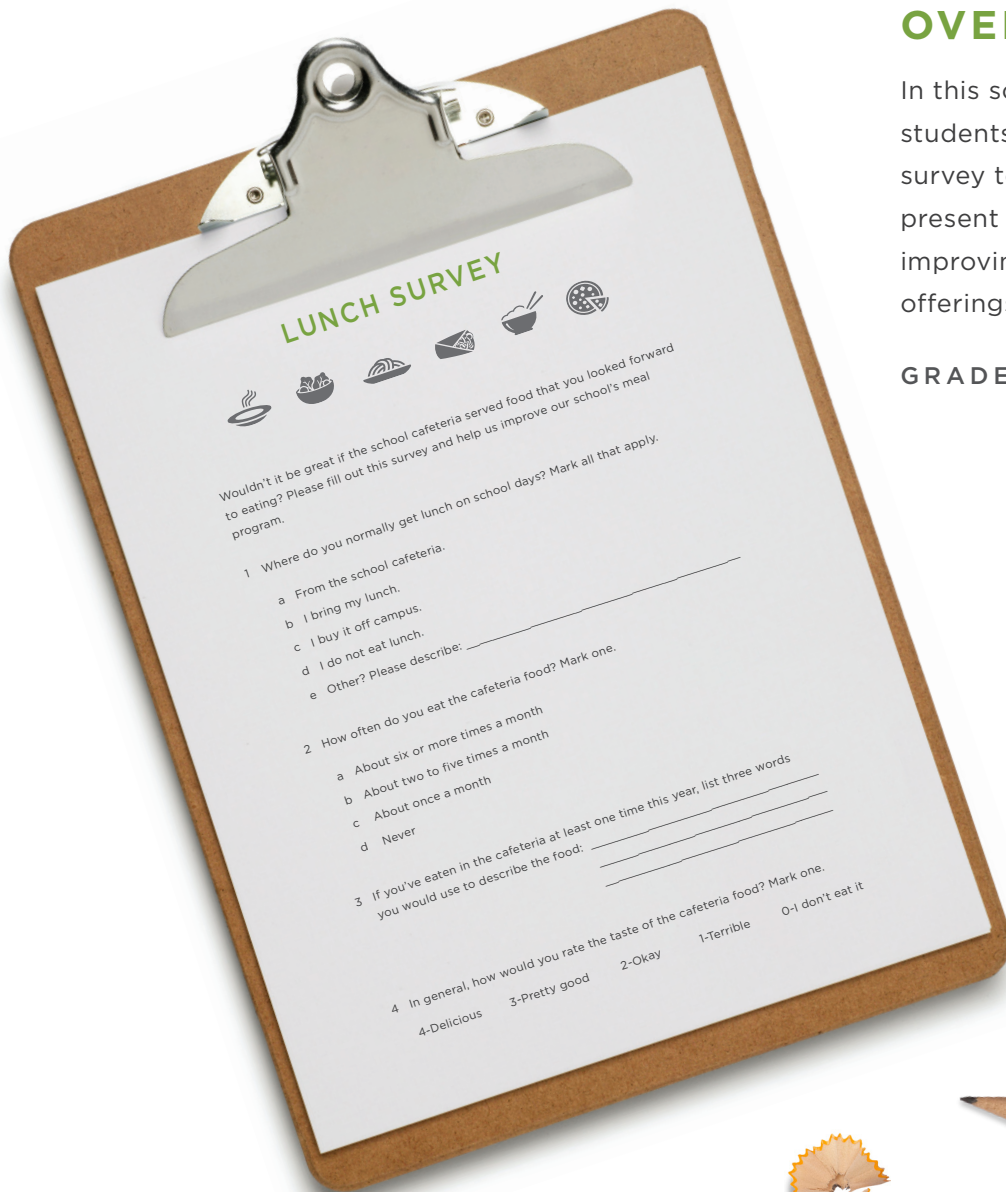


SCHOOL LUNCH SURVEY



OVERVIEW

In this solution-oriented lesson, students conduct a school lunch survey to gather ideas and then present recommendations for improving their school district's lunch offerings.

GRADE LEVEL: 6-8





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SCHOOL LUNCH SURVEY

PURPOSE

Students conduct a survey about their school's cafeteria food and identify ways to improve the lunch offerings. They begin by interviewing the food services director to learn about the factors involved in planning school menus, and then develop a survey for their peers. After analyzing the results, they present their findings and recommendations. Through this process, students learn effective ways to bring about change in their school community and help increase healthful eating and reduce waste.

GRADE LEVEL

6-8

ESTIMATED TIME

Two or three 50-minute periods, plus time to distribute the survey

BACKGROUND

It seems that everyone has an opinion about cafeteria food, and improvements are beginning to take hold in various places across the nation. One of the first steps to upgrading school meals is to identify what is currently in place. This kind of exploration doesn't stop with the food that is being served, but also considers where the food comes from, how it is prepared, the atmosphere in the dining hall, the waste that is generated, and the ways that food can serve as a focus for teaching and learning around many subject areas.

Most schools in the US participate in the National School Lunch Program, which affects what can be served, the source of many ingredients, and even the food service budget. (See the box on page 4 to learn more about the program.)

Changes to the program under the 2012 Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act mean that participating schools must meet new, more rigorous nutrition guidelines. While these are welcome changes, one challenge for food service directors is funding a program that is less reliant on subsidized commodities and that requires purchasing fresh ingredients. Another is finding foods that are both healthful and loved by kids.

By empowering students to make suggestions for cafeteria lunches, this lesson helps students make a real difference at their school. They may not be able to effect big changes, but even small changes can increase student satisfaction and reduce waste. At some schools, for example, students have suggested offering culturally inspired dishes, a salad bar with fresh vegetables and fruits, sliced apples instead of whole, more vegetarian or vegan options, or more local or organic foods.

WHAT IS THE NATIONAL SCHOOL LUNCH PROGRAM?

Most school cafeteria food in the US is tied to the National School Lunch Program (NSLP). Many districts also participate in the School Breakfast Program. Established in 1946, the federally assisted NSLP began as a way to provide nourishment to low-income children and, at the same time, to promote consumption of US agricultural products to boost food prices and support farmers. Today, it provides lunches to over 31 million children in 95,000 schools every school day.

Schools participating in the National School Lunch Program get cash reimbursements and donated commodities from the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) for each meal they serve. In turn, they must follow federal nutrition guidelines, which are established by the USDA and approved by Congress.

Children from low-income families are eligible for free or reduced-price meals, depending on family income level. Other children at a participating school may also purchase lunches. In most districts, the school nutrition program must be both self-supporting and nonprofit.

The 2012 Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act marked the first overhaul of the program since the 1990s. New nutrition guidelines stipulate more fruits and vegetables; require low- or nonfat milk and whole grains; and limit the amounts of calories, salt, and trans fats contained in school meals.

MATERIALS

- Copies of the Sample Lunch Survey for your class
- 3" x 14" strips of paper
- Copies of the class-designed survey, enough for the school
- Colored pens and poster paper, or presentation software

PREPARATION

- If possible, work with the school district's nutrition services director or his or her representative, since the changes that can be made at the level of the individual school are usually fairly minor. Before getting too far into planning this lesson, it is important to know whether the director is inclined to cooperate with you. Discuss the lesson with the director to get his or her perspective on what would be a realistic goal. Emphasize that you want to collaborate rather than criticize and that you hope that students can gather information that will be helpful to the food service program. (See the box on page 6 for suggestions on working with your food services director.) Invite him or her to your class for an interview, explaining that the purpose will be to help students understand the school lunch program so that they can focus on workable solutions. If possible, provide the interview questions in advance (see "Conducting the Lesson," Part A, Step 3).
- Make copies of the **Sample Lunch Survey** to serve as an example. If possible, have your students design their own survey.
- Make arrangements with other teachers for your students to distribute surveys in their classes. Also, plan for students to present their findings to the food services director or other appropriate audience.

WORKING WITH YOUR FOOD SERVICES DIRECTOR

Your district's food services director oversees the school lunch program, and is there to resolve any problems or issues. This person often appreciates — and may even encourage — student involvement to make the program as strong as possible. Following are some suggestions for working with him or her:

- Approach your food services director from the perspective that you have the same goal: wholesome, well-balanced meals that students will enjoy and eat.
- Acknowledge that planning school lunches is a complex process. Menus have to satisfy federal and state guidelines, meet nutrition and health goals, conform to the limitations of kitchen facilities, and stay within a limited budget. Invite the director to explain some of the obstacles that he or she encounters.
- Explain your goals for the lesson, and ask whether there is a particular area of the food service program where student input would be most helpful.
- Be sure that you and your students present any questions, concerns, and suggestions in a respectful and positive way, being sensitive to the constraints and pressures the food services director must face.

LESSON INTRODUCTION

Ask students to name some of the adjectives they or their friends might use to describe the school's cafeteria lunches, and list these on the board. Ask: Which of the adjectives would you say are positive and which are negative? (Mark them accordingly with a + or - sign.) Do you think it would be possible to offer a menu that would elicit mostly positive adjectives? What could our class do to help improve the food so that there are more positive and fewer negative adjectives?

Introduce the idea of doing a survey to find out what students' peers think of school meals and to get ideas for how to make the food tastier, healthier, or more appealing; to improve the overall dining experience; and to encourage more students to participate in the lunch program. Explain that they will first have a chance to interview the food services director to learn about the lunch program.

CONDUCTING THE LESSON

PART A: INTERVIEWING THE FOOD SERVICES DIRECTOR

- 1 A day or more before the interview, tell students that you have invited the food services director to answer any questions about the school meal program. Talk about this person's job at the school, and discuss being respectful before, during, and after the interview.

In order to design and conduct a good survey, ask students what they think would be helpful to ask about the school lunch program. List their possible interview questions on the board, and then as a class choose which to include. (Alternatively, you may use some or all of the Sample Interview Questions in the box on this page.)

- 2 Make copies of the questions to give to the food services director in advance, and to help students take notes during the interview.
- 3 On the day of the interview, welcome and introduce the food services director. Have students ask the planned questions, as well as any follow-up questions.
- 4 After the interview, lead the class in thanking the director for coming. Ask students what they learned from the interview that will help their survey. Discuss what the goal of the survey will be, pointing out that having a clear focus will help guide the process.

SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS TO ASK FOOD SERVICES DIRECTOR

- How many lunches does the district serve each day?
- Who decides what is served for lunch?
- What factors do you consider when you plan meals?
- What new food items have you tried recently? Were they successful?
- How do you know what students do or don't like to eat?
- Is there anything in particular you want to learn from students that we might include in our survey?
- If we would like to recommend a change, what would be the process to do so?

PART B: DESIGNING AND CONDUCTING THE SURVEY

- 1 With the survey focus in mind, ask students what information or opinions they want to learn from their fellow students about the school's lunches. Begin a class list of ideas on the board.
- 2 Give students copies of the questions they have generated, and read through them together. Discuss whether the survey will provide the information the class wants. Are there any questions that should be added or modified? Are there any that should be dropped?
- 3 If a new survey (or a new survey question) is in order, divide the class into teams of about four students and have them brainstorm possible questions. Share the tips for designing an effective survey on this page to help them narrow their lists down to the two or three best questions. Direct teams to trade their questions with another team to test them out, and then revise as necessary.

TIPS FOR DESIGNING AN EFFECTIVE SURVEY

- Define your goal. Decide what you want to find out, and keep the survey focused on that goal.
- Keep it short. For each question, ask, "How will we use this information?" If you won't use it, throw out the question.
- Give the survey a short title.
- Include clear instructions on how to complete the survey.
- Use simple and direct language. Make questions as brief as you can.
- To keep it interesting, include a variety of question forms such as yes/no, multiple choice, and open-ended questions.

- 4 Have teams write their final questions on strips of paper to share with the class. Post the strips and discuss which questions to include and in what order. Rearrange the strips to create a draft survey.

- 5 Have students test the draft survey by answering the questions themselves to see whether any changes would make the survey better. Help students revise the survey or individual questions as necessary.
- 6 Make copies of the final survey to use with other students in the school. Depending on your arrangement with teachers, direct students to take copies of the survey to different classes to complete.
- 7 After conducting the survey, help students compile and analyze the results. For questions that have a rating scale (like numbers 4 and 5 on the Sample Lunch Survey), they might tally and average the answers.

DISCUSSION AND WRAP-UP

Discuss the survey findings, asking such questions as:

- What different opinions did students express about the cafeteria's food and the dining experience?
- Did any of their responses surprise you? How?
- What were the most interesting suggestions for improving the school meal program?
- Which suggestions seem most workable?
- Based on our survey, what recommendations could we make?
- Knowing what we do about the school lunch program, which recommendations should we focus on?
- How do our results support these recommendations?
- What would be the best way to present these recommendations?

Help students plan a presentation that shows their findings and explains their recommendations. They may use colored pens and poster board or presentation software to produce the desired visuals.

Celebrate your successes. Whether or not their recommendations are adopted, students have learned a lot about the lunch program and about how to effect change at the school. They have also gained skills in conducting a survey, formulating recommendations, and developing an effective presentation.

SAMPLE LUNCH SURVEY



Wouldn't it be great if the school cafeteria served food that you looked forward to eating? Please fill out this survey and help us improve our school's meal program.

1 Where do you normally get lunch on school days? Mark all that apply.

- a From the school cafeteria.
- b I bring my lunch.
- c I buy it off campus.
- d I do not eat lunch.
- e Other? Please describe: _____

2 How often do you eat the cafeteria food? Mark one.

- a About six or more times a month
- b About two to five times a month
- c About once a month
- d Never

3 If you've eaten in the cafeteria at least one time this year, list three words you would use to describe the food: _____

4 In general, how would you rate the taste of the cafeteria food? Mark one.

- 4-Delicious 3-Pretty good 2-Okay 1-Terrible 0-I don't eat it

- 5 In general, how healthy do you think the cafeteria food is? Mark one.
 4-Very healthy 3-Pretty healthy 2-A little healthy 1-Not healthy 0-I don't eat it
- 6 What is the best thing you've eaten in the cafeteria? _____
 What did you like about it? _____
- 7 What was your least favorite food item? _____
 What didn't you like about it? _____
- 8 If the cafeteria could change one or two things to make the food tastier, healthier, or more interesting, what would you suggest? Be as specific as you can: _____
- 9 Does it seem to you that a lot of waste is being generated in the meal program? _____
 What could be done to reduce that? _____
- 10 Do you feel you have enough time to eat your lunch? _____
 If not, how much would make a difference for you? _____
- 11 In addition to the food itself, what changes (for instance in the lunchroom) would improve the overall dining experience? _____
- 12 Think about students you know who don't regularly eat the school lunch. What changes might make them more likely to participate?



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The Center for Ecoliteracy is an internationally recognized leader in systems change innovations in education for sustainable living. Since 1995, the Center has engaged with thousands of educators from across the United States and six continents. The Center offers publications, seminars, academic program audits, coaching for teaching and learning, in-depth curriculum development, keynote presentations, and technical assistance. Books authored or coauthored by the Center for Ecoliteracy include *Ecoliterate: How Educators Are Cultivating Emotional, Social, and Ecological Intelligence* (Jossey-Bass, 2012); *Smart by Nature: Schooling for Sustainability* (Watershed Media, 2009); and *Ecological Literacy: Educating Our Children for a Sustainable World* (Sierra Club Books, 2005).

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