



FEEST's

Healthy Food Round Table

Community Research and Solutions to Increase Youth Consumption of Fruits & Vegetables in White Center, WA

September 2019

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FEEST youth build power to improve the health of their schools and communities.





Executive Summary

FEEST (Food Empowerment Education & Sustainability Team) works at the nexus of healthy food access, racial justice, and youth empowerment to create food justice in low income communities of color and develop leadership for lasting change in South King County. We know that the lack of access to healthy food is a persistent problem for families in low income communities, and the problem is compounded in schools, where many low income youth access the majority of their food.

In September 2018, FEEST organized an inter-generational group of community stakeholders called the Healthy Food Round Table (HFRT) Committee. The purpose of the group was to gather community feedback about the barriers youth in White Center face in accessing healthy food in their community and schools. Based on this feedback, the group then identified solutions to increase young people's consumption of fruits and vegetables.

The HFRT Committee gathered feedback from over 320 community members and found that young people are not eating school lunch due to poor quality and taste of food, limited fresh foods available, and little variety in lunch menu items, including a lack of culturally relevant meal options.

After analyzing this feedback, our policy recommendations include:

Short Term

- Implement weekly CSA-style snack boxes with fresh food items for students at schools with high Free and Reduced Lunch rates.
- Increase availability of culturally relevant menu items and number of Multicultural Lunch Days.
- Enroll all eligible schools in the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) to make school food free for all students.
- Improve salad bars for increased student participation.

Long Term

- Initiate kitchen renovations and staffing changes to reestablish scratch cooking in our schools.

When school food is not fresh or culturally relevant and lacks variety, it leaves students hungry and creates the demand for pre-packaged, low cost and/or fast food alternatives. In a community like White Center where there is an excessive number of fast food restaurants and gas stations, fresh food is not accessible. Our recommended changes to the school food system will begin to address the generations-long disinvestment the health of in low income communities and communities of color by proposing systemic solutions in school food.

Who is FEEST?

Who We Are

FEEST (Food Empowerment Education & Sustainability Team) works at the nexus of healthy food access, racial justice, and youth empowerment to create food justice in low income communities of color and develop leadership for lasting change in South Seattle and South King County, WA. We set the table for young people to change the landscape around health and equity in their families, schools, and neighborhoods while simultaneously advocating for systems and policy changes that increase access to healthy food and win youth voice with school decision makers.

FEEST began in 2008 as part of the King County Food and Fitness Initiative, seeking a community-driven approach to reversing health inequities in low income, racially diverse neighborhoods. Since then, FEEST youth have been changing the way school districts run lunch programs and have systematized an information pipeline from students to school food policy makers. FEEST's Student Advisory Council in Highline and Seattle Public Schools gives youth the opportunity to work directly with School District Nutrition Services to address improvements in school food, including more fresh and nutritious, better tasting food; more culturally relevant meals; more food made from scratch. FEEST youth leaders serve as emissaries between school policymakers and the student body, raising the concerns of the student collective and likewise gaining support for the changes from the entire school.

Why We Do this Work

We link the problem of poor health in low income communities of color to a food system that limits access to more expensive, healthier food choices while

promoting cheaper, unhealthy options. Lack of access to fresh nutritious food is a persistent problem for families in low income communities like White Center, and the problem is compounded in schools, where food is the most accessible for youth.

A healthy student is a more successful student. In order to learn, youth need adequate nutrition to avoid being distracted by hunger or detrimental side effects of highly processed food. From our data, we know that high percentages of the youth who qualify for free or reduced lunches do not eat them and are more likely to experience these side effects. According to

FEEST youth have been changing the way school districts run lunch programs

the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI), on average of the 13,174 students who qualify for free or reduced lunch in Highline Public Schools, 4,042 (31%) of them are not eating lunch each day.

In South King County, there are significant gaps in school food policies and infrastructure that make it increasingly difficult for young people to achieve their full potential with inadequate nutrition. HFRT Committee members identified some of the major barriers, and the policy recommendations in this memo are rooted in addressing these issues.

Our long-term vision for school food is that every student has access to free, nutritious, culturally relevant, and fresh meals.

Healthy Food Round Table

What We Did

Starting in September 2018, FEEST organized an intergenerational group of community stakeholders in White Center, WA called the Healthy Food Round Table (HFRT) Committee. The committee included 3 students, 3 parents, 1 teacher, 1 food business owner, and 2 community members who created a survey to gather feedback on where and how young people are accessing fruits and vegetables in White Center. They surveyed a total of 219 students, parents, teachers, food business owners, community members, and residents over the course of four months. Surveying took place at local markets, coffee shops, online forums, community events, and schools.

Committee members also reached over 100 participants at the White Center Community Development

Association’s (WCCDA) Community Summit in November 2018. There, they facilitated breakout sessions to hear community members’ perspectives on barriers and experiences young people have when accessing fruits and vegetables; as well as their hopes and visions for more accessible, fresh, and nutritious food in schools and the White Center community.

Results

Challenges Outside of School

Through our research, the Committee found that availability and affordability are the two most significant barriers for young people to access fresh food outside of school. Fresh food is too far away, inaccessible by bus, and too expensive. The majority of inexpensive options for young people in White Center are fast food, not fresh or nutritious options.



Above: 2018 Healthy Food Round Table Committee

What are the biggest barriers for young people to access healthy food in White Center?

Too many fast food restaurants.
Fruits and veggies are expensive.
– Evergreen High School student

In my opinion, it seems to be difficult to eat healthy because unhealthy foods seem to be the nearest option.
– Cascade Middle School student

““ Parents are not buying enough fruits and vegetables due to income limitation.
– White Center food business owner ””

Food is a little far and is all fast food or food trucks. Safeway is far and there are only a few corner stores/convenience stores nearby.”
– Evergreen High School student

Most families don't have enough money to buy veggies and fruits to store in the refrigerator.”
– Cascade Middle School parent

““ Lack of affordable grocery stores that sell food from many people's cultures.”
– White Center teacher ””

Challenges with School Food

The Committee discovered significant challenges for students related to the quality, freshness, taste, and variety of food served at school.

QUALITY & FRESHNESS

Students, parents, and teachers described the quality of school food in their own words:

"Hot food is always cold by the time I get it. Fruits and veggies are not fresh."
– Evergreen High School student

"I talked to my child often regarding her lunch. She sometimes skipped lunch because it was cold and looked nasty." – White Center Heights Elementary School parent

"Sometimes it's moldy, but sometimes it's okay."
– Evergreen High School student

"It is a lot of pizza. The food is very processed because it is not cooked on site."
– White Center teacher

"It's bad, but I'm hungry."
– Evergreen High School student

TASTE

When asked to share their opinions about the taste of school food, students, parents, and teachers said:

"Yucky! I sometimes just take a bite and toss it in the trash." – Evergreen High School student

"Often my child told me that school lunch is sometimes disgusting." – Cascade Middle School parent

"I've ate the same thing the past 2 years. Switch it up." – Evergreen High School student

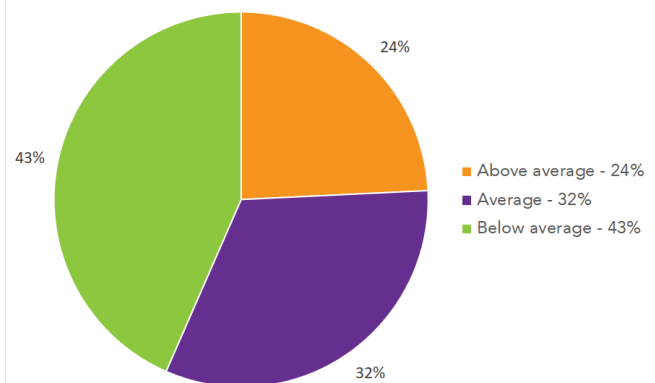
"Cold and nasty." – Evergreen High School student

Why School Food?

We understand that the lack of affordable and available options for buying healthy food is a systemic problem that affects low income communities of color, including in White Center. In order to increase consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables for youth in these communities, we need systemic solutions to address these problems at a large scale. Systemic school food solutions are most effective because:

- School is more accessible to students than a grocery store.
- Youth spend the majority of their day at school.
- Youth who qualify for Free and Reduced Lunch get most of their meals from school. For some students it's the only food they have access to for the day.
- Students on Free and Reduced lunch don't have to pay as much for food at school as they would at a grocery store.

How would you rate the quality of food at your school?



VARIETY: CULTURALLY RELEVANT FOOD

Another barrier to students participating in school lunch is a lack of variety in the lunch menu, specifically around culturally relevant lunch items, including a lack of halal options. When asked about cultural representation in school food, 66% of student respondents said their culture's food was not represented in school meals.

SKIPPING LUNCH

The data showed that 65% of students surveyed skip school-provided meals at least once per week, and that 61% of students who skip lunch experienced at least one of the following effects: loss of focus, tiredness, headaches, body aches, blurred vision, nausea, and grumpiness.

One student who skips school lunch shared their reasons for skipping:

"Lunch was yucky and fruits and veggies are not fresh."
– White Center Heights Elementary School student

HOPES FOR SCHOOL FOOD

When asked to describe their hopes for school food, respondents expressed strong support for more fresh fruit and vegetables. For full menu items, the above participants also advocated for a stronger variety of fresh, culturally relevant meal options, including halal options in addition to vegetarian lunch items.

How would you like to see school food change?

Offer more healthy options, including salads, vegetables, and fresh fruit.
– White Center community member

Pho or more noodle options.
– White Center Heights Elementary School student

“ Other ethnic foods like Indian, Thai, Somali, Salvadorian
– White Center parent ”

Halal and culturally relevant food, e.g. Halal rice, teriyaki, or halal egg rolls, etc.
– Mt View Elementary School parent

Policy Recommendations

Long Term

Kitchen Renovations to Increase Scratch Cooking

Most schools have old and outdated kitchen equipment. Since Highline moved to central cooking in the 1990s, a majority of the schools only have the capacity to heat and serve (limited to heating ovens). Anecdotally, students often share that food is frozen, gone bad, or simply lack flavor because of this heat-and-serve model. And studies have shown the clear impact scratch cooking has on closing food-related health inequities for low income students.

Ethnically and culturally diverse students need to see themselves and their families' food reflected in the menu

Investments can include assessment of equipment, overhaul of new equipment, dedicated technical assistance for kitchen staff to return to scratch cooking, sustainability support, and evaluation tools

Short Term

Weekly Snack Box Program

This pilot project, designed by the HFRT Committee with input from the White Center community, will be a combination of a grab-and-eat station and community farmstand. Taking inspiration from community-supported agriculture (CSA) systems, boxes of snacks including fresh fruits, veggies, nutritious bars, etc., will be delivered to Evergreen High School every Monday. All produce will be purchased from a local people of

color owned food business, Lee's Produce. Students will receive 1 piece of produce or a fruit-based dried snack per day throughout the week. If there are items left over at the end of the week, students can take snacks home. Future opportunities can include scaling this project at additional schools with high Free and Reduced Lunch rates and one-time capital investments to increase engagement and reach.

Culturally Relevant Menu Items and Multicultural Lunch Days

Schools in highly dense urban neighborhoods are unable to meet the diverse needs of their student body. Daily lunch items still include: pizza, nachos, chicken nuggets and chicken burgers. In our surveys and break-out sessions, the top 2 improvements consistently articulated across stakeholder groups included increasing culturally relevant menu items and a demand for fresh, scratch-cooked food. Ethnically and culturally diverse students need to see themselves and their families' food in the menu. This is especially true for the strong Muslim community in South King County where there is an increased need for access to halal meats and assurance that pork products do not cross-contaminate with other school food items.

CEP directly addresses many of the challenges identified in our survey

Increasing culturally relevant menu items also addresses the need for more variety in school food. One way to standardize this would be through hosting Multicultural Lunch days, in which each day of the week includes a lunch entree from a different culture.

Increase Schools Enrolled in Community Eligibility Provision

The Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) provides fully-funded meals to schools that have 40% or more students who meet the program's eligibility requirements. Because the cost of food was identified as a significant factor to why students do not eat school lunch, or why they would rather eat off campus, CEP directly addresses many of the challenges identified in our survey. Many students said in the survey and anecdotally that if they are going to spend their money, they would rather spend it on something they know they will enjoy. Since the foods most available to students outside of school food are fast food and gas stations, increasing the number of schools enrolled in CEP will not only increase participation in school lunch, it will also ensure that students are consuming food with higher nutritional value.

Increase Participation in Salad Bars

A clear way to increase consumption of fruits and vegetables is to invest in improvements in school salad bars. These improvements can include:

- One-time capital investments to improve salad bars for high Free and Reduced Lunch schools: bigger bins for variety, wheels for accessibility, etc.
- Increase the funding for fruits and vegetables for school districts for all schools with more than 50% Free and Reduced lunch eligibility.
- Create policies for cafeteria staff to train on cleaning and replenishing salad bars efficiently.

Next Steps

FEEST is currently working on the implementation of a weekly CSA Snack Box at Evergreen High School in White Center to increase student consumption of healthy fruits and vegetables. We believe that this is an effective short term solution addressing the im-

Case Study: Scratch Cooking in Spokane, WA

In 2012, Spokane Public Schools began its transition to scratch cooking with a pilot project funded by Empire Health Foundation. Today, all schools in the district serve meals cooked from scratch, and the district recently introduced its first "pilot kitchen" with updated facilities designed specifically for scratch cooking.

mediate and pressing needs of the most populated school in White Center. However, South King County students need short-term and long-term policies that ensure they are provided nutritious and fresh food that they deserve.

Conclusions

From these data, we are able to understand that low student participation in school lunch is often due to poor quality, freshness, and taste of school food. A lack of variety in lunch menu items and a lack of culturally relevant and halal meal options are also significant influences on low student participation in the lunchroom. Outside of school, it is difficult for young people, families, and residents in White Center to eat healthy food because fresh food is far away and too expensive.

When it comes to student learning, we know that students with empty stomachs are less likely to perform well in school, and often experience a variety of negative symptoms that affect their ability to be fully present in the classroom. Providing enough fresh, nutritious food to students during the school day is crucial for student success, but our research shows us that most youth in White Center are not able to access the food they need.

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Healthy Food Round Table Committee

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FEEST