“If the bell rings you are forced to throw your food away.”

Carver Middle School 7th Grader

“There were no more teriyaki bowls and salads when I got to my window.”

Marshall High 10th Grader

Did you throw any food away today?



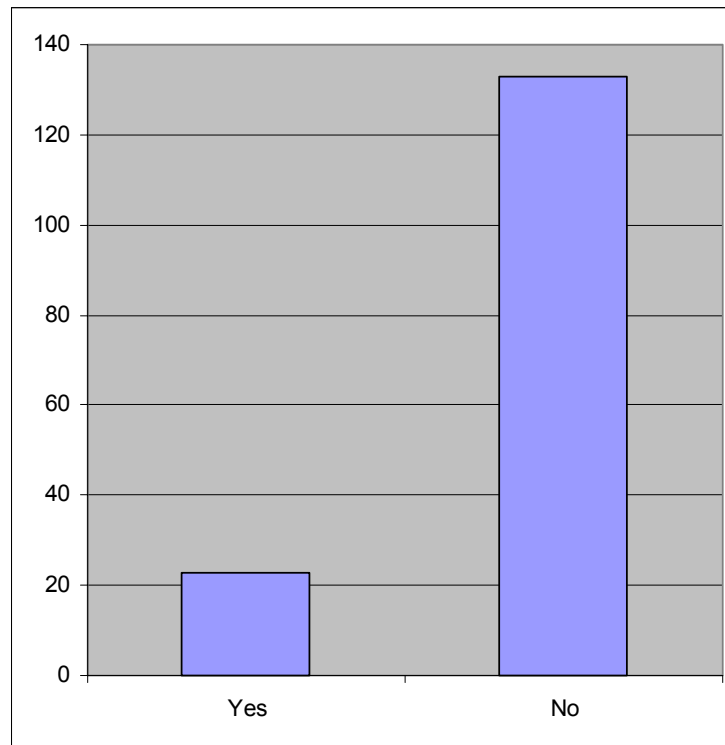
On the days they completed the surveys, most students reported that they threw some, if not all, of their food away. Of the 173 students who answered this question, 75% of students reported throwing away food, while only 25% reported that they did not throw their food away.



This student is throwing her entire meal away. Asked why, "I get sick from the cheese and I can't open the orange."

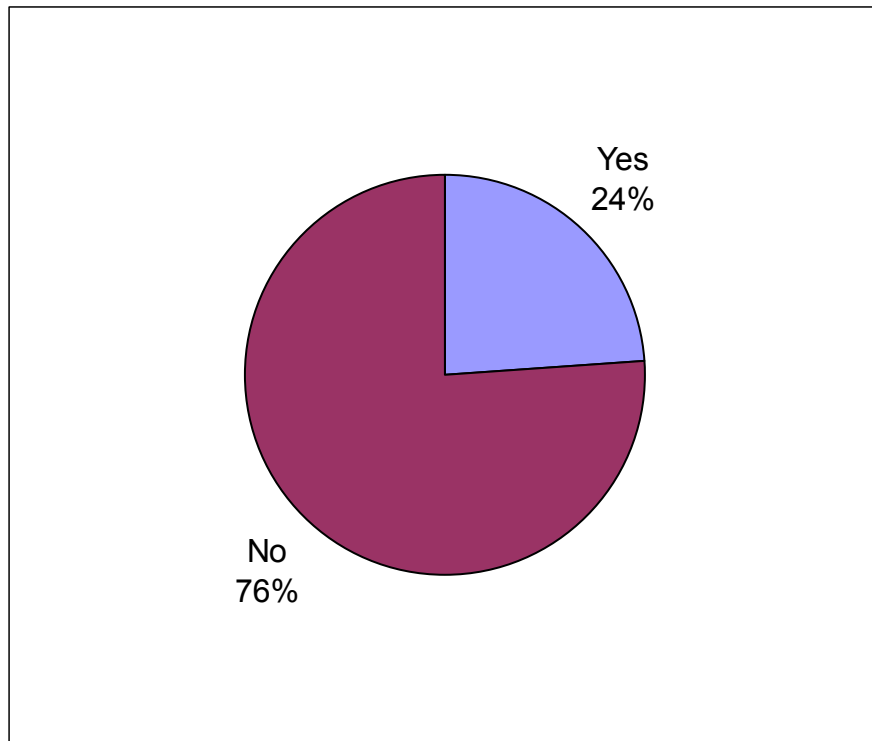
Hoover Street Elementary 1st Grader

Have you ever spoken to anyone about the food?



The majority of students who completed surveys have never spoken to anyone at their schools about problems or issues with the food. 85% reported that they had not spoken to anyone, while only 15% stated that they have reported their concerns.

Do you know who to report your concerns to?



When asked if they knew who to report their concerns to, 76% of students answered no, while 24% answered yes.*

*It should be noted that when asked if they knew to whom they should report their concerns to, many of the students that answered yes to this question stated that they spoke to their parents, friends or a Healthy School Food Coalition organizer – not to a school site or district representative.

Which of these healthy items were offered today?

LAUSD has taken major steps in increasing the availability of fresh fruits, vegetables and other vegetarian items in their meal programs. That is why our students felt it was important to include the following question in our survey: “Which of these healthy items were offered today?” We wanted to help track the progress cafeterias are making in providing healthier options.

After reviewing student responses and comments, it became clear that there were conflicting answers. For example, many students checked off that a salad bar was available for lunch at their school, yet those same schools currently do not have salad bars. Additionally, students who checked off that fresh fruit was offered later wrote in the comment section of the survey that the fruit that day was “old” or “rotten”.

The terminology and word choices used for this question may have been confusing to students. It was clear that many students may have a different understanding of what constitutes “fresh” or what is a “salad bar.” We see now that definitions or examples should have been used in the question. We plan to revise and ask this question differently for our next round of survey work in 2006. We intend to have more accurate and consistent responses to this question in our final report in the spring of next year.

Crowded Cafeterias



+ Long Lunch Lines



= Less Time to Eat and Lower Participation

According to students interviewed at Belmont, Fairfax and Marshall High Schools, PIZZA is the most popular entrée because:

1. Pizza is the first and most visible entrée at the window.
2. Windows serving pizza are usually the quickest and most efficient lines.
3. Pizza is the easiest and quickest item to eat before the bell rings.
4. Unlike the other entrees served, pizza is less likely to be served uncooked, stale or cold.
5. Students believe pizza won't make them sick and/or taste bad.
6. The cafeteria never runs out of pizza. Frequently pizza is the only option available after other items run out.

"I don't choose to eat pizza a lot because I like it. I pick it and try to eat it because it is the only thing that doesn't taste too bad. It's is the lesser evil of the food."

Belmont High 12th Grader

"My friends and I usually grab pizza, but we end up only taking 1 or 2 bites and then throw it away. No one I know gets full with pizza and eats the whole meal."

Fairfax High 9th Grader



"They took out the hot cheetos so we don't get fat. But they still offer pizza everyday. It's setting kids up who don't know better to make bad choices."

Marshall High School 11th Grader



"The problem today was that the pizza had a lot of oil and grease on it. This can't be good for you."

Jefferson High 10th Grader



"I told my mom that my food at school is like the food at McDonald's. We get to eat hamburgers and fries. But they just don't taste as good."

Union Avenue 5th Grader

HSFC Students Support the Cafeteria Improvement Motion

The youth and students we work with and have met in classrooms and youth programs across the district are very clear about one thing: they want to eat from the cafeteria regularly and to depend on school food to get them through the day. However, there are many reasons why they choose not eat in the cafeteria— long lunch lines, insufficient time to eat, poor meal quality and general dissatisfaction with the taste of the food. This was illustrated clearly in the personal testimony and words of the students who completed our surveys.

Students cannot reconcile that fact that while hot Cheetos and soda are no longer available, pizza and nachos are readily available everyday. As one student commented in her survey, “Nachos and pizza are not regular food. They are junk food. Don’t you think we know the difference?”

The purpose of the HSFC Cafeteria Customer Service Survey Project was to give students a chance to share what is really happening on school campuses. Students feel strongly about their right to have better quality food. They want to go to class on a full stomach. They want to take advantage of the free and reduced price meals that they and their friends qualify for.

The Healthy School Food Coalition firmly believes the Cafeteria Improvement Motion is a critical opportunity to attract new customers to the district’s meal program, and will continue to build upon the district’s efforts to create and promote healthy eating environments on all school campuses. We are excited about our continued collaboration with Members of the Board and Food Services, and look forward to working towards full student participation.

Students of the HSFC and Fairfax High School's Nutrition Advisory Council submit the enclosed petitions that contain 446 signatures from 32 schools urging the members of LAUSD School Board support for Cafeteria Improvement Motion. Signatures were gathered from the following schools:

10th Street Elementary
28th Street Elementary
9th Street Elementary
Arroyo Seco Elementary
Belmont High School
Belvedere Elementary
Berendo Middle School
Booker T. Washington
Carver Middle School
Charles White Elementary
Dorsey High School
Fairfax High School
Foshay Middle School
Gardena High School
Gratts Elementary
Hamilton High School

Hobart Blvd. Elementary
Hollywood High School
Hoover Street Elementary
Inglewood High School
Jefferson High School
John Adams Middle School
John Marshall High School
Jordan High School
Logan Street Elementary
Mulholland Middle School
Norwood Elementary
Palisades High School
Rosemont Elementary
Union Avenue Elementary
University High School
Venice High School

The personal distribution of several hundred surveys, one-on-one interviews, photo taking, petition gathering and write up of this report was completed by the following dedicated individuals:

Carolina Cesareo – 9th Grade
Elvira Marquez – 11th Grade
Esmerlda Abarca – 6th Grade
Guadalupe Abarca – 8th Grade
Jacky Moz – 12th Grade
Jafet Rodriquez – 12th Grade
Javier Mondragon – Class of 2005
Jaycee Melendez – 10th Grade
Jazmin Orrellana – 6th Grade
Joselin Saucedo – 5th Grade
Josie Morales – 12th Grade
Loren Ormeo – 11th Grade
Mayra Gonzalez – Class of 2005
Nancy Castillejos – 9th Grade
Susan Hernandez – 10th Grade

If you have questions or would like more information about the Cafeteria Customer Service Survey Project, please call Francesca de la Rosa 323-341-5097.