

## School Setting Findings

This section offers a synthesis of feedback from individuals who are knowledgeable about healthy food access in school settings. The results of these interviews, listening sessions, and school-specific Food Charter Events provide a portrait of systemic challenges related to healthy food access in school settings. The most popular solutions focus on a combination of training, guidelines, partnership and engagement, funding increases, curriculum development, and assessment tools.

### Background

Residents of Minnesota have reason to be concerned about children's health and related implications for the future. Over the past twenty-five years, rates of obesity and overweight for children of all ages in the US have tripled. Depending upon their age approximately ten percent of children and youth in Minnesota are obese or overweight, which has also contributed to an increase in related diseases like type 2 diabetes, once only seen in adults. This issue raises long-term concerns about the future health status of Minnesotans and economic impacts that result, such as increased healthcare costs, worker absenteeism, and quality of life.

For all of us, obesity and related chronic diseases are closely tied to how easy it is to obtain affordable, healthy food. And for those concerned about Minnesota's children and their health, exploring where schools fit into the equation is a key piece of the puzzle. Minnesota Food Charter participants point to two key needs relative to schools, children, and youth: [school food environments](#) and [acquisition of food skills](#). Since children spend so much of their time in school settings – during the school day, after school, at school events, and at summer programs - having adequate access to healthy food in school environments is critical.

### *Fast Facts about Childhood Obesity, Healthy Food Access, and School Food Environments in Minnesota<sup>1</sup>*

- 14% of 2 – 4 year olds are obese who are members of low-income families in Minnesota. 14% of 10 – 17 year olds are obese in Minnesota.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://minnesotabudgetbites.org/2013/09/19/minnesota-still-a-land-of-inequality/#.Usb5IWRDv9g>; <http://healthyamericans.org/reports/obesity2013/?stateid=MN>; <http://www.health.state.mn.us/divs/hpcd/chp/cdr/obesity/pdfdocs/childreoverwightfactsheet.pdf>; <http://www.fns.usda.gov/farmtoschool/census#/state/mn>; <http://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/07/mn.pdf>

- Between 1989 and 2011, obesity rates among Minnesota’s children and youth went from 8.7% to 12.6%. These rates peaked in 2002 above 13% and are slowly declining.
- In 2012, the food insecurity rate among children under 18 in Minnesota was 16.7% or 212,050 children.
- 14.6% of Minnesota’s children live in poverty.
- Poverty and its impacts on health and food security are felt much more acutely by communities of color in Minnesota, adversely affecting children in these communities. Statewide, poverty rates for communities of color range from nearly twice to four times that of their white counterparts.
- In Minnesota, more than two-thirds of students eat school-cooked meals, according to the state Education Department. About 29 percent of the state's schoolchildren qualify for free or reduced-priced meals.
- 71% of Minnesota schools participate in Farm to School programs, according to the USDA (2011 – 2012 school year)
- Changes in federal guidelines, combined with investments by the Minnesota legislature, have substantially improved school food environments in recent years, including an increase and funding, equipment and training for school foodservice staff, school districts, and their vendors. Children now eat substantially more whole grains, fresh fruits and vegetables, and other foods cooked from scratch at school. They also have less access to unhealthy items sold at school concessions, in vending machines, and as part of school fundraisers and a la carte options.

## Context

The majority of children in Minnesota spend at least some of their time in a school setting, which means they may regularly eat meals or snacks at school. Food served at school comes from a variety of sources. It may be prepared onsite by a foodservice worker who may be employed by the school district or a foodservice or catering company. It may be provided by an instructor, or it may be sent from home by a family member or caregiver. Food may be purchased from a vending machine, a concession stand, a snack cart, school fundraisers or may be served as a birthday treat or celebration. Because so many children in Minnesota consume food provided by and at schools, it’s important to examine the barriers and solutions surrounding healthy food access for Minnesota’s schools.

## School Setting Food Charter Input

Feedback from participants focused on healthy food access in schools came from several sources: individual interviews, listening sessions, Food Charter Events that used a worksheet specific to school food environments, and Food Charter Events that included

some questions relevant to school food environments. There were 12 Food Charter Events focused on healthy food access in schools, and 127 Food Charter Events that included some questions on school food environments. A total of fourteen people participated in a Twin Cities-based listening session focused on encouraging healthy school environments. 8 interviews focused on school food environments occurred across the state.

Location	Metro	Metro Interviews	International Falls
# Participants	6	4	4
Description	Nutrition Services Director for a suburban school district (3), Public Health Law Center representative, School health consultant, Minnesota Department of Education Nutrition Services	Nutrition Services Director for an urban district (2), Farm to Institution consultant, School health consultant, Elementary Principal in a suburban school district	Nutrition services director in a rural school district (3), High School Principal of a rural school district

### School Setting Food Charter Findings

Minnesota Food Charter participants were asked to consider healthy food access in the context of school and identified several important facets of this issue:

- Schools are food environments with several affected stakeholders groups, including district and school administrators, parents, students, and foodservice professionals
- As food environments, schools offer food in many contexts – snacks, breakfast and lunch, vending machines and a la carte options, concession sales, celebrations, fundraisers and others
- School food is not only available during the school day, but also at school performances and athletic events, community education, after-school and summer enrichment programs
- Schools can be learning environments about many aspects of food in formal and informal ways for students and the professionals who work with them

These dimensions informed participants’ observations about the barriers to healthy food access and the strategies to improve access to healthy food in schools. They responded with ideas for professional development and training of key staff, shifts in state standards and related curriculum, implementation of policies that improve healthy food access on school grounds, and engagement of key stakeholders in developing and sustaining suggested solutions.

Food Charter participants described several constraints that influence healthy food access in schools. Due to federal and state education policies, schools are forced to focus on test scores not healthy foods. Low engagement of families in schools, combined with schools' inability to control what foods students bring from home, compound this problem. Some participants also pointed to a lack of common definition by community members about what constitutes healthy food. Furthermore, some participants observed that schools are under intense pressure to fulfill many roles in a community, and they cannot be the only institution that makes healthy eating a priority.

When asked what the ideal school food environment would look like, respondents from rural and urban communities alike suggested that school foodservice programs would serve fresh, whole foods, featuring abundant, locally sourced products where many more students would eat school lunch. But, a food environment is a complex place, and there are many factors that challenge schools to offer healthy foods to their students, from budgets to facilities to curriculum to behavioral norms to policies.

## **Food Affordability**

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People participating in the Minnesota Food Charter public input process frequently point to the cost of healthy food as a core issue when it comes to healthy food access. Schools are no exception.

**Barriers** – There was disagreement among participants about the extent to which cost is a factor inhibiting healthy food access in schools: 50% agree that fresh, healthy food is expensive, putting many healthy options out of reach for school foodservices. 50% disagreed. Some school foodservice directors pointed to challenges involved in offering far more healthy options and far fewer unhealthy options at school. Many school foodservices must generate revenue to sustain the school meal program; schools near restaurants face competition for student dollars, so feel pressure to sell foods students will buy. Yet, only 43% of participants agreed that removing unhealthy options for sale (like vending machines and school fundraisers) would reduce much needed revenue. 57% disagreed. Some participants expressed concern about the issue of 'charge backs,' money from foodservice budgets going to the school's general fund to cover things like water and electricity. Some participants said that in many cases schools are overcharging meal programs for these services.

**Solutions** - Some participants suggested that decision-makers spend a day in a school to better understand the challenges and costs experienced by school foodservices. Others emphasized the connection between healthy food and student academic performance, calling on policymakers to support schools financially so that they can promote healthy foods.

Increasing school foodservice budgets so schools are able to purchase and prepare healthy, local food and provide adequate training and staff to cook food from scratch was also recommended by some participants.

## Food Availability

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Increasing the availability of healthy food options in schools has been a focus across Minnesota for the last several years. Federal policy changes, combined with state-level support, have resulted in substantial improvements in school food environments. Widespread creativity, engagement and commitment from school districts and supportive partners have already improved healthy food access. Some participants have observed a lot of energy and conversations about healthy school environments underway that should continue.

Opinion was divided among participants about the availability of healthy food in Minnesota schools. Nearly 60% concur that schools offer **too many** unhealthy food options and **not enough** healthy food options, including the cafeteria, classroom, concession stands, vending machines, and fundraising activities. Just over 40% disagreed. Some participants suggested that schools should only serve and promote healthy items and avoid promoting unhealthy foods through a la carte items and concessions. Many participants indicated that schools need to say they will only provide healthy items and enforce that decision.

Leadership can be an issue in some cases, as is adequacy of funding. 76% of respondents agreed that in some cases key leaders (like school administrators and staff) do not identify improving school food environments as a priority or even oppose efforts to improve school food environments. Yet, when the leadership demonstrates commitment, 74% of participants agree that there isn't enough funding to coordinate, communicate, plan and implement substantial, lasting changes to school food environments.

**Barriers** – From an implementation standpoint, participants identified several barriers to making healthy food more available in school settings. Broad-based, wide-ranging support for school programs is needed, including more financial resources, and engagement from parents and administration, suggest some participants. Parental support for creating healthy school food environments is critical; 69% of participants agree that in some cases, parents resist changing school policies and practices that would reduce the availability of unhealthy foods at or during school. Furthermore, 88% of participants agreed that sometimes policies intended to improve the school food environment are created, but are unclear or lack a means to enforce them. 87% of respondents agreed that there can be a lack of communication or coordination of effort to carry out efforts to improve the school food environment.

Another problem, indicate some participants, is the use of unhealthy foods as rewards for students, or for fundraisers. Unhealthy foods in vending machines and concession stands also present problems, suggest some. Some participants suggested that school wellness committees and wellness policies associated with healthy eating need to be strengthened and enforced.

As for students, some participants pointed to the lack of time students have to get their food, sit down, and eat lunch. Participants mentioned that short lunch periods not only make it difficult for students to eat, they also contribute to food waste. One participant also expressed concern about new federally-mandated calorie limits were leaving kids hungry and hurting the program.

**Solutions** – Participants pointed to recent accomplishments to make healthy food more available in Minnesota schools. In fact, many participants indicated that foodservice programs at their schools were working well and serving healthy foods. Sourcing locally grown foods from nearby farmers has dramatically increased statewide. Many schools have started gardens. Schools across Minnesota have increased the amount of healthy foods (like fresh fruits and vegetables) served at school meals were listed as examples. Some participants mentioned recent federal changes to the school food program in the Healthy Hunger Free Kids Act were beneficial and should not be changed. These types of activities will encourage children to adjust and appreciate new, healthy options, suggested some participants.

Yet more can be done. Many participants identified school-based and district-wide wellness committees as an effective strategy for changing school food environments. Respondents indicate that there is strength in numbers: wellness committees that include teachers, paraprofessionals, school nursing staff, and students are integral to making lasting changes in schools. Some suggested that schools and school districts need to be held accountable for implementing and enforcing the wellness policies they pass. From a policy standpoint, some participants recommended that school wellness councils should be expanded, and the state should provide training and assistance so these wellness councils are successful.

Do staff have time to participate in these types of committees? Opinion was divided among participants. 35% agreed that school and district staff do not have time available to serve on a wellness committee or spend the time that it takes to make changes to school food environments, while 67% disagree.

Policies that support the types of healthy eating goals established by these wellness committees can include things like healthy foods at school celebrations, permitting water bottles and healthy snacks during class, and serving fresh fruits at staff meetings, all of which were proposed by participants. Some suggested eliminating sugar-sweetened

beverages in school settings, and establishing systems so parents can control what children purchase at the school store or concession stands. Some participants also recommended that schools should expand the time available for students to eat lunch, to ensure they have time to finish and enjoy their meals.

Sustained funding for school lunch and public health efforts to work on school wellness, such as SHIP, were acknowledged by participants as critical factors in sustaining changes. 81% of participants agreed that funding to hire professional expertise and necessary equipment/supplies would be helpful to coordinate and support district wellness work that focuses on healthy food environments in schools.

## Food Skills

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Many Food Charter participants suggest that food skills are one of the most pressing issues when it comes to healthy food access. In school environments, food skills are just as important for the students as for foodservice professionals indicate some participants. Many respondents agreed that most children do not understand the food system and lack basic food skills, which are no longer widely taught in schools or at home:

- 85% of respondents agree that children lack knowledge of healthy foods from their own cultures and the cultures of their classmates
- Over 90% of participants agree that most children lack a basic understanding of agriculture and the connections between the food they eat and what it takes to grow and distribute it
- Over 90% of respondents agree that most children do not basic gardening, healthy meal planning, and cooking at school
- Some participants observe that children's taste preferences are a component of 'food skills. Many students are unaccustomed to healthy, homemade food and prefer processed and fast foods.

Some participants suggested a link between academic performance to healthy eating and basic food skills to healthy food choices by students as justification for strengthening food skills of Minnesota's students.

**Barriers** - 87% confirm that district and state-level educational requirements do not provide adequate support for schools to improve student knowledge around healthy eating, cooking, gardening and agriculture. Over 90% of participants agree that there is not adequate availability of extracurricular and summer educational programs that focus on healthy eating, gardening, food preparation, healthy meal-planning, healthy food traditions and agricultural sciences in school districts across Minnesota. Some participants indicate that nutrition, cooking, gardening, and food systems education are not offered at all in certain schools.

Over 90% of participants agree that state-mandated learning standards are not adequately tied to student learning around healthy eating, food preparation skills, and gardening. Yet time is an issue for some schools; participants identified a lack of time available to organize school gardens as well as a lack of space for these gardens.

Furthermore, many foodservice professionals do not know how to plan, prepare, or procure healthy, fresh foods for school meals (including food safety practices for locally grown produce), report some participants.

**Solutions** - The most commonly identified opportunity for improving school food environments by participants was expanding cooking and nutrition education programs in schools, with the ultimate goal of building student skills in gardening, cooking, healthy eating, meal planning, and literacy around agriculture and food systems. 84% of participants agreed that state educational standards could be changed to require students to know how to garden, cook and make healthy food choices. Some participants also suggest a role for foodservice staff and teachers to encourage students to try new foods and make healthy choices during school meals. Learning opportunities associated with healthy eating, suggest some, should be integrated between the cafeteria and the classroom.

Some proposed that professional development opportunities for teachers and creation of curricular materials to help incorporate nutrition education content into lesson plans are worthwhile steps. Several participants indicated that statewide expansion of school gardening is also important. Some respondents also suggested that these types of educational efforts somehow involve parents, improving their food skills in healthy meals planning and preparation as well.

Participants also recommended strengthening the food skills of foodservice professionals through training opportunities. Some respondents indicated that improving healthy food access in schools requires district wide involvement to develop educational standards surrounding food skills education. Leadership, staff training and development, and wellness committees could help to implement these plans.

## **Food Infrastructure**

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Infrastructure is the system that moves food to students – an interconnected network of policies, systems, procedures, people, equipment, networks, and providers. Food Charter participants identified many facets of school food infrastructure that impact healthy food access at schools.

**Barriers** - 78% of participants agree that many schools lack the time, equipment, staff and space to prepare fresh, healthy meals from scratch or develop new menus. Budgets and a lack of staff were identified by participants as the most significant challenges to increasing

access to healthy foods at schools. Space is also a concern, suggest some participants; many schools do not have adequate cold storage to store perishable foods like fresh fruits and vegetables. Seasonality is also an issue; fresh, local produce is mostly available in Minnesota when school is not in session, revealed some participants.

Even with proper equipment, time and space, 69% agree that many school foodservice personnel lack experience preparing fresh, healthy foods from scratch. Procurement is also complicated for many schools.

71% of respondents agree that building efficient purchasing relationships between schools, school districts and local growers is a challenge. These challenges include the added cost and logistics of purchasing directly from a local producer than a wholesale distributor as well as requirements for insurance and certifications that local farmers lack. That said, 63% of participants disagreed that schools are unable to get, purchase, and serve affordable, healthy food grown by nearby farms; 37% agreed.

These resource and facilities issues are compounded, some participants suggest, by complex federal regulations.

**Solutions** – Food Charter participants offered support for numerous solutions designed to improve school food infrastructure, including procurement partnerships, recognition and incentives, and training. According to nearly 95% of participants, long-term funding and support provided to school districts for networking, coordination, equipment, supplies, and participation to make last changes to school food environment changes. Over 90% recommended that funds be made be available to purchase equipment, remodel school kitchens, and train school foodservice staff to safely prepare healthy, locally grown food from scratch.

Recognition, training and development of healthy school food champions and key staff were supported by many participants. Over 90% of participants affirmed the need for widely available, affordable or free training and development opportunities associated with improving school food environments for school administrators, school nurses, school foodservice staff, and interested school and community stakeholders. Nearly 95% supported the formation of a regional network of healthy school food leadership across school districts in a region to provide critical professional development and expert feedback, to encourage adoption of successful efforts tried in other member districts. Over 90% suggested that school districts and schools can recruit and support school-based champions who see healthy school food environments as a priority and position them to articulate the barriers and influence change. A participant also suggested that the Minnesota Department of Education start recognizing schools that exemplify support for healthy eating.

Nearly 95% of participants affirmed that school districts can appoint and actively support an effective district-wide wellness committee with strong leadership, clear goals, and annual wellness plans to achieve identified healthy eating goals. To encourage skillful participation in these efforts, 89% agreed that widely available skill-building and technical assistance that focuses on how to execute effective communications for school wellness initiatives is needed.

Procurement was another area that generated numerous recommendations by participants. Over 90% agreed that creating efficient and affordable systems for farmers, school food distributors, and school foodservice personnel to order and distribute food could be developed, with funding support to develop these systems. 86% agreed that the formation of regional networks of food service directors can be developed and supported on an ongoing basis to facilitate regional menu development and joint food purchasing would be helpful. For example, proposed a participant, small rural school districts could work together to purchase healthy food in bulk and jointly negotiate with vendors and food manufacturers. One participant suggested using group purchasing techniques to demand healthier and more appealing options from vendors. 83% agreed that farmers need incentives and support to grow, sell and distribute healthy food for nearby school foodservices. Some recommended that state policy be enacted to support the expansion of Farm to School programs.

### **Creating Supportive Networks for Healthy School Food**

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Cultivating effective partnerships in support of lasting changes to school cafeterias and classrooms is critical to success, according to some Food Charter participants, who emphasized the importance of getting the whole school community on board – including teachers, students, and parents. Cultivating the support of school administrators was viewed by many participants as crucial to the success of school- and district-based healthy eating efforts. Other participants recommended that champions within school foodservice should be identified and supported. 81% of participants agreed that healthy eating efforts in school buildings do not effectively recruit supportive parents and community stakeholders to participate. Some participants pointed to the role of state agencies and the importance of the state departments of health, agriculture, and education working together to support healthy food environments in schools.