

***School Lunch Eligible
Non-Participants***

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Chapter One

Introduction

The School Lunch Eligible Non-Participants Study, conducted for USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS), was designed to determine "why children eligible to participate for free and reduced-price meals do not apply or participate" in school nutrition programs (P.L. 101-624). The study therefore revolved around the two groups that are not taking full advantage of the benefits offered by the school nutrition programs:

- families which are potentially eligible for meal benefits, but do not apply; and
- children approved for meal benefits, but who do not always take the school meals.

This chapter provides brief descriptions of the two programs that are the focus of the study -- the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and the School Breakfast Program (SBP) -- and presents an overview of the study design.

OVERVIEW OF THE NATIONAL SCHOOL LUNCH PROGRAM AND THE SCHOOL BREAKFAST PROGRAM

The NSLP and the SBP are two of the "Child Nutrition Programs" administered by FNS that operate in every State in the nation. Each program is briefly described below.

The National School Lunch Program

The NSLP is the largest and oldest Child Nutrition Program. The Federal contribution for School Year (SY) 1992-93 was about \$4.7 billion, including donated commodities.

The NSLP provides Federal subsidies for school lunches served to children at all income levels. Eligible institutions include public schools, private non-profit schools, and public or licensed residential child care institutions. Nationally, about 99 percent of all public schools and 20 percent of all private schools

participate in the NSLP. Any child in a participating school is eligible to purchase a school lunch. About half of all children in schools regularly participate in the program on a given day.¹

Federal assistance takes two forms: cash and commodities. To be eligible for Federal subsidy, lunches served must meet nutritional guidelines set forth by the Secretary of Agriculture designed to ensure that the meal provides, on average, one-third of a student's daily nutritional requirements. Federal assistance is performance-based—i.e., reimbursement is provided to States only for meals actually served to students. Two kinds of cash assistance are provided. Under Section 4 of the National School Lunch Act, a uniform cash subsidy is provided for every lunch served, regardless of the income of the child's family. Under Section 11 of the National School Lunch Act, additional cash subsidies are provided for children qualifying for free or reduced-price lunches. Currently, students eligible for a free lunch are those from families with incomes at or below 130 percent of poverty. Reduced-price lunches may be served to students from families whose incomes fall between 130 and 185 percent of poverty. These students may be required to contribute an additional amount of their own money for the lunch—up to \$0.40 per lunch. An additional \$0.02 per lunch is reimbursed for each meal served in schools in which 60 percent or more of the lunches in the second preceding year were claimed as free or reduced-price meals. Total cash reimbursements received by schools during Fiscal Year (FY) 1993 amounted to approximately \$4.1 billion.

The NSLP is the only Child Nutrition Program that requires a matching contribution by States. States are required to provide matching funds equal to up to 30 percent of the amount of Section 4 assistance they received during SY 1980. The actual percentage depends on the average per capita income in the State as compared with the national average. States with average per capita incomes lower than the national average are required to contribute less than 30 percent.

Under Sections 6 and 14 of the National School Lunch Act, schools also receive agricultural commodities for use in school lunches. Entitlement commodity assistance, provided regardless of family income, is available for each meal served (about \$0.14 per lunch for SY 1992-93) and is provided to States based on the estimated number of lunches to be served in the school year. In addition, the school lunch

¹U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service. **The School Nutrition Dietary Assessment Study** (Washington, D.C.; 1993).

program may receive "bonus commodities"—commodities that do not count against the State's entitlement and which vary from year to year both in amount and the types of commodities provided.

In FY 1992, about 24.6 million lunches were served daily in the NSLP. The per meal lunch reimbursement rates in effect for SY 1993-94 are as follows:

	<u>Regular Reimbursement Rates</u>	<u>Average Entitlement Commodities</u>	<u>Total Subsidy</u>
Paid	\$0.1675	\$0.1400	\$0.3075
Reduced-price	1.3450	0.1400	1.4850
Free	1.7450	0.1400	1.8850

Federal law prohibits schools from charging students who qualify for free lunches, but allows them to charge up to \$0.40 for reduced-price lunches. There is no limit placed on what paying students may be charged for lunch.

The School Breakfast Program

The SBP provides Federal funds for non-profit breakfast programs in eligible schools (i.e., public or private non-profit) and other approved child care institutions. Initiated in 1967, the program is aimed at "nutritionally needy" children². Throughout its early history, legislation stressed the need to reach children in poor areas, especially rural areas where children might have to travel great distances to school, and children of working mothers.

The current cost of the breakfast program (FY 1993) is about \$868 million. As with the NSLP, Federal SBP reimbursement is based on the number of meals served. Per-meal reimbursement rates vary in two ways. First, as in the NSLP, three categories of reimbursement are established according to family income: paid reimbursement is provided for breakfasts served to those from families with incomes above

²Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry, U.S. Senate, 1983.

185 percent of poverty; reduced-price rates are established for breakfasts served to children from families with incomes between 130 and 185 percent of poverty; and free rates are established for breakfast served to children from families with incomes below 130 percent of poverty. Second, a "severe need" rate is established for free and reduced-price breakfasts in schools that served 40 percent or more of their lunches to children below 185 percent of poverty two years prior to the school year for which the rate is claimed.³ Schools must also demonstrate that unusually high preparation costs exceed the regular reimbursement. The per meal breakfast reimbursement rates in effect for SY 1993-94 are as follows:

	<u>Regular Reimbursement Rates</u>	<u>Severe Need Reimbursement</u>
Paid	\$0.1925	\$0.1925
Reduced-price	0.6700	0.8525
Free	0.9700	1.1525

Federal law prohibits schools from charging students who qualify for free breakfasts, but allows them to charge up to \$0.30 for reduced-price breakfasts. There is no limit placed on what paying students may be charged for breakfast.

Most subsidies are for meals served in elementary schools; not only do more elementary schools participate in the program, but student participation is much greater in these schools. The great majority of children who participate in the program receive free breakfasts (i.e., have incomes below 130 percent of poverty). In FY 1993, 83 percent of all breakfasts were served free or at a reduced-price rate.

OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY DESIGN

School Food Authorities (SFAs) that participate in the NSLP or SBP are provided with cash reimbursements and donated commodities for each meal that meets USDA's guidelines. As discussed above, the amount of the reimbursement depends on whether the meal is served free, at a reduced price,

³Prior to the 1981 Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act (OBRA), schools could be designated as severe need if state law required them to operate a breakfast program.

or at full price. Thus, the program is designed to encourage children from poor families to eat school meals, by offering those meals free or at a reduced price.

In order to obtain free or reduced-price meals, a family must file an application with the SFA. The application requires a listing of each of the wage earners in the family and the income received by each person. If the income declared on the application does not exceed the established eligibility guidelines (185 percent of the federal poverty guidelines), the family qualifies and all children in the family can receive free or reduced-price meals. But, some families that are eligible for free or reduced-price meals do not apply. Available data indicate that between 16 percent and 25 percent of potentially-eligible families do not apply for school meal benefits.⁴

Moreover, some children who are approved to receive free or reduced-price meals do not always obtain the meals. Previous studies have shown that student participation rates (the percentage of children in a given group who purchase a meal on a typical day) are about 80 percent for children approved for free meals, about 70 percent for children approved for reduced-price meals, and about 45 percent for children who pay full price. Participation rates decline considerably as children get older.⁵ This non-participation by income-eligible families is much less common in elementary schools than in middle or high schools.

The School Lunch Eligible Non-Participant Study was an effort to examine and clarify the attitudes and behaviors of potentially eligible non-applicant families and approved but non-participating children and to suggest possible barriers to their participation in the school nutrition programs. The design for the School Lunch Eligible Non-Participants Study included case studies in four school districts to identify the barriers to application/participation in the school nutrition programs. Each of the case studies included an interview with an SFA director, interviews with school principals, and a series of focus groups conducted with parents and students. Three types of focus groups were conducted in each of the four sites participating in the study:

⁴Burghardt, J. et al., *The School Nutrition Dietary Assessment Study: School Food Service, Meals Offered, and Dietary Intakes* (Princeton, NJ: Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., 1993).

⁵Burghardt, J. et al., 1993.

- non-applicant parents of elementary and secondary school students;
- non-applicant secondary school students; and
- non-participant elementary and secondary school students.

A total of 24 focus groups were conducted across the four sites included in the study. In each school district, focus groups were conducted in three schools -- one elementary school, one middle school and one high school. Six focus groups were conducted at each site:

- 3 non-participant student groups
 - 1 elementary
 - 1 middle
 - 1 high school
- 2 non-applicant parent groups
 - 1 elementary
 - 1 middle/high school
- 1 non-applicant student group
 - 1 high school

The composition of the focus groups reflects the analysis of data from the School Nutrition Dietary Assessment Study which suggested that:

- income-eligible students are less likely to participate in the NSLP and SBP as grade increases;
- parents of elementary school students are more likely to apply than those of middle or high school students;
- income-eligible high school students may have some influence in the parents' application decision.

A two-person team spent three days at each site. Each site visit began with a team interview of the SFA director. Prior to any focus groups being conducted in any school, the team also conducted a joint interview with the school principal. Responsibilities for conducting the focus groups were divided between the team members. While both team members conducted parent and high school student groups,

one team member who was experienced in conducting focus groups with young children was responsible for conducting the groups with elementary and middle school children. An exit interview with the SFA director was conducted on the last day of each site visit. Exhibit 1.1 presents a summary of the study design.

Focus Group Methodology

Focus groups are a cornerstone of marketing research. At its core, a focus group is an *interactive* group interview with a small sample (eight to ten) of purposely selected participants. The participants are selected based on one or more homogeneous factors, such as age, gender, and in this study, eligibility but non-application for or participation in the school meal programs. The reason for the homogeneity of the group composition is that the one to two-hour discussion *is* focused—it is intended to address several specific issues that the participants, by nature of their experience (e.g., participation), or lack of it (e.g., non-participation), would be considered "experts." The interaction among participants under the direction of the focus group moderator is capable of producing information that would otherwise be considerably more expensive to obtain with other research techniques, such as individual interviews. Furthermore, a group discussion is often more comfortable for respondents than one-on-one interviews. While care must be taken to overcome inhibitions about talking about sensitive issues—such as stigma—with a group of people, participants generally tend to be more honest and candid in a group situation than in a face-to-face interview. The dynamics of the focus group discussion, as participants react and interact with one another, often generates issues and considerations that would go undetected in individual interviews or quantitative questionnaire methodologies. The homogeneity of the group also encourages a comfort level, especially when talking about sensitive issues. Because many differing opinions can often be expressed during a focus group discussion, participants have opportunities to more easily relate to comments made by others in the group and express their own thoughts and feelings. Focus groups, therefore, provide an opportunity to obtain more in-depth information from a target group of individuals.

The focus group methodology is not intended to produce statistically generalizable findings, nor is it designed to produce individual-level data. Rather, the focus group methodology is used to *explore* group level—in this case, parents and students—attitudes and perceptions about some topic—the school lunch and breakfast program. The analysis of the focus group findings from these four sites are very useful

in providing *exploratory, yet directional, and in some instances confirmatory* information about reasons for non-application and non-participation among parents and students in four study sites.

The chapter that follows describes the four school districts that participated in the study and the criteria that were used to select those districts. Chapter Three presents the study findings. It examines the factors affecting non-application among potentially-eligible families; non-participation among students approved for meal benefits; and compares the focus group findings to nationally-representative survey data from the School Nutrition Dietary Assessment Study.

Exhibit 1.1

SUMMARY OF STUDY DESIGN

Design Element	Urban (N=2)(*)		Suburban (N=2)(*)		TOTAL (N=4)
	Each District	Total	Each District	Total	
Non-Participant Student Focus Groups	1 elementary school	2	1 elementary school	2	4 elementary schools 4 middle schools
	1 middle school	2	1 middle school	2	
	1 high school	2	1 high school	2	
Non-Applicant Parent Focus Groups	1 elementary school	2	1 elementary school	2	4 elementary schools
	1 middle/high school	2	1 middle/high school	2	4 middle/high schools
Non-Applicant Student Focus Groups	1 high school	2	1 high school	2	4 high schools
Total		12		12	24 focus groups

(*) As noted in Chapter Two, the four sites also varied by racial/ethnic mix.

Chapter Two

Description of the Study Sites

This chapter describes the criteria used to select the school districts included in the study and presents a brief profile of each of the study sites.

The School Lunch Eligible Non-Participants Study was conducted in a sample of four school districts. Each of the four sites was a low-income school district which was believed to have a significant degree of non-participation in the NSLP.¹ The sample is not intended to be a nationally-representative sample of school districts participating in the school lunch and breakfast programs. Rather, the sample was selected so that it included variation along several dimensions that were hypothesized to affect participation and application rates:

- urban and suburban school districts;
- racially mixed, predominantly black, predominantly white, and districts with a significant Hispanic enrollment; and
- school districts that have open campuses and significant a la carte sales.

Schools within the selected district were selected on the basis of recommendations by the School Food Authority (SFA) director. Exhibit 2.1 presents a summary of the four sites that participated in this study. Profiles of each of the study sites are presented below.

PROFILE OF SITE A

Description of the School District

Demographic Description of the School District. Site A is a suburban school district located in the Southwest, about 40 miles from a major city. The public school district covers a wide geographic area

¹Low-income school districts were defined as districts in which at least 10% of the children enrolled were living in households with incomes below the poverty threshold (as measured by the 1980 Orshansky Index). Three of the four SFAs had participation rates in the NSLP that were at least 0.5 standard deviations below the national mean in School Year 1989-90. The fourth SFA had a participation rate approximately equal to the national average. Participation rate data were obtained from the Child Nutrition Program Operations Study conducted by Abt Associates for USDA.

EXHIBIT 2.1
CHARACTERISTICS OF THE FOUR STUDY SITES

School District	FNS Region	Number of Schools	Size	Free Participation %	Paid Participation %	Orshansky (Poverty) Index	Racial/Ethnic Composition	Metro Status
Site A	Southwest	8	Medium	74	36	23	75% White 25% Native-American	Suburb
Site B	West	45	Large	77	31	19	90% Hispanic 10% African-American, White, and Asian	Urban
Site C	Southwest	4	Small	72	36	11	90% White 10% Hispanic, African-American, and Native-American	Suburb
Site D	Southeast	78	Large	85	23	30	72% African-American 28% White	Urban

and includes students living outside of the jurisdictional boundaries of the district. About three-quarters of the student population is white, less than one-quarter Native American, and the balance African-American and Asian. Economically, the area is described as being clearly split into the "haves and have-nots," with a large upper class, a large lower class, and a very small middle class. School district officials report that there is strong peer pressure to fit in with more affluent students and that low-income parents (and high school students) often work two or three jobs in order to buy clothes and have spending money to look like and fit in with other students.

The school district consists of eight schools: five elementary schools (including an early childhood center), one middle school, and two high schools (including one alternative school). The total enrollment in Site A is just under 4,000 students.

Demographic Description of the Schools Studied. The elementary school included in the study is the largest in the district, with enrollment over 400 students in grades one through five. The middle school is the only one in the district and has an enrollment of approximately 900 students in grades six through eight. The high school included in the study has an enrollment of just under 1,200 students in grades nine through 12. The demographics of the study schools are comparable to the district as a whole.

Lunch and Breakfast Programs

Availability. All schools in Site A have both a lunch and breakfast program. However, at the high schools, breakfast is no longer served in the morning before classes. Instead, students get a 15-minute "nutrition break" between 9:00-9:15 AM. Students can get a reimbursable breakfast during the nutrition break. All schools in the district have offer vs. serve (OVS).²

Patterns of Participation. Exhibit 2.2 presents the participation rates for the lunch and breakfast programs at each of the three study schools. These data were provided by the SFA director and reflect activity averaged for the first six weeks of SY 1993-94.

²Under OVS a student may refuse as many as two items offered as part of the reimbursable lunch and still have the meal counted as a reimbursable lunch. Students may refuse one item offered as part of the reimbursable breakfast and still have the meal count as a reimbursable breakfast.

Application Process. Separate applications must be submitted for each child in the household. The application forms are distributed to parents by each school individually, and this is accomplished differently in each school. In the elementary school included in the study, parents are given a school enrollment package which includes the application. In the middle school, parents are asked at enrollment if they want an application. In the high school, applications are given to the students at enrollment.

Exhibit 2.2

**PARTICIPATION RATES IN SITE A STUDY SCHOOLS
(Reported by SFA Director)**

Grade Level	Percent Approved for Free and Reduced Price Meals	Participation Rates in Study Schools			
		Students Approved for Free and Reduced Price Meals		Students Not Approved for Free and Reduced Price Meals	
		Breakfast	Lunch	Breakfast	Lunch
Elementary School	40%	45%	95%	6%	50%
Middle School	47	25	72	2	46
High School	18	2	40	1	6

While applications are distributed by each school, completed forms must be returned to the school food service central office. Parents can receive assistance in completing the application from the food service central office. Assistance is not typically available at individual schools. Approval of applications is done centrally by food service personnel. Site A does not currently have direct certification.³

Ticketing Systems. All students in the school district have a pre-paid food service account and are issued a "smart card"--a plastic debit card, which is used for both breakfast and lunch. Students can also use

³Direct Certification is the process by which students are certified to receive free school meals without application, by virtue of their eligibility for Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) or Food Stamps. School districts are allowed to waive the application process for eligible students provided documentation has been received from the agency responsible for administration of AFDC or Food Stamps.

cash to pay for reimbursable meals and a la carte items. While every student has a food service account, not all accounts may be activated. Elementary school students are required to open an account and reduced- and full-price students must maintain a balance in their accounts. Middle and high school students are not required to open their food service accounts or maintain a balance in open accounts.

Operating Characteristics of the Lunch and breakfast Programs. While food selection and purchasing decisions are totally centralized at the district food service level, Site A practices site-based management with regard to meal schedules and times, with each principal making decisions for his or her school.

In the elementary school, the only alternatives to the lunch program are bringing lunch from home, going home for lunch, or not eating. The campus is closed; there are no vending machines, and no a la carte items are available. The middle school has a closed campus, but the high school an open campus. A la carte items and vending machines are available to students at the both the middle and high school levels.

PROFILE OF SITE B

Description of the School District

Demographic Description of the School District. Site B is an urban school district located in the West. The school district has 45 schools: 30 elementary schools; seven middle schools; four high schools; three special education schools; and, one continuing education school. The ethnic/racial composition of the student population across the district is approximately 90 percent Hispanic, with smaller representations of African American, Caucasian and Asian. Family incomes across the district are reported to be low with many families living on minimum wage incomes. Additionally, family size is often large with up to 12 people living in one family setting.

Demographic Description of the Schools Studied. The elementary school has a year-round cycle with a total enrollment of 885 students in pre-kindergarten through grade five. The middle school also has a year-round cycle with a total enrollment of 1,780 students in grades six through eight. The high school has a total school enrollment of 3,060 students in grades nine through 12. The ethnic/racial composition of each of the three schools included in the study is similar to that of the district as a whole, with Hispanics accounting for 85-92 percent of the students enrolled.

Lunch and Breakfast Programs

Availability. The SFA operates both breakfast and lunch programs in all but five elementary schools which are located in outlying areas of the school district.

Patterns of Participation. Exhibit 2.3 presents the participation rates for the lunch and breakfast programs at each of the three study schools. The data provided by the SFA Director reflect activity averaged over a typical one-month period.

Exhibit 2.3

**PARTICIPATION RATES IN SITE B STUDY SCHOOLS
(Reported by SFA Director)**

Grade Level	Percent Approved for Free and Reduced Price Meals	Participation Rates in Study Schools			
		Students Approved for Free and Reduced Price Meals		Students Not Approved for Free and Reduced Price Meals	
		Breakfast	Lunch	Breakfast	Lunch
Elementary School	90%	36%	88%	3%	66%
Middle School	70	24	61	1	6
High School	53	18	39	2	9

Application Process. Families are required to submit one application for each child in the family. In the elementary and middle schools, teachers distribute applications to every student at the beginning of the school year. In these schools, the students act as couriers in bringing the applications to and from home. In the high school, applications are included in the registration package mailed out to students one week prior to registration. Students return the applications in person during registration week. Applications are available in both English and Spanish. In addition, applications are computer generated to include much of the required information for applicants.

In each of the three study schools, assistance is available to all families filling out the applications. In the elementary school, the cafeteria staff and the principal follow up with children to ensure that

applications are returned. In the middle school, English and Spanish reminders are printed in the student bulletin and oral announcements are made in school. The high school supplies the least amount of individual attention to applications due to the large number of students. While assistance is offered to parents, no follow-up is done on applications that have not been returned.

Eligibility determination is conducted centrally by food service personnel. Site B uses direct certification (where families receiving food stamps and/or AFDC are directly certified for school meal benefits and are not required to submit an application) and Provision One (which allows the SFA to approve students for meal benefits for a two-year period).

Ticketing Systems. All students have a laminated ticket containing a student I.D. and a code indicating eligibility status. Site B does not charge reduced-price students for meals, only full-price students are required to pay for pattern meals. Food service personnel manually record the student I.D.s and eligibility codes of each student taking the pattern meal.

Operating Characteristics of the Lunch and Breakfast Programs. In the elementary and middle schools all menus are planned centrally by the SFA Director with input from the cafeteria managers. All items served are prepared centrally, pre-packaged, and sent to the schools where they are heated if necessary. This is also the case in three of the four high schools in the district. The fourth high school (the study school), which has a cook and a full kitchen, plans its own menus and prepares meals on-site.

Offer vs. serve is available at all schools for breakfast; it is available at middle and high schools for lunch. Alternatives to the pattern meals vary between elementary, middle and high schools. In the middle and high schools, a la carte foods are available. Vending machines and an off-campus option are available to high school students only. However, the availability of off-campus lunch varies by high school, and is not available at the high school included in this study. Additionally, vending machines are supposed to be closed to students during meals. However, this agreement is not adhered to by all high schools.

PROFILE OF SITE C

Description of the School District

Site C is a small suburban school district located in the Southwest, about eight miles from a small city. The district has four schools with a total enrollment of approximately 1,700 students. The elementary school has an enrollment of 625 students in kindergarten through the third grade. The intermediate school has a total enrollment of 250 students in grades four and five. The middle school serves 415 students in grades six through eight. The high school has 410 students in grades nine through 12. The racial/ethnic composition of the district is primarily white. Approximately 90 percent of the student population is Caucasian, with the remaining population consisting of Hispanic, African-American, and Native-Indian students. School district officials report that family incomes throughout the district are "mixed," spanning all economic levels.

Lunch and Breakfast Programs

Availability. The SFA operates both breakfast and lunch programs in each of the four schools in the district.

Patterns of Participation. Exhibit 2.4 presents the participation rates for the lunch and breakfast programs at each of the three study schools. The data provided by the SFA Director reflect activity averaged over a typical one-month period.

Application Process. At Site C, SFA policy stipulates that families submit one application that covers all children in the household. Application forms are distributed and collected by each school individually. At the intermediate school, applications are sent home with the students on the first day of classes and returned to the school by the students. At the middle and high schools, applications are available at preregistration for classes. While middle school parents often attend preregistration and complete the applications on-site, parents are less likely to attend preregistration at the high school, leaving the students responsible for bringing the applications home and returning the completed applications to the school. Most questions from parents are referred to the SFA central office, which also provides assistance in completing the application to parents who request it. Approval of applications is done centrally by food service personnel. Site C uses direct certification.

Exhibit 2.4

**PARTICIPATION RATES IN SITE C STUDY SCHOOLS
(Reported by SFA Director)**

Grade Level	Percent Approved for Free or Reduced Price Meals	Participation Rates in Study Schools			
		Students Approved for Free or Reduced Price Meals		Students Not Approved for Free or Reduced Price Meals	
		Breakfast	Lunch	Breakfast	Lunch
Intermediate School	32%	32%	90%	1%	72%
Middle School	29	37	61	4	16
High School	17	63	63	10	28

Ticketing Systems. This SFA does not issue tickets to students approved for free and reduced-price meals. Instead, the cashier at each cafeteria maintains a master list that indicates each student’s payment status. Students have the option of pre-paying for reduced and full-price meals or paying cash at the time of purchase.

Operating Characteristics of the Lunch and Breakfast Programs. The daily menu for reimbursable meals is the same at each school in the district. The SFA Director plans all menus with occasional input from cafeteria managers at each school. All schools in the district are equipped with a complete kitchen. Food preparation includes heat and serve items such as pizza, hamburgers, and some frozen vegetables, as well as items prepared from scratch such as chili, spaghetti, meatloaf, breads, and desserts.

Reimbursable lunches are pre-plated. When there is a choice of any single item in the reimbursable meal, trays are prepared in various combinations. In addition to the reimbursable meals, students at all schools in the district also have the option of bringing lunch from home, and purchasing drinks and snacks from vending machines located in all cafeterias. At the middle and high schools, students may also purchase a range of food items a la carte from snack bars. While all schools in the district have closed campuses, high school students who are 18 years old are considered adults and are permitted to leave the school premises.

PROFILE OF SITE D

Description of the School District

Demographic Description of the School District. Site D is a large urban school district in the South. The school district has 78 schools (52 elementary school, 16 middle schools and 10 high schools) with a combined enrollment of approximately 45,000 students. The racial/ethnic composition of this district is predominantly African-American. Approximately 72 percent of the student population is African-American with the remaining population representing a combination of Caucasian and to a lesser degree, Hispanic and Asian. School district officials describe the population of the district as primarily lower-middle income. District officials noted that about half of the children in district are from families that receive food stamps.

Demographic Description of the Schools Studied. The elementary school included in the study has a total enrollment of 442 students in kindergarten through the fifth grade. The middle school has a total enrollment of 573 students in grades six through eight. The high school included in the study is the largest in the district, with 1,563 students in grades 9-12.

In each of the three study schools, the ethnic/racial composition is reportedly between 98 to 99 percent African-American. The remaining one to two percent of the students are Caucasian, Hispanic or Asian. District officials report that the economic status at each of the three study schools is similar to that of the district as a whole--primarily lower-middle income.

Lunch and Breakfast Programs

Availability. The school breakfast and lunch programs are operated in each of the 78 schools in this district.

Patterns of Participation. Exhibit 2.5 presents the participation rates for lunch and breakfast programs at each of the three study schools. These data provided by the SFA Director reflect activity averaged over a typical one-month period.

Exhibit 2.5

**PARTICIPATION RATES IN SITE D STUDY SCHOOLS
(Reported by SFA Director)**

Grade Level	Percent Approved for Free and Reduced Price Meals	Participation Rates in Study Schools			
		Students Approved for Free and Reduced Price Meals		Students Not Approved for Free and Reduced Price Meals	
		Breakfast	Lunch	Breakfast	Lunch
Elementary School	85%	43%	83%	0%	8%
Middle School	73	16	83	0	3
High School	56	16	64	0	22

Application Process. SFA policy stipulates that an application must be submitted for each child applying for meal benefits. Applications are distributed at registration at the beginning of the school year. At the elementary and middle schools, parents must register their children in person. Forms are given directly to the parents during pre-registration and parents are requested to complete the applications at the school. The principals are on hand to assist parents who have questions. Parents who choose not to complete the application at the school can take the application home. At the high school, obtaining the application is primarily the student's responsibility. Relatively few parents attend registration as they are not required to register their children in person. With the exception of those applications completed by parents at the school, students are responsible for returning applications to the schools. Eligibility determination is conducted centrally by food service personnel. Site D uses direct certification.

Ticketing Systems. A district-wide ticketing system is used to record meal payments. All tickets look identical and payment status is indicated by a numerical code printed on the ticket. Students may pre-pay for reduced- and full-price meal tickets from one to four weeks in advance. Students may also pay cash for meals if they have not pre-paid or their pre-paid account is depleted.

Operating Characteristics of the Lunch and Breakfast Programs. The same daily menu is served in each of the schools. Although menu planning is centralized, cafeteria managers have the flexibility to add items to their menu; however, they may not delete items.

With the exception of three schools, all of the schools in this district are equipped with complete kitchens. Although food preparation includes heat and serve for items such as pizza and corn dogs, the majority of the food is reportedly prepared from scratch. Alternatives to the breakfast and lunch programs include bringing lunch from home and/or purchasing items from the a la carte selection. Vending machines and eating off-campus are not options for any of the schools in this district.

Chapter Three

Findings

This chapter presents the findings related to non-application and non-participation from a series of focus groups in four sites. It synthesizes the focus group discussions with students and parents, and the interviews conducted with SFA Directors and school principals. The study addressed two broad research questions:

- Why don't potentially-eligible families apply for school meal benefits? and
- Why don't students approved for school meal benefits participate in the lunch and/or breakfast programs?

It was anticipated that the factors affecting potentially-eligible parents' decisions not to apply for school meal benefits would differ from the factors affecting approved students' decisions not to participate in the lunch and breakfast programs. It was hypothesized that parents' decisions not to apply for meal benefits would be related to such factors as lack of information, administrative constraints surrounding the application and approval process, and the perceived stigma of receiving school meals. For students approved for school meal benefits, it was hypothesized that the decision to participate in the lunch or breakfast programs would be related to such factors as the quality and variety of the food, structural barriers such as the school meal schedules, and the perceived stigma of receiving meals.

A major, and unanticipated, finding is that the same factors that affect approved students' decisions to participate or not participate in the lunch and breakfast programs also have a major influence in potentially-eligible parents' decisions to apply or not to apply for school meal benefits. Quite simply, parents tend not to apply for school meal benefits if they do not feel that their children will take the school meals. In this context, the key findings with regard to non-application and non-participation include:

- The *perceived quality and variety of food* served in the lunch and breakfast programs is a key factor in approved students' participation decisions and potentially-eligible parents' application decisions. Students of all ages in all sites voiced complaints about the poor quality of food and the limited choices available. Students inform their parents that they will not eat the food, and consequently parents decide not to apply.

- **Perceived stigma** is a major factor affecting application and participation decisions for many parents and many older students. In three out of the four study sites, perceived stigma is a substantial barrier to application for school meal benefits. While perceived stigma is also a barrier to participation among approved students, stigma is a stronger issue for parents than for students. Among students, perceived stigma is only an issue for older students, and was considered a major issue in two of the four sites.

It is important to note, however, that for the study population, the concept of stigma has many facets to it. Stigma as associated with application to/participation in the NSLP and SBP goes beyond the negative perception of the programs being only for the poor. Among the study participants, being associated with the school meal programs reflect negatively on them in general. For instance, parents expressed stigma in terms of being embarrassed at not being able to provide for their children financially; in terms of fears of being criticized for not being "good" parents, or "abusing the system," or "taking a government handout;" and in terms of resentment at being financially eligible for a program associated with the poor, when they themselves are working and earning what they consider to be a "middle-class income."

Students, on the other hand, in addition to perceiving the school meals programs "for the poor," also perceive them as "uncool," regardless of payment status of the student. This latter type of perception may or may not be explicitly related to the income-eligibility aspect of the program.

- **Structural barriers** related to the scheduling of meal times and the time available to go through the lines and eat are a contributing factor to students' participation decisions, and to a lesser extent parents' application decisions. School meals are often scheduled at times that are not synchronized with students' appetites. Students also complained about the limited amount of time available to eat lunch.
- **Lack of information** does not appear to be a major factor in non-application for school meal benefits. In all four study sites parents were aware of the lunch and breakfast programs and the need to apply for free or reduced-price meals. In three of the four study sites parents completely understood the application process. In the fourth study site parents' confusion about the application process resulted in unintentional non-application, that is, they either thought they did not have to reapply each year, or that they had already applied.
- **Administrative constraints** do not appear to be a major factor in non-application for school meal benefits. In general, parents did not feel that the application process was burdensome and did not express serious concerns about income verification. While some parents felt that income verification was an invasion of privacy, it was not viewed as a barrier to applying for benefits.

The following sections discuss these findings in greater detail and place these findings in the context of a recently completed national survey that addressed non-application and non-participation. Before proceeding, however, it is important to note the role of the focus group moderator in leading and analyzing the discussions. It is not realistic to think that all participants in a focus group discussion will be verbal and articulate, or that they will respond verbally to each issue being discussed. As in life, communication can be either verbal or non-verbal—through body language, eye contact or lack of it, head nodding, non-responsiveness, etc. Often times the moderator will interpret and utilize such communication (e.g, tone of voice of verbal conversation, reluctance to talk about a topic) during the group discussion and make note of its meaning. However, non-verbal communication, or certain nuances of verbal conversation do not translate well into verbatims to support analytic findings. Therefore, while the reader may wish for more concrete evidence to support certain findings, specific quotations from the focus group participants may just not be available. However, this supposed lack of evidence does not, in any way, negate the findings.

FACTORS AFFECTING NON-APPLICATION

This section discusses the factors affecting non-application for school meal benefits among potentially-eligible families. The findings are grouped by the topics covered in each of the focus groups with non-applicant parents and students: lack of information, administrative constraints, quality and variety of food, structural barriers, and perceived stigma.¹ Non-applicant parents and students frequently differed in their perceptions of certain issues. Selected verbatims that support the focus group findings are identified by [P] for parent or [S] for student.

¹ The following questions were not directly asked as phrased in the focus group discussions. These questions are the research objectives that were developed at the onset of the study and which the focus groups discussions were designed to address. The answers to these questions came out of information which the free-flowing discussion format is designed to elicit.

Question: How large a factor is *lack of information* in potentially-eligible families' decision not to apply for school meal benefits?

Finding: *Lack of information does not appear to be a major factor in non-application for school meal benefits.* In three of the four study sites, lack of information was not perceived to be a substantial barrier to application for school meal benefits—both among parents and students. In the one site where lack of information was problematic, the issue focused on the application process, rather than on awareness of the program, receipt or understandability of the application form, or knowledge of eligibility status. That is, parents did not understand that they had to complete a separate application for each child in the household, and re-apply for each child yearly.

Discussion:

Awareness of the School Meal Program

Across all four sites, awareness of both the breakfast and lunch programs is high for both parents and students. In Site C, however, a few high school parents report a lack of awareness of the availability of breakfast for all students, regardless of income. The key mechanism for informing families of the school meal programs is the application that is distributed to parents and students. In addition, many parents are aware of the school meal program through their own experiences receiving meal benefits as students. Secondary school parents and children are also often aware of the meal programs through prior experiences in elementary school. (Eighty-one percent of secondary school students in the non-applicant student focus groups had participated in the NSLP in earlier years.)

"I assume everyone gets the sheet which has the income levels and prices listed. And even the newspaper says you can contact the school. It's well publicized that if you need help, it's there for you." [P]

"In this day and age, anybody who can't feed their children is going somewhere to get some kind of assistance and everybody knows that's something available somewhere...I would really be surprised if there's somebody out there who does not have food and doesn't know about [the free meals]." [P]

"I remember the food from when I was in school." [P]

"I qualified for free lunches when I was younger and took them regularly." [S]

"I've never eaten it, but I know about it." [S]

Promotional Activities

Across all four sites, both the extent and awareness of promotional activities is low among both parents and students. School district staff, parents and students alike confirm that there are limited promotional activities for the school meal programs. None of the four sites employ any outreach activities. When promotional activities do occur, they are most often directed at elementary school parents. In general, school-level promotional activities include letters to parents, informational meetings at school, and reminders by classroom teachers and school food service staff. District-level promotional initiatives include press releases and menus in local papers, and posters in unemployment offices (Site B). State-level promotional programs include "Let's Do Lunch" and "Crunchy Critter" (Site D), as well as posters, handouts, and mailings to parents (Site C).

"Other than the application, the school has never sent anything home with the kids. But they may have and I just never see them." [P]

"The teachers tell us to return the applications a couple of times, but no one really enforces it." [S]

"There's no advertising. All there is is a billboard outside the cafeteria saying what there is." [S]

Obtaining Application Forms

While non-receipt of applications does not appear to be a barrier to application for program benefits per se, it is more problematic at the secondary level than at the elementary school level. Across all sites, students in secondary schools are given increasing responsibility to courier application forms to their parents and back to the school. This gives them increased influence in the decision-making process and often results in parents' non-receipt of forms. However, parents report that if they wanted to apply for benefits, they would know how to obtain the application forms.

"They tell you to contact the school office. They tell you about the lunch program and that it's based on your income and they give you the chart breakdown." [P]

"When we enroll, they ask us if we want the forms and you can take the forms or not." [S]

"Teachers hand out applications. If they forget, the kids just ask for them." [S]

"They might throw it in a locker and then they just forget about it." [S]

"Some might put it in their pants pocket. Then it goes into the washing machine." [S]

Understandability of the Application

The understandability of the application form varies across sites. In general, the application form is perceived as more complicated among less educated parents. In Site D, the application form is perceived as less understandable than in the other sites. It is perceived most favorably in Site B.

"It's simple and not too long." [P]

"There's no problem with filling out the forms. They are very clear in what they want to know." [P]

"People may not be able to understand the application and figure their income." [P]

While parents are universally aware that eligibility is based on family income and size, many parents (particularly in Site D) were confused about requirements to 1) submit one application for the household vs. for each child, and (2) re-apply each year. Several of the sites have recently taken steps to attempt to clarify these issues. Site A has color-coded forms for each year to prompt parents to re-apply. In Site B, the applications are pre-printed with the child's name and other identifying information and are bilingual. In addition, Site B has elected to use Provision 1 which allows SFAs to certify eligibility for two years instead of one (7CFR245.9[a]). Site C also has bilingual applications.

"There should be only one application per family because it all goes to the same place." [P]

Understandability of the Application Process

Of more importance than the understandability of the form is the understandability of the application process. While most parents and students understood the application process, some parents and students clearly did not understand the process. This was especially true in Site D. Among those parents and students who did not fully understand the application process, concerns were expressed about (1) application requirements (discussed above), (2) not knowing the status of their applications or where to get information to clarify their circumstances, and, (3) not understanding the meaning of letters from the SFA.

"That's what I don't understand. He got free lunch last year and didn't get it this year. I said, 'OK, forget it.'" [P]

"That's what was confusing me. I thought the [notification] letter didn't apply to me because I had already been approved for free lunch. When the cutoff day came I didn't send any money because I was under the impression that I had already been approved." [P]

While much more prevalent in Site D, across sites parents tend not to understand that students approved the previous year have a grace period during which they can eat free or reduced-price meals, based on last year's determination. Parents claim that they had not been notified and had therefore assumed that they had been approved. Students in Site D echo their parents' concerns and confusions about the application and approval process.

"I don't know if I was turned down or not, but he was getting free lunch when school started. But in the first part of October, he was told to pay." [P]

"I had a ticket at the beginning of the year, but my name's not on the chart anymore, so I have to pay full price for my lunch. My parents are trying to straighten things out." [S]

One factor inhibiting follow-up on the status of an application and further complicating an understanding of the root of these information problems, particularly in Site D, is the pervasive belief by parents that school personnel are not concerned about the children. This feeling was reinforced when they learned, with what they perceive as little or no notice, that their children would no longer receive free meals.

"They don't care, but until the paperwork is completed, they should feed the kids." [P]

"That's not right. You shouldn't have to have the child pay. I thought that was so mean of them not to feed a child. You can't get no lower than that. Are you going to deny a kid a meal...in elementary school? [P]

"You have to keep in mind the area where you are. We're in the projects, and there is no concern or care. Those who are in charge of the meal program and nutrition don't care about kids. You only hear about the program at the beginning of the school year." [P]

Across sites, parents report, and school food service personnel confirm, that only limited assistance is provided to families in completing the application—and that parents must be proactive in asking for assistance. There is also little follow-up activity, and this is usually for previously approved students only. When more vigorous follow-up efforts are provided, they are aimed at elementary rather than secondary school students. A very few parents suggest that there should be more follow-up because parents may just forget to apply because the application may be overlooked in the extensive paperwork requirements at the start of the school year.

"You get a packet and if you can't fill it out, tough." [P]

"At the beginning of the school year, you're bombarded with so many papers." [P]

Eligibility Status

Despite the above issues regarding approval status, the majority of parents across all sites are aware of their eligibility status; however several in each site perceive that they are ineligible because their income exceeds the limit.

"The last two years I'm not eligible for free or reduced meals. In the application form, they show you the limits, so I had been on it and they questioned me this year, but I'm not eligible." [P]

"Most of the teachers were aware of our financial situation and they saw that I got the application. They also give you the application at enrollment. The lady in the cafeteria called me personally just to see if I wanted to go ahead and send it in, but I knew we had exceeded the income level. I appreciated the follow-up they did in calling." [P]

Regardless, uncertainty with respect to eligibility status is not a key consideration for parents, including those who believed themselves to be currently eligible, in their decision not to apply for school meal benefits. What is of more importance in their decision are concerns about the quality and variety of the food served and issues regarding stigma. These will be discussed in detail in subsequent sections.

Question:	How important are <i>administrative constraints</i> in potentially-eligible families' decision not to apply for school meal benefits?
Finding:	<i>Administrative constraints do not appear to be a major factor in non-application for school meal benefits. Across all four sites, neither an unwillingness to comply with the requirements of the application process, concerns about income verification, nor past application experience played a major role in the decision not to apply for the school meal program. In the two sites where income verification played a very minor role in non-application, the issue was one of perceived invasion of privacy. However, parents committed to receiving benefits are willing to provide documentation.</i>

Discussion:

Income Verification

Across all sites, potentially-eligible non-applicant parents and students are generally aware that approval for school meal benefits may require some kind of information regarding their income, and most do not perceive this requirement negatively. However, many are unaware that some families get contacted to provide verification of the income information they supplied at application. For families who have received benefits of any kind in the past and/or intent on receiving school meal benefits in particular, providing verification of income is not a barrier to application. What is important is having their children eat.

"I can't remember if they verified our income. I think I had to supply check stubs. I think there was a place for listing work information, and the Social Security number, so if they wanted to check they could. But I don't remember anybody calling. I wasn't aware that they check on some people." [P]

"Someone reads it. Someone has to determine whether you need it. I don't think just anybody can walk off the street and read it, just certain authorities. I never went to the office and asked about this though." [S]

For a very few families in Sites A and C, having to provide any kind of information regarding income is perceived as an invasion of privacy and potentially discourages families from applying.

"I'm pretty sure that we would qualify, but they ask so many questions. It's not worth the trouble." [P]

In Site B in particular, verification of income may present a barrier to application due to immigration issues. Of note is that this issue was not raised by the parents or students themselves, but by school food service and school personnel.

Previous Application and Denial

Potentially-eligible non-applicants do not report being previously turned down for school meal benefits, nor do they believe that such a situation would have any bearing on non-application. Some non-applicant high school students, however, suggest that this may be an issue in non-application.²

"Maybe they tried before and didn't get it, so they get tired of trying." [S]

²This sentiment was also voiced by parents in the pre-test site.

Perceptions of the School Bureaucracy

Except in Site D as discussed in the previous section on lack of information, in general, non-applicants do not have a negative view of the school bureaucracy.

Direct Certification

Direct certification is not currently used by Site A but it is used in the other three sites. School food service personnel report that direct certification has increased application rates, as well as decreased processing time.

Question:	How important is the <i>quality and variety of food served</i> in the decision not to apply for school meal benefits?
Finding:	<p><i>The perceived quality and variety of the food served is a key factor in families' decision not to apply for school meal benefits. Across all four sites, student influence in the application decision-making process is primary with regard to the food served in the pattern meal. Students present numerous complaints about the food and report to parents that they will not eat it. The key complaints center around two areas:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• food preparation, and• food choices. <p>Consequently, parents decide not to apply.</p>

Discussion:

Perceptions of the Food Served

Across all four sites, high school non-applicant students report that the preparation of the food and the choices offered in the pattern meal are deterrents to their participation in the school meal program. And lack of student participation is a key factor in all parents' decision not to apply for meal benefits. Parents report that they do not want to apply and "waste money," if their children do not eat the food.

"My daughter doesn't like the food and won't eat it, so I pack her lunch to make sure she eats it." [P]

The primary concerns about food quality include:

- poor taste,
- cold or undercooked,
- overcooked,
- too greasy,
- unfamiliar seasonings, and
- unappealing presentation.

"I don't like lunch—it's cold and greasy. It tastes like it's been cooked, then frozen, then recooked. Like it's been saved from day to day. The bread is stale." [S]

"The food is too greasy; it's cold; and the onions and pepper are cut in too big of chunks. The potatoes don't taste good. And I worked in institutional food settings and there's only one reason for that and that is they didn't prepare it right." [P]

"The food doesn't stay warm because they don't have any steam tables or warming lights or anything." [P]

"I've eaten with my children at times. And their biggest complaint is about the seasoning. I season differently. They tell me it tastes "yucky" and it was really bland. It's just different from the taste they're used to at home. And when kids get used to one taste at home, they just don't like others. It was the same when I went to school." [P]

Parents' issues about the quality of the food ranges from concerns that their children will not eat to fears that by eating the food, their children may become sick.

"My daughter has a sensitive stomach and if there's something that looks like it will disagree with her, she won't eat it. And if she's not eating lunch, there's no nutrition. It's a real concern. She has often said she will buy lunch and when she gets there, it doesn't look good, so she won't eat it." [P]

"My kids got sick from the food. It is not cooked well, especially the hamburger—it's too greasy. Also the seasoning was not right." [P]

In addition to concerns about the quality of the food, students and parents report that the variety and choices offered play a part in whether students eat at school or avail themselves of other meal alternatives. Parents, particularly those in Site B, perceive that students' taste in food is directly related

to eating habits developed at home and that offering more choices would allow students to select and customize their meals.

"My child goes through the calendar and picks the things he likes. The ones he doesn't like, he crosses off. And that's OK with us, because he has pretty good eating habits." [P]

"When my son checks the menu and sees pizza for the next day, he says: 'Mama, no lunch box.'" [P]

"We are accustomed to a food that is very different from what they have in school. So, eating at school is not a privilege. We raise our kids so that if they don't like something, they can have something else, or if they are hungry, we make them what they want to eat. The problem is that they can't choose what they want to eat in school." [P]

Of note, is that the quality and variety of the food served at breakfast is perceived to be superior to that served at lunch.

"They like the breakfast choices much better than the lunch." [P]

"The breakfast food is better—it's better prepared and there are lighter choices, like cereal." [P]

"When they sell the things in the packages for breakfast—that's all right. But their stuff looks gross. I don't know how it tastes. There's people in the line, so obviously somebody likes it." [S]

"I've eaten the breakfast and lunch myself and the breakfast is a lot better. It was more appetizing. At lunch, the food doesn't taste good. Maybe because it sits around longer than the breakfast food." [P]

While a few high school students expressed concerns about the portion sizes, this does not appear to be a barrier to application.

"The portions are real skimpy." [S]

"It's not worth \$1.15. You're still hungry after lunch." [S]

Comparison of Pattern Meals to Meal Alternatives

Across all four sites, as well as all grade levels, food alternatives to the pattern meal are perceived as superior to the meal itself. This includes á la carte items, bringing lunch from home, or leaving campus for lunch. Consequently, whenever possible, students tend to avail themselves of the meal alternatives.

Parents, particularly those in Site B, who perceive the pattern meals potentially to be non-nutritious and high in fat content, often prefer to feed their children themselves—either by packing their lunches or feeding them meals at home.

"It's not like home. It don't taste the same. They just throw it [food] together." [S]

"I have five kids that have gone through the [Site A] system and they all say the same thing. Going through the á la carte line is faster and they don't like the other food. They say that food is more bland, it's not cooked the way mom cooks it. If they get a basic item, like a hot dog or pizza, then they can't go real wrong—and that's the stuff on the á la carte line. The stuff on the other line is a main dish is usually a casserole, fruit, milk, a hot roll. I used to work in the school cafeteria and I ate lunch everyday, and basically, it was OK. You aren't supposed to season it that much or maybe they just season it differently, or because of budgetary reasons, they may not have the kinds of cuts of meats, or the vegetables may be canned instead of frozen. And people may just not have acquired a taste for the kinds of foods they serve." [P]

Of note is that the concept of quality often has different meanings to parents and students. Where parents perceive quality to mean nutritious, well-prepared or tasteful, or better cuts of meat or fresher vegetables, students often perceive quality in terms of their preference for fast-food items.

"In the á la carte lines they have the popular foods like Doritos. Inside [the pattern meal] it doesn't look good or taste good." [S]

"The food in the lunch line doesn't look as good as the food in the snack lines." [S]

While not reported to be a barrier to participation, and hence application, some high school non-applicant students in Site B perceive that the meals provided to teachers are superior to those available to the students.

"The teachers get good food. I saw them walking with mixed vegetables and chicken and it looked good. Supposedly the students are supposed to get healthy food, but the teachers get better food." [S]

Suggested Changes in the Foods Served

Not surprisingly, given the above comments by parents and students, a number of suggestions are presented for improving the foods served in the school meal programs. These include:

- altering practices for preparing the food and handling food to ensure that it is appropriately cooked and served warm, and appears appetizing;

"They need to improve the quality of the food and the way it is prepared. That might get more kids to eat it." [P]

- serving preferred foods more often and in larger portions;

"Most of the kids like the chef salad. But they only have it on days that we like the main meal, like when they have pizza. On Mondays, when we hate the food, they usually don't have chef salad." [S]

- serving foods that are nutritious or have lower fat content, such as salad bars;

"I would eat if there was a salad bar and if the vegetables were fresh and not leftovers. The salads in the cafeteria—the lettuce is old." [S]

"In the past were concerned about eating healthy food, then in junior high school wanted to eat junk food, now in high school want to eat healthy food again. If I don't get my breakfast in the morning then I don't get to eat till 6:30 because of sports, so if I don't eat something at lunch I get sick at practice. I go through the lines—it's not all junk food, there's pizzas, hamburgers out there." [S]

- offering more variety; and

"I want more choices for my children to eat, because I'm concerned about the fat content." [P]

"They only have one thing for lunch everyday. If you want to eat, you have to take it." [S]

- serving fewer pre-packaged and frozen foods and more that are "homecooked."

"To improve it, you could make the food yourself—put it together yourself, instead of buying it pre-made and processed. Throw the left-overs away. The hamburger patties sit in a bowl of water and soak it up. At a fast-food place, it might be pre-prepared, but they cook it right then and there." [S]

Question:	How important are <i>structural barriers</i> in the decision not to apply for school meal benefits?
Finding:	<i>While structural barriers—particularly the time allotted to eat lunch—contribute to the decision not to apply for school meal benefits, they are not in and of themselves a key driver of the non-application decision. Insufficient time to go through the line and eat, particularly at lunch, is another reason why students do not participate in the pattern meal program and choose meal alternatives, when available. Similar to findings regarding the quality and variety of food served, student non-participation directly influences parents' non-application decisions.</i>

Discussion:

Meal Schedules and Time Allotments

Breakfast and lunch are served at all four sites in this study, however, the times the meals are scheduled and the amount of time allotted to go through the lines and eat varied by site and within each site by school and meal. Therefore, perceptions of the impact of time and schedule vary drastically. In general, there were fewer concerns expressed about breakfast schedules and times than lunch schedules and times. Only in Site A was the morning bus schedule perceived to be a deterrent to students' eating breakfast in school. However, late arriving students are accommodated in all sites except Site B. For the most part, across all sites, families' own schedules or eating patterns and preferences had more of an impact on students not eating the school breakfast.

"The youngest one ate breakfast quite a lot, but the other didn't get to school early enough to eat breakfast because of the bus schedule—it got her there too late to eat." [P]

"At breakfast, we're all in a hurry and one child prefers not to eat anything. The other one drinks milk and then if she eats anything else, I don't care just as long as she drinks her milk." [P]

"In the morning, they won't eat breakfast, because they won't get up until 15 minutes before they have to leave. I take them to school, so they grab something and eat it in the car." [P]

"My kids eat breakfast at home. It's a family time; we start the day off together." [P]

Regarding lunch, students and parents generally report that across all four sites, the time of the day that lunch is scheduled is satisfactory. However, there were numerous complaints about the length of time available to go through the line and eat. The amount of time is often confounded by:

- the number of students that need to be served,
- the length of the lines in which students are to be served,
- the number of periods that are established to serve them,
- and the size of the space in which they can be served and eat.

Elementary and middle school parents in Site A have concerns about what they perceive to be insufficient time to eat lunch. Elementary school students have 20 minutes, with students who bring their lunch from home having the greater part of the 20 minutes since they are led into the cafeteria first and do not have to go through the line. Another elementary school reportedly allots only seven minutes for students to eat lunch. In the middle school, 30 minutes are allotted for each of three lunch periods. However, because of the limited size of the lunch space, this 30-minute time period is divided into two 15-minute segments—one for boys and one for girls, with each gender being dismissed to lunch first on alternating weeks. Parents who are concerned about the length of the lunch period believe that being forced to eat quickly leaves many children hungry, forces them to eat unbalanced meals, and also leads to bad eating habits later in life. Increasing the length, however, is not perceived as sufficient to increase participation, unless the meal choices are desired ones.

"We wanted to see if our kid had a justifiable reason—we didn't believe she only had 20 minutes so I went to eat with her. She leaves her classroom at 11:35 and by 11:55 they're on the playground." [P]

"The time they have to eat is a big problem. ... They end up dumping it. Even if you pack it and they leave their classroom late, they don't have enough time to eat a packed lunch. So they come home in the afternoon and their lunch becomes an afternoon snack." [P]

"My child finally suggested to me that she bring her lunch because she's a slow eater and she wasn't getting enough time." [P]

"Twenty minutes is too short, but if it were lengthened to 30 minutes, that would not increase participation, unless there's something on the menu they like." [P]

Long lines often drive students to the à la carte lines so they can assuage their hunger more quickly, have more time to socialize with their friends, and be assured of the availability of the foods they like.

"If you arrive late to the lunchroom, the lines are so long that there's not enough time to eat and visit with your friends." [S]

"My daughter says that the ones who eat first eat well, and the last ones eat food that is not good anymore." [P]

"Juniors don't eat in the cafeteria, they go through the lines. It gets too crowded in the cafeteria, the lines are too long. All the best food is gone, by the time you get to it. All you get is the leftovers. The one time I went through the line, I was near the end and by the time I got to the food, there was hardly anything left to choose from." [S]

"There is not enough time to eat your food. You have to eat it in a hurry before class starts. 35 minutes is not enough time. You can go through the snack lines faster and there are a lot of lines." [S]

"You're hungry and your stomach is growling, so you make for the snack lines to get something to eat quickly. And when you're hungry you can't concentrate in class and you fall asleep." [S]

In general, for lunch, 45 minutes is perceived as an adequate amount of time to go through the line and eat at the high school level, and 30 minutes at the middle and elementary school level. Of course, these times assume that the four factors identified above are adequately addressed.

Space

As noted above, space often goes hand in hand with scheduling times to eat meals, with lunch in all sites being served in shifts to accommodate the number of students and the size of the space available. In the Site D high school, the small size of the cafeteria is perceived to produce hostility and fighting.

In Site B, all eating space at all school levels is outside and parents express concerns about the space, especially in inclement weather.

"It's a big place and the children come in groups. When it's raining or when it's too hot, the children can't eat outside." [P]

In the Site A high school, however, students cite recent improvements in the space over the previous year.

"There are more places to sit this year. This was a classroom last year." [S]

Question:	How important is <i>perceived stigma</i> in the decision not to apply for school meal benefits?
Finding:	<i>Perceived stigma is a major factor in non-application for school meal benefits. In three of the four sites, perceived stigma is a substantial barrier to application for school meal benefits—both among students and parents. It is a stronger issue, however, for parents than for students. And among students, perceived stigma is clearly an issue for high school students, and clearly not an issue for elementary school students. In the fourth site, which experienced homogeneity with regard to receipt of other income-conditioned benefits, stigma is not an issue. Of note is that while the importance of stigma in non-application varies across the four sites, the variation did not appear to correspond directly to differences in the economic profile of the sites, but rather to differing perceptions of the school meal programs. Parents values and attitudes toward their own as well as governmental responsibilities are important factors in their perceptions of the programs and are not consistent across sites or income categories.</i>

Discussion:

Perceptions of the School Meal Program

Parents' perceptions of the school meal programs are closely connected to their perceptions of themselves. Parents in Site A, which is economically divided between the "haves" and the "have nots," perceive the school meal program very positively in the abstract—it is a nutrition program. This is especially notable in their perception of the breakfast program.

"They started the breakfast program because there were so many parents working outside the home and it is a way that kids get a nutritious breakfast and it eases tensions in the mornings in rushing around. And the schools are open in the mornings so the kids are supervised and the parents can get off to work." [P]

"I think it also started along when mothers started working a lot. It used to be that mothers would be home to provide the meal. There was never the problem about not having the time to get up and do all the things that you needed to do. But as a working mother and a single parent, there's not that much time. So the program is good for that point to." [P]

Site A parents' perceptions of the school meal program as a nutrition program extends, however, only to those who can afford to pay for it or who do not purposely shirk their responsibility for taking care of their children. Once people get it for free or at a reduced price, it becomes a financial assistance program—one that is not for them, unless dire financial straights force them into accepting help.

"I think it is a nutrition program. The way I look at both the breakfast and lunch program, for some kids, that's all they get. Some parents are so neglectful [emphasis added] that the kids have to fend for themselves. Some kids are fortunate enough to have parents who take care of them, but for the others, if it weren't for the school meal program, they wouldn't eat." [P]

"As an adult, I always thought of the program as providing a nutritional meal for kids whose parents could not afford to feed them [emphasis added]. This was one way to assure they got one properly balanced meal a day. [P]

"We were on it when we had extraordinary medical bills and were eligible." [P]

In Site C, which is economically heterogeneous, parents do not perceive the NSLP and SBP as positively in the abstract as do those in Site A. To them, they are nutrition programs specifically designed to serve lower income households. Some parents define the public perception of program recipients as "poor people." While most parents view the free and reduced-price meals as both a welfare and a nutrition program, some refer to it as a "handout."

"I think most people think of those who are on it as poor people." [P]

"It provides meals for those who may not be eating otherwise—like children from low income families." [P]

"If my kids were starving, I'd send them up here to get it, but as long as we can find some way to pay it, well, they're not going to be taking a handout." [P]

In Site B, which is homogenous with regard to ethnicity and income, parents refer to the "shame" in taking the free lunch and not being able to feed their children. Furthermore, they feel strongly that it is their responsibility to feed their children, not the schools—and, that they can do it much more nutritiously. While not perceiving the school lunch program as a "welfare" program per se, they do perceive that any program sponsored by the government should only be used when absolutely necessary, as government programs are so commonly abused. They are against receiving welfare and food stamps and see stigma in both.

"If they are in charge of the school lunches, then they should also see to it that the food they are providing is food the kids will eat, so there won't be so much waste. If the kids don't eat it, they're not getting nutrition. So if they eat at home, I know the food will be nutritious." [P]

"The responsibility of feeding my child is mine, but if the school is going to get involved, then it is their responsibility to serve something better." [P]

"I'm against the government programs, because people abuse them." [P]

"It is in the conscience of each family as to whether they choose to ask for help. Some people are really in need—like a poor widow with a lot of children and who is sick with diabetes and cannot work. I see other families with jobs and only a few children who have food stamps." [P]

"I was given some food stamps to pay for some tamales at a church carnival, and I brought them home and put them on my dresser. When my sister saw them, she said: 'You get these? That's shameful.'" [P]

Parents, however, in Site D, which is racially and economically homogeneous, do not perceive stigma to be an issue in non-application, primarily because so many children receive meal benefits. This site is very similar to that of the pre-test, which also found similar results with regard to stigma.

"It's so popular. ... More people get it than don't. Now everybody gets it, so it's nothing to be ashamed of." [P]

"It makes a difference in the area that you live in. In this area, I think about 80% get it, so it's not that big of a ridicule kind of thing for my kids." [P]

Non-applicant high-school students' perceptions of the role stigma plays in the decision not to apply for meal benefits mirrors that of their parents. Students in Sites A, B, and C, while aware that all students, regardless of income, may participate in the NSLP and SBP, perceive that the school meal program is for low income families. They talk about feelings of embarrassment and how these feelings can prevent students from eating even if they're hungry.

"The ones who get it for free are the ones who are having a hard time. Their parents don't make enough money, so they need help." [S]

"You could tell by looking who gets free and reduced by their appearance. They don't have the best clothes." [S]

"You keep it to yourself if you get it for free. So many people are embarrassed to tell others that they get their lunch free. It's embarrassing because the people who are on it are the ones who don't have that much money." [S]

"It doesn't matter what time breakfast is served. If you came early and you were by yourself, you wouldn't want to be seen eating by yourself. They make fun of you eating breakfast if you're by yourself." [S]

"Some people are just too resistant. They have too much pride to eat it. They would rather not eat lunch and be hungry than be seen eating lunch." [S]

"Hunger never wins out over embarrassment, unless you're really starving. A growling stomach where you know you'll eat at dinner, you just won't eat lunch." [S]

"Nowadays, everybody is surrounded around money, and if you don't have it you might feel left out." [S]

"Some kids look down on people who don't have a lot of money and think they're worthless." [S]

These students also agree that stigma was less of an issue in earlier grades, when everyone, regardless of income participated in the program, and when "getting something for free" was perceived more positively than paying.

Furthermore, in Site A, because of the extreme distinction between the "haves" and the "have nots" and the intense pressure to fit in, students perceive that there is stigma directed to all students who participate in the school meal program, regardless of income. Any student who takes the school lunch is perceived as "not popular." Leaving campus for lunch is the thing to do.

"The kids that go out [to eat]—they're part of the in-crowd. They're smart, they dress well, and they have lots of friends." [S]

"The kids that stay in [to eat]—well, they can be from a bad environment or get into trouble, like selling drugs, or they can be studious and want to stay in and study, or they may stay in because they don't have anybody to go out with." [S]

"Even if some kids are eligible, they may not want to take it because they think they're just too cool, or others may not want to be seen with those who do take it because they want to fit in." [S]

Interestingly, some high school non-applicant students in each of these three sites do perceive that students who do eat the school meals are those who have pride in themselves, do not care what others think, or are part of a group in which it is socially acceptable to eat the school meal.

"The students that eat it have pride in themselves and don't care what anybody else thinks." [S]

"Some of the kids who get the lunch are not ashamed to get it; maybe they're smart enough to know they're saving money doing it." [S]

"If you're in a group, you'll eat it. Because you're part of a group, you won't care if people make fun of you because you have your own group to be with." [S]

Students in Site D, however, perceive free meals as more desirable than paying and do not report the embarrassment of students in the other sites.

"Everybody wants free lunch." [S]

"Feel embarrassed? They're crazy if they do." [S]

Confidentiality of the Application

Confidentiality of the application is not a major issue for parents in Sites A and D. Most report that if they are in a situation that necessitates asking for help, all they want is the help and they are less concerned about who knows than about getting the help.

"Confidentiality wasn't an issue. At that time, we needed help so bad that I didn't care if I had to publicize it. It might have caused my daughter embarrassment. But when you're in that position where you know that you can't provide for your kids what they can get at school, it's a big help, because that's just one less thing you have to worry about." [P]

Parents in Sites B and C, however, perceive confidentiality of the application to be an issue that may discourage application and participation by eligible households.

"Now they know. It used to be 'hush-hush.' I don't know how they find out, but they do." [P]

"This is a very small town and I guarantee you...you go to the [grocery store] and people say 'Look at her. She's buying steaks and her kids get free lunch.' It's small. It's got it's bitterness, its good and bad points, but it's small." [P]

Anonymity of the Ticketing System

Anonymity of the ticketing system is of concern in Sites A, B and C, however the perception of anonymity sometimes differs between parents and students. Additionally, anonymity of the ticketing system does not appear to be an issue at the elementary school level, since practically all students participate in the school lunch program at this level in the four sites visited.

While secondary school parents in Site A are concerned that their children will be identified as receiving school meal benefits, and therefore face stigma from their peers, they do not perceive that the automated meal card identifies free and reduced priced students. They especially cite how the current system is an improvement over past systems in which students could easily identify the free and reduced-price students by the color of the ticket.

"Now they just stick it into a machine, where before, it was a paper ticket." [P]

"Years ago, you used to know the kids who were getting free lunches. And I never thought that was right. The tickets were different colors. Now they all have the same computerized cards and no one knows if you've sent money to school or not. So the kids don't give the kids such a hard time about it and I think that's good because I think the children, of anybody, needs to eat the meals." [P]

"They always kind of kept it low-key and the schools were good about that too. So according to the ticket, there really wasn't a way to identify which children were receiving the free lunch or the discount lunch. I think when we first moved here, there was a different ticket for each category and the kids could tell and then they finally picked up on the idea that this was making the kids feel inferior or upset so they wouldn't use the ticket because the other kids would know they were getting free lunch. We have a lot of very wealthy people in [Site A] and we have a lot of people who are not wealthy and so everybody wants to be together. But if you're identified as one or the other, then how are you going to fit in. That's what the kids think." [P]

"The best thing we did was to be discrete, so the kids didn't have to let a lot of people know they were on it. When we first started on it, my kids would lose their tickets on purpose, because the color would let other kids know they were on it." [P]

High school non-applicant students in Site A, however, report that just having a ticket, regardless of free, reduced- or full-price status, stigmatizes students. If a student wants to eat the school lunch, paying cash in the acceptable mechanism.

"My daughter thinks that if she takes advantage of the free or reduced meals and the others know about it, she gets this peer pressure and they think less of her because she cannot afford to pay the full price. Just by using the card, kids will think she's getting the meals for free." [P]

Some secondary school parents in Site B perceive that the ticketing system does not maintain the anonymity of students receiving free and reduced price meals. They perceive that there are different line for free and reduced price students.

"There are different lines for free and reduced price tickets. When I was a student, there was a single line." [P]

Universal Free Meals

The concept of universal free meals met with mixed responses across sites and by parents and students. Parents in Site A do not perceive that universal free meals will increase application/participation rates. They cite lack of freedom of choice as being a deterrent to the success of universal free meals.

"Truthfully, it would not make a difference. You will always have those who will bring something from home. The only way you could do that is if you had one lunch line, just the hot meals, or don't give them too big of a choice and tell them they can't bring anything from home. When I was in grade school, if you had to bring something from home, it was almost like a disgrace. Now, it's the thing. I think it's because they think it's their choice. They get to chose what they bring. Where the change came, I don't know." [P]

Parents in Site C, however, perceive that universal free meals could potentially help alleviate stigma and increase application/participation rates.

Interestingly, high school non-applicant students in Sites A, B and C perceive that universal free meals could help counteract the negative impact of stigma and potentially increase participation. However, other factors, such as menu choices and amount of time to eat would be other important considerations in a students decision to eat lunch on any given day.

"Students would take it. I would, so you could save the money so parents could spend it on other things." [S]

"Yes, more people would eat it." [S]

"If they raise the income level, then more people would qualify and those students who are embarrassed wouldn't feel singled out because a lot of people would be on it." [S]

Children's Role in Parents' Decision-Making Process

Across all sites, parents and students alike report that students play a major role in their parents' decision to apply for school meal benefits, and that stigma, particularly at the secondary school level, is a key factor in that decision.

"My son asked me not to apply because other students made fun of him. He still eat at school, but we pay full price." [P]

"I've never done it because my kids say they don't want to eat at school. We get it once in the beginning of the year in the packet and I ask them if they want to do it and they say they want to take their lunch." [P]

"I look at the form, see if it applies and if it does apply I ask my kids and we go from there." [P]

"When we received the applications at the beginning of the year, I asked my children if they wanted lunch tickets and they said 'no, we won't eat it.' So we didn't apply." [P]

However, many students report that they really do not talk to their parents much about the school meal program—they just tell them outright not to apply because they will not eat.

"I said something to my parents about the construction when they redid the whole cafeteria. But it's not something I talk to them about. I ate it last year and they asked me if I liked it and I said no." [S]

"You tell your parents not to apply, even if you're eligible, because you don't want to be embarrassed." [S]

"You start telling your parents not to apply when you enter high school. You say you just won't eat it." [S]

Aspects of Stigma

Interestingly, stigma has many facets to it. Some parents express it in terms of being embarrassed at not being able to provide for their children financially.

"My situation is just slightly different. We were two working parents and we were still eligible for free meals at one time. And we were hard working people and we were still eligible. It's like my mother used to talk about the Depression all the time saying we can't afford this or that and my kids were still saying that until just recently." [P]

"I don't want my kids to look down on a kid that takes it, but I want to be proud that my kids don't have to." [P]

"I'm thinking about people who could qualify for reduced, but didn't take it. I wonder if certain ones, who have never had welfare, and even though to some degree we may qualify we don't want to take advantage of it. I think there's still a stigma attached to it, and regardless of where you're at and your tax dollars pay for it, to some degree it's still a stigma." [P]

Others express it in terms of fears of being criticized for not being "good" parents and or "abusing the system."

"Being on welfare, or partial welfare, I don't think I'd like that. You hate to categorize and see how some people are always on welfare and abuse the system and we don't want to abuse it or even be recipients of it, because we don't feel like we should." [P]

"Some people have children just so they can receive assistance and not work." [P]

Much of the discussions focused on parents' perceptions of the school meal benefits as being for the poor, and that just applying for (or receiving meal benefits) is associated with being poor. Therefore, in the lower cost-of-living Sites A and C, some parents express stigma in terms of surprise and resentment at being financially eligible for a program associated with the poor, when they themselves are working and earning what they consider to be a "middle-class income," and view themselves as being financially able to feed their children.

"This year, the income levels were really high. It has over \$30,000 for a 5-member family. I was surprised you could make so much money and still qualify." [P]

"We qualified for the reduced rate, but didn't sign up for it. We had the money in our budget to pay full price so we made the decision not to apply and let someone who really needs it have it. The difference between full and reduced was so minimal anyway \$.10 or \$.20. But we haven't looked at it in several years." [P]

"When my kids first started school we looked at it and qualified for reduced, but we were able to pay for it, so we didn't apply and I haven't checked since." [P]

"We qualified before I went back to work, I just felt there were children who needed it more than mine did. I could afford to pay for my kids." [P]

FACTORS AFFECTING NON-PARTICIPATION

This section discusses the factors affecting non-participation in the NSLP and SBP among students who are approved for school meal benefits. Students must decide on a daily basis whether or not to participate

in the lunch and breakfast programs. This study recruited focus group participants on the basis of their participation in the lunch program. Students completed a brief questionnaire indicating the number of days in the last full school week that they participated in the NSLP. Any student that did not participate on all five days (excluding days absent) was classified as a non-participant for purposes of this study. Among the focus group participants, 40 percent did not participate on any of the days that they were in school during the reference week. At the other extreme, 28 percent participated in the NSLP on all but one day (see Appendix B). This strategy enabled the study to identify the reasons why some students *occasionally* do not participate in the program, while at the same time identifying the reasons why some students never participate in the program. It also enabled the study to identify the reasons why some students participate in the lunch program, but not in the breakfast program. The findings are grouped by the major topics discussed in the focus groups with nonparticipating students: quality and variety of food, structural barriers, and perceived stigma. As noted in the previous section, non-application is strongly related to nonparticipation. Therefore, many of the issues raised in nonparticipant focus groups were similar to those discussed in student nonapplicant focus groups.

Question:	How important is the <i>quality and variety of food served</i> in the decision not to participate in the school nutrition program?
Finding:	<i>The perceived quality and variety of the food served is a key factor in students' decisions not to participate in the school nutrition program. Across all four sites and grade levels, the perceived poor food preparation and lack of desirable food choices drives students to select other meal alternatives. In general, although participation in the breakfast program is lower than in the lunch program, perceptions of the quality and variety of food served in the breakfast program are more favorable.</i>

Discussion:

Perceptions of the Food Served

Although the general consensus about the quality and variety of the food served is unfavorable across sites, there is some variability with regard to the intensity of the unfavorable reviews. Other than the perception in some sites that the food served at breakfast was better prepared and offered more desired choices than that served at lunch, no other consistent conclusions can be drawn either across site or grade level.

In Site A, perceptions of the quality and selection of the food offered in the SBP and NSLP are primarily unfavorable in all three schools, and was the foremost reason for non-participation among elementary school students, who only had two choices for breakfast and lunch everyday.

In Site B, the key concerns are the quality of the food preparation rather than the variety of foods served. However, elementary school students do complain about lack of choice at lunch, and middle school students report the frequent unavailability of desired food items at lunch.

"Sometimes you want something, like a hot dog, but there's none left when you get your turn."

In Site C, students in both elementary and secondary schools have mixed reactions to the quality and variety of the food in the SBP and NSLP, with the key concerns being food preparation and unfamiliar foods.

"For breakfast sometimes they have green stuff and red stuff and eggs. I don't know what it is and kids don't want to eat it."

"They have something called 'mystery meat.' I'm not going to eat that. If I don't know what it is, I won't eat it."

In Site D, perceptions of the quality and variety of foods served in the SBP/NSLP differ to some degree between programs and grade levels. Middle school students tend to be most critical while elementary school students were somewhat less critical. Reactions to the foods offered in SBP are mixed; perceptions of the foods served in the NSLP are primarily unfavorable. Middle school students have the least favorable reactions, and elementary school students have somewhat more positive reactions. Across all grade levels, negative perceptions focus primarily on issues of preparation and lack of familiarity, and secondarily on issues of choice.

Of note however, is that in Site D, middle and high school students translate perceptions of poor food preparation into concerns about food safety and perceptions that the cafeteria staff is indifferent to their work and uncaring about the students.

"The way the food is made makes you feel like the cafeteria staff takes no pride in what they're making. They don't care if we live or die."

"They just throw the food on the tray without even trying to separate it into the compartments. Everything's all mixed up together."

"Sometimes they don't wear gloves and I've even found hair in my food."

Also of note in Site D, complaints about portion sizes at lunch are an issue among high school students. Based on perceptions of the portions as insufficient, these students believe that the price of the lunch, whether full or reduced, is too high for the perceived value of the meal offered.

"We ain't saying feed us no Sunday dinner. Just give us what we pay for."

As in non-application, the overall primary concerns about the food served are:

- food choices that are not reflective of the tastes or interests of children;

"Some of the stuff is not what kids like. It's more like adult food."

"I just put the vegetable on my plate but I don't eat them, no matter how good they make them. That's not the kind of food we like."

- limited choice, no variety;

"It's kind of like the army. You're always getting the same thing after the same thing after the same thing."

"They only have one thing for lunch everyday. If you want to eat, you have to take it."

- not freshly prepared/undercooked or cold;

"They shouldn't prepare the food so far in advance. It doesn't get cooked right and doesn't look fresh. Either it's frozen solid in the middle or all soggy."

- greasy; and

"They should make the food fresh instead of sticking it in the microwave where it comes out in its' cellophane wrap sitting in grease."

- unappealing taste and appearance.

"It doesn't look good and I'm not going to eat anything that doesn't look good."

"Sometimes the food smells good and makes you hungry but it doesn't look good. They must spray the smell on because once you taste it you know it can't be the food that's smelling that way."

Comparison of Pattern Meals to Meal Alternatives

As with non-application, food alternatives to the pattern meal are perceived as superior to the meal itself. This includes, when available, á la carte items, vending machines, eating at home, bringing lunch from home, leaving campus for lunch, or just not eating. However, these alternatives do not cause non-participation per se. Rather, unappealing food and/or stigma associated with the school meal program itself led students to prefer utilizing these other options. This generally held true across all four sites and grade levels, with some variability noted.

"I can get the kinds of things I crave from the vending machines like cheetos or cookies or a candy bar to get me going. They don't have these kinds of things or the kinds of cookies and sweet things I like in the cafeteria. They just have nutri-grain bars or fruit."

Across all four sites and grade levels, food from home is perceived to be preferable to the food served in the meal programs. Preference for eating at home is a key driver of non-participation in the breakfast program.

"The only reason I don't eat breakfast in school is because I like the food better at home. The food at school is more bad than good. I mean, they have pancakes and eggs in school, but my father makes them at home for me and it tastes much better."

Utilization of specific meal alternatives varies by school district and grade level. In Site A, á la carte food is perceived to be superior to the food in the pattern meal. Other than in the elementary school, bringing lunch from home is rarely utilized as a meal alternative option by secondary students who perceive this option as "babyish" or "for girls." At the high school level, eating lunch off-campus is the most popular option. In comparison to the food offered in the NSLP, the food available in the fast food restaurants frequented by these students is perceived to provide the variety and selection of food students this age prefer.

In Site B, á la carte food items and vending machines, which are available in the high school for breakfast and in the middle and high schools for lunch, are perceived to offer popular items not available in the pattern meals. In the middle school, á la carte is perceived to have more availability of well-liked items

and is less likely than the NSLP to run out of selections. In the high school, á la carte is perceived to offer larger portion sizes than those in the pattern meal and to provide a greater variety of items daily.

"A cheeseburger costs \$1.50 at the snack bar lines and it would only cost \$1.15 inside [the pattern meal]. But the one outside [snack bar] is double the size of the burger inside, so I'd rather spend more."

In Site C, on days in which students found the pattern meals to be appealing, other options including á la carte, vending machines, home cooked food and food purchased outside of school tend not to be utilized. While off-campus meals are not an option in Site C, some students purchase breakfast or lunch off-campus and bring it to school.

In Site D, á la carte is perceived to provide popular items that are not available in the pattern meal. More specifically, desserts, side dishes such as french fries and salads, and beverages often supplemented or replaced the pattern meal. Bringing lunch from home is an option most frequently utilized by elementary school students, particularly the girls. Among middle and high school students, bringing lunch from home is most typically associated with girls or perceived as a behavior that is more appropriate for younger and/or less popular students.

"Some kids carry lunch boxes but they look like little babies."

"Nerds and girls bring their lunch."

Also in Site D, purchasing breakfast on the way to school is another alternative to the SBP. Restaurants such as McDonald's, Burger King and Hardees are perceived to offer students across the grade levels the variety and selection of foods they prefer.

Suggested Changes in the Foods Served

Students across sites and grade levels offered suggestions for improving the daily and program menus, and those in Site A specifically expressed interest in having the opportunity to recommend and vote on preferred menu items. In general, students suggest that:

- food should be served hot and be freshly prepared;
- food should not be greasy;
- taste should be improved;

- food should have an appetizing appearance and smell;
- more variety of foods should be available; and
- the frequency with which more popular foods are served should be increased;

Specific suggestions for changes vary by site and grade level. However, it should be noted that across all sites, many of the items the students want added are snack or fast food items and sugary, dessert-type items—preferences which may conflict with the program’s nutritional goals and present challenges for parents and school meal program administrators.

In Site A, elementary school students who have very little variety and choice, want the following breakfast and lunch items added to the menus or served with greater frequency: pancakes, cinnamon toast, doughnuts, fish sticks, hamburgers, egg rolls, corn dogs, chicken nuggets, tacos, flavored milk, and, juice. Middle and high school students focus on revising the lunch menu to include favored snack items such as chips, cookies, cakes and sodas and, franchised foods such as McDonald’s, Domino’s Pizza, and Taco Bell.

In Site B, elementary and intermediate school students suggest adding a greater variety of daily choices for lunch pattern meals by including the following foods and/or increasing the frequency of offering the following well-liked items: pizza, beef and chicken hamburgers, french fries, burritos and other Hispanic foods, fried chicken and chicken nuggets, hot dogs, franchised fast food items, and a greater variety of desserts including Jello and ice cream. High school students, however, report that participation would not increase even if these and other improvements to the food are implemented.

In Site C, students in all schools suggest adding a greater variety of daily choices for both breakfast and lunch pattern meals, by including the following foods and/or increasing in the frequency of the following well-liked items: chef salad as a daily alternative, pizza, beef hamburgers, french fries, burritos, chicken nuggets or strips, franchised fast food items such as those from McDonald’s, Taco Bueno and Arby’s, and a greater variety of beverages including fresh milk and juice, soda, punch and iced tea.

"If they changed the food, all of us would eat lunch everyday. Other kids would too...even kids who bring their lunch would eat the school lunch."

In Site D, students suggest the following as ways of improving the daily and program menus: increase the frequency with which popular items such as grits, sausage, eggs, biscuits, fried chicken, pizza, chef salad and chicken nuggets are served; introduce well-liked items from the á la carte menu into the daily menu including french fries, pickles, cakes and cookies, cinnamon rolls, flavored milk and juice; add popular franchised foods and beverages such as McDonald's cheeseburgers, milkshakes and apple pie, and sodas to the menu; and offer a second daily entree.

Additionally, improving the daily menu is perceived to require eliminating or reducing the service of unpopular items such as vegetables, leftovers and breakfast foods perceived to have minimal nutritional value, like fries.

"Whoever heard of having chicken fingers and fries for breakfast. That's junk food. I want real breakfast food, something that will stick to my bones."

Finally, in Site D, middle and high school students recommended re-instituting self-service in place of service by the cafeteria staff as a means of increasing participation. Self-service is expected to address concerns related to hygiene and careless service by eliminating the need for the cafeteria staff to handle the food. In addition to hygiene, self-service is expected to address concerns related to portion size by allowing students, rather than the staff, to determine the amount of food taken. High school students expect that larger portion sizes will improve the perceived value of the school lunch and encourage more students to participate.

Question:	How important are <i>structural barriers</i> in the decision not to participate in the NSLP/SBP?
Finding:	<i>Unlike in non-application, structural barriers do contribute to the decision not to participate in the school meal programs. The extent that structural barriers influence non-participation varies across sites and grade levels. In some instances the issue is insufficient time to go through the line and eat, and in others it is meal schedules.</i>

Discussion:

Awareness and Promotion of the Breakfast Program

In all four sites and across all grade levels, students are aware of the breakfast program. However, other than the distribution of applications and menus, students report that there are no real promotional efforts undertaken with regard to the breakfast program.

Meal Schedules and Time Allotments

Structural barriers had the greatest impact on non-participation in Site B and the least impact in Site A. In Site B, structural barriers play a significant role in non-participation in both the breakfast and lunch programs and across all grade levels. The early schedule for breakfast is the source of the obstacles to participation; bus or transportation schedules and amount of time allotted for the breakfast period are not. For some elementary school children, the time is too early to arrive in school; for many intermediate and high school students, the time is incompatible with their appetites.

"I can't eat that early in the morning. I don't get hungry until 10:00 o'clock."

The middle school has a mid-morning nutrition break schedule which is compatible with students' breakfast appetites. However, in order to be a viable substitute for the SBP, students maintain that the break needs to be longer and offer breakfast items.

"They open the lines at nutrition break, but there's not enough time to eat. It should be longer than 10 minutes so that kids who don't eat breakfast can eat. Also, they should have breakfast food at nutrition."

Across all grade levels in Site B, students do not perceive the time allotted to go through the line and purchase lunch to be sufficient. For elementary school boys, the 30-minute lunch period is reportedly not sufficient to accommodate long meal lines and play time. The recess bell rings five minutes after the lunch period begins and, therefore, results in non-participation for many boys who opt to play rather than wait in line for food.

Intermediate school students are critical of the small number of lunch lines which did not adequately accommodate the number of students. However, this does not negatively impact on participation as much as impede students' ability to finish all the food provided in the pattern meal.

High school students report that the time required to go through the lunch line in the NSLP is an obstacle to participation. The delays were reportedly due to long lines in conjunction with a time-consuming payment verification system. In Site B's secondary schools, student I.D. numbers are recorded on a master list by payment classification. As each student passes through the breakfast or lunch line, the cashier crosses his/her number off the list. Structural barriers are also reported for the á la carte lunch lines; however, these barriers do not negatively impact on widespread usage of á la carte as an option, given its preference over the pattern meals regarding food quality and variety.

In Site D, the time schedule and length of the time allotted are barriers to participation in both the breakfast and lunch program. Elementary and high school students perceive that a longer breakfast period could increase participation for those students who arrive late due to bus and transportation schedules, and on those days when long lines prevent students from purchasing and eating their breakfast prior to the beginning of class.

High school students in Site D also complain that 10:40 a.m. is too early for lunch and that 25 minutes is insufficient time to purchase and eat their lunch. They perceive that the plating of lunch by cafeteria staff is inefficient and cause delays that slow down the movement of the lunch line.

"The lunch line can be like 40 feet long and take forever. By the time you get your food the bell rings."

In Site C, structural barriers appear to play a substantial role in secondary school student non-participation in the breakfast program only. Middle school students perceive the short duration of the breakfast schedule encourages alternative options including purchase of items from the vending machines and not eating at all. High school athletes involved in early morning athletic practice miss all but a few minutes of the breakfast period. This limited time encourages them to purchase breakfast on the way to school.

"It's too short...that's why I don't eat breakfast in school. Most kids end up getting Cokes to keep them going until lunch."

"Freshman and sophomores have a hard time with the breakfast schedule because of athletics practice. They get here too late. Instead they get a bacon sandwich or a sausage and biscuit from the gas station and bring it in."

In Site A, bus or transportation schedules are only a minimal impediment to participation in the breakfast program, and only at the elementary school level. In the high school, a 15-minute nutrition break at 9:15 a.m. has replaced the before-school breakfast. Students particularly like this arrangement because it more appropriately matches their own internal hunger clocks. In addition, school food service personnel report that breakfast participation has increased. Regarding lunch, while middle school students express concerns about the long cafeteria lines, they did not feel that lengthening the time allotted to go through the line and eat lunch would increase participation without improvements to the quality and variety of the food served.

Space

Only in Site D, and only in the middle school, is space perceived to be a barrier to participation in the lunch program. Middle school students complain that overcrowding in the cafeteria results in fights and disorderly behavior among students. Enlarging the cafeteria is expected to eliminate this problem by reducing the tension among students. As a result, students believe that the cafeteria will be perceived as a more appealing place to eat and more students will be motivated to participate.

Question:	How important is <i>perceived stigma</i> in the decision not to participate in the school breakfast and lunch programs?
Finding:	<i>Perceived stigma is a major factor in non-participation by older students in both the school breakfast and school lunch programs in some sites. The impact on non-participation of stigma vs. food quality and variety varies across sites and grade levels. In two of the four sites, stigma is the major factor; in the other two sites, food quality and variety are more important. Across all sites, stigma is much more an issue at the high school level than at the elementary school level, with middle school students in a transition phase regarding stigma.</i>

Discussion:

Perceptions of the School Meal Program

In Sites A and B, stigma plays a major role in non-participation in both the school breakfast and lunch programs, primarily at the high school level. In both sites high school students do not perceive the school meal program to be operated strictly for the poor; however, students are aware that free and reduced price meals are provided to lower income families. What's more, high school students present a great

need for privacy relative to their payment status, thus indicating the existence of stigma as a factor influencing non-participation. Notably, many high school students in Sites A and B denied being ticket holders themselves, although they were in fact certified eligible for free or reduced price meals. For these students, eating off-campus or purchasing items from the vending machines is inextricably linked to portraying a self image that is consistent with and emulates the behavior of their more popular higher income peers.

"Quite a few kids are rude. It's not what they say it's more their attitude. They act like it's a bad thing. I don't like anyone to know that I have free lunch. It's something you don't want to reflect on your image."

"I don't think it's all having to do with the food. I think it's also having to do with the kind of person you are and whether you want to stay here or go out with your friends off campus. Going out makes you feel better."

"Only poor people eat inside the cafeteria because they can't afford to eat outside. Kids with money don't eat the school lunch."

"Full-price kids never eat the school lunch. They all eat outside because they can afford it."

"Some kids are uncomfortable because they're worried what other people think of them...they might think that they're poor."

"Someone who is self-conscious would be uncomfortable letting people know they could eat for free."

An entirely different picture emerges in Sites C and D, where stigma does not appear to be an obstacle to participation in the SBP and NSLP. The lack of impact of stigma on non-participation is most apparent in Site D, where students who do not receive meal benefits are perceived to be at a disadvantage because they have to pay full price for something that others get for free or at a reduced cost.

"Kids who have to pay full price don't understand why they have to pay. It makes them mad because the food's not worth it."

Students in these two sites do not perceive the meal programs as only for the poor. However, all grade level students in Site C and high school students in Site D do perceive free and reduced-price classification to be based on lower socio-economic status. This awareness is based on familiarity with the application requirements involving approval based on family income.

"Everyone gets an application at registration. Then it's based on how much your parents make. If they make over a certain amount, you can't get it for free; if it's under a certain amount, then you can."

Elementary and middle school students in Site D, however, do not distinguish free and reduced-price students as lower income. They believe that approval for participation is automatic upon submission of a meal program application. According to these students, payment status is entirely dependent upon a parent's inclination to submit an application. Parents' decisions whether or not to apply for meal benefits are perceived to be based on how they choose to spend their money.

"Parents decide if they want their kids to get free meals or not. Parents send in a form if they don't want to spend money every day and want to save it to buy their kids presents."

Further support for the limited role of stigma in non-participation in Sites C and D is their reported behavior during the focus group discussions which reflects non-participation only on those days when unappealing food is offered.

"The only reason we don't eat lunch in school is because of the food. Lots of kids don't eat on Monday because they hate chicken fried steak. I'd rather not eat than eat food that is gross."

Across all sites, lack of stigma as a factor in non-participation for elementary and middle school students is supported by their self-reported participation in the school meal program on days when the food is perceived to be appealing. Furthermore, in all sites, elementary students' belief that getting meals for free or at a reduced price is preferable to paying full price for the same food attests to the lack of stigma related to payment status.

"It's not fair that some kids have to pay \$1.00. It's much better to get it for free."

"The kids who get food for free are happier than kids who pay. They look strong and healthy and they don't have to worry about paying."

"Kids who get lunch for free are happier because they don't have to bring money to school but they still get all the food. The other kids don't look happy because they can't get food unless they bring money."

Confidentiality of Payment Classification

Across all four sites, students do not believe that other students or teachers know who gets free or reduced-price meals, unless students report their payment classification. However, high school students in Site A perceive that just having a meal ticket, whether one is a free, reduced- or full-price student, produces unwanted stigma. Therefore, high school students go to great lengths to conceal their free or reduced payment status and promote a self-image that is modeled on the behavior of their higher income peers, which includes eating off-campus and dressing fashionably, and not participating in the school meal program.

Universal Free Meals

Students's reactions to the role universal free meals would play in increasing participation differs by site. However, students generally agree that universal free meals would not increase participation without concomitant improvements in the food served. In Site A, students believe that eliminating differentiation based on payment status by offering free meals to all students would not increase participation in the meal programs without accompanying improvements to the foods served in the SBP and NSLP.

In Site B, however, high school students react favorably to the idea of universal free meals, particularly for lunch. This idea appears to address the stigma arising from the strong association between free meal status and being poor. Free breakfast for everyone would need concomitant changes to the breakfast schedule in order to significantly increase participation. Elementary and middle school students, however, perceive that changes in the food served would have to accompany universal free meals in order for participation in the breakfast and lunch programs to increase.

In Site C, both elementary and secondary students do not believe that participation would increase in the breakfast and/or lunch programs if meals were free for all children and the food remained unchanged.

"More kids would eat it if they also made the food better. If the food stayed the same, only kids who want to save some money would eat it for free."

In Site D, only elementary school students perceive that universal free meals would increase participation. They reason that free meals would increase participation among full-priced students who sometimes skip lunch in order to save their money.

Teacher Participation

Across all four sites and grade levels, students agree that having teachers eat breakfast and lunch with students in the cafeteria will not increase student participation in the meal programs. Secondary school students especially believe that having teachers in the cafeteria will diminish their sense of freedom and impede their ability to have fun during mealtime.

"Teachers eating in the cafeteria wouldn't make a difference unless the food was better."

NATIONAL CONTEXT

The School Nutrition Dietary Assessment (SNDA) Study included surveys of nationally-representative samples of parents and students. These surveys included questions dealing with the reasons for non-application and non-participation in the school nutrition programs. This section presents the results of the SNDA surveys. The SNDA data were also used to estimate statistical models of the determinants of application and participation. These models are presented in Appendix A. The SNDA data provide a national context for the findings of the focus group discussions.

Reasons for Non-Application

The reasons for not applying for school meal benefits cited by respondents to the SNDA survey (Exhibit 3.1) contrast sharply with the reasons expressed by parents in the focus group discussions. In the focus group discussions parents clearly indicated that the primary reason for not applying was that they did not believe that their children would eat the school meals, either because of the poor quality of the food or the perceived stigma of participation. However, less than 10 percent of the respondents to the SNDA survey mentioned the characteristics of the food served as a reason for non-application, and only 20 percent of the SNDA respondents mentioned a reason related to stigma. More than half (55%) of the SNDA respondents indicated that they did not apply because they did not believe that they were eligible for school meal benefits.

The difference between the SNDA survey results and the focus group findings is not surprising. It is likely that in the more open atmosphere of a group discussion, it was possible to help parents move beyond a "socially-acceptable" answer. It is interesting to note that in self-administered questionnaires completed by focus group participants at the end of the focus group, reasons for non-application were similar to those given by the SNDA respondents. A similar disparity between survey responses and

Exhibit 3.1

**POTENTIALLY-ELIGIBLE PARENTS' REASONS FOR NOT APPLYING FOR
FREE OR REDUCED-PRICE SCHOOL MEALS**

Reason	Percent of Parents
Believed Were Ineligible	55%
Food Preferences	
Preferred Meals from Home	5
Poor Food Quality	4
Total	9
Administrative	
Never Received Application	5
Not Aware of Free Meals	3
Application Too Difficult	2
Total	10
Pride/Stigma	
Did Not Want to Apply	1
Prefer to Pay Full Price	11
Stigma/Pride	4
Don't Need Free Meals	4
Total	20
Sample Size (Unweighted)	336

Source: Weighted tabulations from parent questionnaires, School Nutrition Dietary Assessment Study. Excludes cases where the NSLP was not available.

Detail may not sum due to rounding.

opinions expressed in focus group discussions was noted by Rapp in a study of non-participation in the SBP.³

The statistical model of the determinants of non-application does not address the "reasons" for non-application, rather it examines the relationship between student/family, school, and program characteristics and the likelihood of applying for school meal benefits. The results of the modeling effort (presented in Appendix A) are consistent with the findings of the focus group discussions. Among families that were eligible for free and reduced-price meals poorer families were more likely to apply. This echoes the statements of focus group participants that they had previously applied and been approved, but did not apply when they felt that they could afford to pay for school meals (even though they might still have been eligible). Students in schools with salad bars were more likely to apply. Students in the focus groups expressed a preference for salad bars. Similarly, the availability of alternatives such as á la carte items or an open campus reduced the likelihood that students would apply.

Reasons for Non-Participation

The primary reason for non-participation in the NSLP cited by 42 percent of students in the SNDA survey was that they did not like the food served (Exhibit 3.2). This is consistent with the reasons expressed by students in the focus groups. Many focus group participants indicated that they sometimes take the school lunch.⁴ In the focus group discussions, these students indicated that the decision to take the school lunch was usually made on the basis of what was being served.

None of the SNDA respondents indicated that perceived stigma was the reason for not participating in the NSLP. By contrast, in the focus group discussions, while stigma was not an issue for elementary school students (and only a secondary issue for middle school students), perceived stigma was clearly an issue affecting participation among many high school students. As in the case of non-applicant parents,

³ Donald W. Rapp, *We Are Your Neighbors' Children: A Study of the School Breakfast Program in Massachusetts Public Schools* (Bridgewater, MA: Bridgewater State College Advocacy Research Center, 1991).

⁴During the reference week that was used to identify non-participants, 60 percent of non-participating students took the school lunch on at least one day.

Exhibit 3.2

REASONS WHY STUDENTS HAD NOT EATEN THE SCHOOL LUNCH ON THE INTERVIEW DAY

Response Category	Percent of Approved Students
Does Not Like the Food	42%
Ate at Home or Brought Lunch from Home or Went Out to Lunch	26
Does Not Eat Lunch, Not Hungry	12
Too Expensive	7
Did Not Know About Program, Believed Was Ineligible	4
No Time, Wanted to Play, Other Things	3
Does Not Like Cafeteria	2
Other	4
Sample Size (Unweighted)	204

Source: Weighted tabulations of data from interviews with students in grades 3 through 12, School Nutrition Dietary Assessment Study.

Detail may not sum due to rounding.

it is likely that the atmosphere of the focus group discussions helped students move beyond "socially-acceptable" answers.⁵

The statistical model of participation in the NSLP estimated the effects of student/family, school, and program characteristics on the likelihood of participation among students approved for free and reduced-

⁵In self-administered questionnaires, focus group participants cited reasons for non-participation that were quite similar to those given by the SNDA respondents. Interestingly, none of the focus group participants cited stigma as a reason for non-participation in their responses to the self-administered questionnaires.

price meals. While not specifically addressing the reasons for non-participation, the results of the modelling effort are consistent with the reasons expressed in the focus group discussions. In particular, students in schools which offered salad bars and pizza for lunch were more likely to participate. Focus group participants indicated that they would like to see salad bars and pizza served more often as part of the school lunch. Similarly, the model indicates that students in schools with open campuses and schools that offers á la carte items as an alternative to the school lunch were less likely to participate. In the focus group discussions, students indicated that these alternatives were viewed as preferable to the school lunch (either because of the poor quality of the school lunch or the perceived stigma of taking the school lunch).

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The School Lunch Eligible Non-Participants Study conducted 24 focus groups with students and parents to determine why children eligible for free or reduced-price school meals do not apply for program benefits and why children approved for school meal benefits do not participate in the NSLP and SBP. The focus group sessions were quite informative. Focus group participants spoke freely about the school nutrition programs providing information that extends our understanding of the necessarily brief responses to questionnaire items that are usually obtained in large scale surveys. The focus group format can allow in-depth discussion of the range of concerns that may underly issues identified by survey research.

The focus groups strongly suggested that major factors affecting application and participation decisions are the perceived quality of the food served in the lunch and breakfast programs, and the perceived negative stigma of participating in the meal program. However, while both parents and students expressed concern about the "poor quality" of the school meals, parents and students viewed quality in very different terms. Parents expressed concerns about the nutritional quality of the school meals-- many parents were aware of the findings of the recently released School Nutrition Dietary Assessment Study which has received much media attention in the weeks preceding the focus group discussions. Students talked more about foods they liked and disliked and wanted the school meals to be more like the meals available in fast food chains. The focus group discussions also made it clear that students (especially older students) have a major influence on their parents' decision to apply for school meal benefits.

Lack of information does not appear to be a major factor in non-application for school meal benefits. Parents are aware of the lunch and breakfast programs and the need to apply for free and reduced-price meals. Similarly, administrative constraints do not appear to be a significant factor in non-application for school meal benefits. Parents did not find the application burdensome, nor did they view income verification as a barrier to applying for benefits.

Parents and older students in several sites perceived a negative stigma associated with receiving free and reduced-price school meals. High school students often explained their nonparticipation in terms of stigma, while it was not an issue for younger grades. This is consistent with participation patterns seen nationwide, which show a significant reduction in participation as grade level increases. Focus group participants viewed the school nutrition programs more as a welfare program than as a nutrition program. Their perception is that receiving free or reduced-price meals labels students and their families as being poor and sets them apart from other students. While program regulations require school districts to maintain the confidentiality of the information provided on the application for meal benefits and to ensure that students approved for free and reduced-price meals are not overtly identified, parents and students do not believe that the system is "blind." Even in a school district that used "smart cards" to ensure that students' payment status could not be identified, students in the focus groups indicated that simply taking a reimbursable meal identified a student's payment status. In fact, in some cases, simply participating in the program carries stigma regardless of one's income status.

Although the focus group discussions identified the perceived poor quality of the school meals and the perceived negative stigma of receiving free and reduced-price meals as the major factors affecting non-application and non-participation, the two factors should not be viewed independently. While improvements in the quality of school meals should tend to increase application and participation rates, this alone would not solve the problem. The perception of the school nutrition programs as a welfare program continues to function as a barrier to application and participation by some potentially eligible families.