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Student Engagement in School Meal Programs: Engagement Efforts, Opportunities, and Sustainability

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1. Introduction

The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) was signed into law by former president Harry S. Truman in 1946.¹ The National School Lunch Act was drafted in response to a problem encountered by the U. S. Military during World War II – many draftees were ineligible to serve because they suffered from nutritional deficiencies.² Thus, the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) was created to turn surplus agricultural commodities into nutritious lunches for the nation's food-insecure children, and therefore protect the nation's security by preventing nutritional deficiencies among future soldiers. The School Breakfast Program (SBP) was piloted in 1966 by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and permanently authorized in 1975.³ Free school breakfast was further popularized by the Black Panther Party, who piloted their own before-school breakfast program in an Oakland, CA church in 1969 as a response to widespread poverty among urban Black communities.⁴ This literature review focuses on the National School Lunch Program and the School Breakfast Program, referred to as "school meal programs." However, these programs are two out of many child nutrition programs under the USDA's Food and Nutrition Service umbrella.⁵

Out of concern for the growing rates of childhood obesity, U. S. Congress passed the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act in 2004.^{6,7} This legislation required that school districts participating in the NSLP or SBP must develop a Local Wellness Policy addressing student health promotion and physical activity. In 2010, the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act further expanded on the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act by requiring school districts to include nutrition promotion in their Local Wellness Policies. The Local Wellness Policy provision requires school districts to seek feedback from their communities and engage stakeholders when developing and revising the policy.⁸ In addition to, or as part of the Local Wellness Policy, schools may promote wellness by engaging in various student health initiatives, such as the nationwide program Fuel Up To Play 60.⁹ Programs like Fuel Up To Play 60 offer technical assistance, grants, supplies, trainings, and to help often under-resourced schools implement wellness initiatives and activities.

In addition to improving student health, school districts have a financial incentive to engage students in the meal program. During the 2018-2019 school year, schools in the

contiguous United States were reimbursed up to \$2.14 for SBP and up to \$3.54 for NSLP meals served to students qualifying for free meals.¹⁰ Additionally, schools receive partial reimbursement for meals served to students eligible for reduced-price meals and for meals served at full price. Thus, student meals purchased at full price may produce a sizeable income for school nutrition departments.

The purpose of this literature review is threefold. First, this review will describe how school nutrition departments have (or how can) effectively engage students in school meal programs or grant-funded nutrition efforts. Second, this review will present case study results of engaging students in school meal programs or grant-funded nutrition efforts, including changes in meal program participation rates. Third, this review will examine the sustainability of different engagement efforts, and how engagement efforts continue after an engagement grant, program, or initiative concludes.

2. Methods

This review was completed to inform Bellevue School District's Nutrition Services Department, located in Bellevue, WA. Bellevue School District Nutrition Services would like to build student engagement and increase participation in their meal programs, and learn about best practices and approaches to student engagement in school meal programs.

The present review began with drafting and then revising research questions, with feedback from Bellevue School District Nutrition Services, to determine the scope and purpose of analysis. With input from Bellevue School District Nutrition Services, the research questions were finalized:

- How have school nutrition departments effectively engage students in school meal programs or grant-funded nutrition efforts? How can school nutrition departments effectively engage students in school meal programs or grant-funded nutrition efforts?
- 2) What are the results of engaging students in school meal programs or grant-funded nutrition efforts? How has meal program participation changed after engaging students?

3) How do engagement efforts continue after an engagement grant, program, or initiative concludes? What barriers and facilitators exist to sustaining engagement efforts?

These research questions were used to identify keywords for the traditional literature search. Using these keywords, the author created five Boolean searches, which returned between thirty-seven and over 3,000 results each when entered into PubMed. The Boolean searches are presented in Table 2.1. Searches 1 and 2 were too expansive, pulling articles well beyond the scope of the research questions, while Search 5 was too narrow, returning too few articles to answer the research questions. Searches 3 and 4 both retrieved articles which answered the research question. However, after browsing both searches' results, it was clear that Search 3 returned more irrelevant results than Search 4 and, thus, Search 4 was chosen as the search strategy for this review.

After obtaining the sixty-seven articles from Search 4, each article was evaluated based on predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria, presented in Table 2.2. After applying this criteria, fifteen articles remained. An additional six articles not present in the initial search were pulled from citations of articles from the initial search. After discovering one article from the initial search only described an intervention's methods, two additional articles analyzing the this intervention's results were pulled and analyzed. In total, this review includes twenty-three articles, with fifteen articles from the original search and eight articles from outside the original search.

The present analysis also includes non-traditional, grey literature sources. Many school districts' efforts to engage students are not published in peer-reviewed literature, but their stories provide anecdotes to answer these research questions. After reading the peer-reviewed articles, it was clear that the third research question had not been sufficiently answered with available traditional literature. To find non-traditional sources to answer this question, the author searched the terms "sustainability," "sustained," and "sustain," on No Kid Hungry's Center for Best Practices website, a non-profit child nutrition advocacy organization whose work often involves school meal programs.¹¹ Each search term returned twenty-two results,

which were identical for each term. Out of the twenty-two results returned, three resources relevant to the scope of this review were analyzed incorporated into this analysis.

Table 2.1: Boolean Search Criteria (as of August 31, 2021)					
Search	Number of	Search Terms:			
No.:	Results:				
1	3,984	("engag*" OR "feedback" OR "evaluat*" OR "assess*" OR "survey*" OR "involv*" OR "participat*") AND ("NSLP" OR "National School Lunch Program" OR "Child Nutrition Program*" OR "Federal Nutrition Program*" OR "Federal Meal Program*" OR "school meal*" OR "school lunch*" OR "nutrition service*" OR "nutrition program*") AND ("school*" OR "education agenc*" OR "student*" OR "youth*" OR "child*")			
2	2,916	("engag*" OR "feedback" OR "evaluat*" OR "assess*" OR "survey*" OR "involv*" OR "participat*") AND ("NSLP" OR "National School Lunch Program" OR "Child Nutrition Program*" OR "Federal Nutrition Program*" OR "Federal Meal Program*" OR "school meal*" OR "school lunch*" OR "nutrition service*" OR "nutrition program*") AND ("school*" OR "education agenc*" OR "student*" OR "youth*")			
3	127	("engag*" OR "feedback" OR "involv*") AND ("NSLP" OR "National School Lunch Program" OR "Child Nutrition Program*" OR "Federal Nutrition Program*" OR "Federal Meal Program*" OR "school meal*" OR "school lunch*" OR "school nutrition*") AND ("student*" OR "youth*")			
4	67	("student* engag*" OR "student* feedback" OR "student* evaluat*" OR "student* assess*" OR "student* survey*" OR "student* involv*" OR "student* participat*" OR "youth* engag*" OR "youth* feedback" OR "youth* evaluat*" OR "youth* assess*" OR "youth* survey*" OR "youth* involv*" OR "youth* participat*" OR "child* engag*" OR "child* feedback" OR "child* evaluat*" OR "child* assess*" OR "child* survey*" OR "child* involv*" OR "child* participat*") AND ("NSLP" OR "National School Lunch Program" OR "Child Nutrition Program*" OR "Federal Nutrition Program*" OR "federal Meal Program*" OR "school meal*" OR "school lunch*" OR "nutrition service*" OR "school nutrition*")			
5	37	("student engag*" OR "student feedback" OR "student evaluat*" OR "student assess*" OR "student survey*" OR "student involv*" OR "student participat*" OR "youth engag*" OR "youth feedback" OR "youth evaluat*" OR "youth assess*" OR "youth survey*" OR "youth involv*" OR "youth participat*" OR "child engag*" OR "child feedback" OR "child evaluat*" OR "child assess*" OR "child survey*" OR "child involv*" OR "child participat*") AND ("NSLP" OR "National School Lunch Program" OR "Child Nutrition Program*" OR "Federal Nutrition Program*" OR "Federal Meal Program*" OR "school meal*" OR "school lunch*" OR "nutrition service*" OR "school nutrition*")			

Table 2.2: Article Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria			
Inclusion Criteria:	Exclusion Criteria:		
Article must specifically discuss	Outside the United States		
programs, or discuss barriers to	Before 2010		
engagement or participation	Federal meal program other than SBP SP		
 Intervention or pilot articles must 	OF INSLP		
involve the school's nutrition services, cafeteria/lunchroom, and/or meal program(s)	 Non-nutrition intervention or pilot articles (if an article included nutrition as part of a wider wellness or physical 		

3. Results

•

Student engagement efforts have resulted in increased lunch program participation during or after the intervention period.^{12–15} In some cases, engagement interventions resulted in a reduction in lunch participation, but these articles described mitigating circumstances which explain the decrease in participation.^{16,17} Engagement efforts have produced other favorable effects on students, including improved dietary habits, ^{13,14,16,18,19} satisfaction with engagement activities,^{12,19–21} and feelings of empowerment to become essential stakeholders in school meal programs.^{19,21} Students have also gained valuable skills and knowledge, such as survey methodology and data collection,²¹ lunch program operations,^{20,21} behavioral economics,²⁰ communication,²¹ marketing,¹⁹ food systems and food waste,¹⁸ and PSE methods.¹⁹ Student engagement interventions have benefitted staff, who reported satisfaction with engagement activities,^{12,19–21} valuing student feedback,^{12,20} building relationships with other staff,^{20,22} and building relationships with students.^{20,21} Qualitative studies have collected valuable data on students' perceptions of school meal programs and suggestions for improvement.^{21,23,24} Finally, process and outcome evaluation of student engagement interventions have provided helpful information regarding facilitators and barriers to student engagement.^{12,19,21,22} Not all interventions or engagement efforts presented in this review measured or discussed outcomes or impact on meal program participation. Outcomes and meal program participation changes are included when measured and reported by the cited source.

3.1. How Schools Have Engaged Students

While schools and school districts have employed a wide variety of strategies to engage students in their meal programs, the articles included in this review engaged students in three primary ways: 1) Involving students in wellness interventions,^{16,18–21,25} 2) Developing new recipes^{12,13,19} and offering taste tests,^{12,13,19,21} and 3) Through Policy, Systems, and Environment (PSE) methods.^{14,15,19,25–28} Finally, a body of mostly cross-sectional research has examined PSE-

related factors such as state law, district policy, and innovative foodservice models and their relationship to student engagement, revealing an association between "top-down" strategies and student engagement outcomes.^{14,15,25,29–33}

3.1.1. Involving Students in School Wellness Interventions

To engage students, schools and school districts have sought students' input and participation when designing or implementing school wellness interventions.^{18–20,25} In a multiyear multi-pronged intervention in an urban California school district, researchers and staff involved students in redesigning the school cafeterias.²⁵ Based on input from students, several schools updated their cafeterias by adding colorful artwork, new paint colors, and new furniture, including circular tables and movable couches to encourage socialization. Interestingly, lunch participation rates declined over two years among both intervention and comparison schools, but comparison schools experienced a significantly sharper decline in participation as compared to intervention schools.¹⁷ However, decreased participation rates can be explained by a city-wide minimum wage increase which went into effect during the intervention. Minimum wage growth may have caused many families to become ineligible for FPR lunch due to increased income. Additionally, the authors noted that gentrification may have changed school district demographics and displaced FPR lunch-eligible families.

Similarly, Askelson and colleagues engaged students at six lowa middle schools in a behavioral economics-based pilot intervention to improve the cafeteria environment.²⁰ Researchers developed an assessment tool based on five target areas (milk, fruit, vegetables, lunchroom atmosphere, lunchroom staff) responsive to feasible and low-cost changes intended to nudge students towards more healthful choices. The research team trained a group of students to conduct the assessment in the cafeteria and document strengths and areas for improvement with photographs. After the students completed the assessment, the research team analyzed the results and presented findings to each school's respective foodservice directors and staff, who, in turn, presented the findings back to the students who had conducted the assessment. The staff and student group from each school made plans to make changes to school lunch environment based upon the assessment's findings and principles of

behavioral economics. Throughout the intervention, the research team encouraged food service directors and staff to meet with students independently and even facilitated an icebreaker exercise between the two stakeholder groups at each school. At the end of the year, students reassessed the lunchroom environment using the assessment tool.

Two schools participating in this intervention increased servings of fruit, while three schools increased servings of vegetables and milk.²⁰ However, this result is based on production and serving records rather than observed student consumption. This intervention produced favorable results among school food service directors, which were collected through qualitative interviews. Several directors indicated they valued the students' involvement and feedback. They also reported the intervention helped students build a relationship and communicate with nutrition staff, and one foodservice director said, "We have ambassadors in our students now." Another director mentioned the intervention "humanized" school nutrition staff.

In another example, science teachers administered a sustainability-focused food systems curriculum to 268 sixth-graders at two Colorado middle schools during an experimental study.¹⁸ As part of this curriculum, students had an opportunity to submit a food and sustainability-themed poster to a schoolwide contest. A qualitative analysis of the submitted posters found that most posters targeted food waste, demonstrating that reducing food waste was a topic of concern for the participating students. The winning posters were displayed in the school cafeteria. Students also consumed healthier foods after this intervention. In an analysis comparing baseline tray waste data to post-intervention tray waste data, students took more fruit and vegetables at lunch after participating in the curriculum and poster contest.

Schools have employed the School Wellness Integration Targeting Child Health, or SWITCH, intervention to engage students in wellness activities.²² This intervention aims to improve schools' wellness environments by building capacity among school staff to implement school-based wellness initiatives. Unlike other articles discussed in this section, the School Wellness Integration Targeting Child Health intervention did not solicit student input or feedback during implementation. During a feasibility study of this intervention, eight participating Iowa elementary schools formed "school wellness teams" each consisting of three staff members, such as food service directors, teachers, principals, and nurses. Each school

wellness team received regular trainings through in-person conferences and webinars. Each school was instructed to have fourth and fifth graders track their daily health behaviors through an online tracker in an effort to engage students in improving these behaviors. Half of schools maintained high rates tracking tool usage, while the other half of schools maintained low rates or didn't use the tracking tool. Surveys administered to school wellness teams revealed the regular trainings increased cohesion within the teams implementing the intervention at their respective schools.

3.1.1.1. <u>Student-Led Wellness Interventions</u>

Some schools and school districts have implemented wellness interventions to engage students by intentionally giving students leadership roles in these efforts.^{16,21} Fuel Up to Play 60 is a well-known school wellness program supported by the National Dairy Council and the National Football League, and developed with the input of students.¹⁶ Each school participating in Fuel Up to Play 60 chooses a staff Program Advisor to coordinate implementation, who, in turn, chooses a School Team consisting of additional staff and between ten and twenty students to help implement the program. The School Team evaluates school wellness environment at baseline through a standardized needs assessment survey. Each school has the opportunity to implement different wellness initiatives from the Fuel Up to Play 60 "playbook." Most schools begin the program with a kickoff event involving the student body, and the program offers many other opportunities for student engagement with prizes, incentives, promotions, and visits from National Football League players.

In a pre-post evaluation of 30,000 from 72 schools implementing Fuel Up To Play 60 during the 2009-2010 school year, students reported increases in consumption of dairy, whole grains, fruit, and vegetables after participation.¹⁶ However, student-reported school lunch participation significantly decreased. This evaluation occurred before the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act nutrition reforms were implemented. Therefore, as a result of Fuel Up To Play 60, students may have sought out healthier meals outside of the school meal program. Furthermore, this result is based on student-reported data and not actual participation data.

In a semester-long community-based participatory research pilot project with fourteen eighth-graders from one middle school in California, researchers engaged a student group in a data collection project to improve school lunch.²¹ The fourteen students selected for this intervention were contributors to both a positive and negative environment of campus, including students involved in clubs and academics alongside students involved in truancy and acting out in class. Students and researchers brainstormed ideas for issues to address through this project, eventually deciding on school lunch quality. The students wanted to understand the school food environment before brainstorming changes. Thus, the researchers helped the students design a data collection method and tool for assessing tray waste and interviewing other students about food quality. Researchers also arranged a tour of the school kitchen to meet nutrition services staff and taste test a menu item. According to the researchers, the students appreciated the opportunity to experience a normally adults-only environment and were "giddy with excitement" to wear the required hairnets. After participating in an educational workshop about survey methodology, the students designed a survey and administered it to 44% of the student body. The students eventually presented their survey findings and recommendations for change to the principal and director of nutrition services, who were grateful for and receptive to the feedback.

3.1.2. Recipe Development and Taste Testing

Three articles described interventions to engage students by developing new recipes,^{12,13,19} and four articles engaged students by conducting taste tests of school meal program foods.^{12,13,19,21} One article described evaluating the taste test event by collecting student feedback.¹² In this pilot intervention, researchers implemented the FAV5 program at seven North Carolina elementary schools. The FAV5 program aims to improve school meal programs by improving meal taste and relationships within the meal program, and between the meal program and other school stakeholders. During this intervention, a professional chef provided training and assistance to nutrition staff to create and serve three new NSLP-compliant recipes from USDA's Recipes for Healthy Kids cookbook.³⁴ Researchers conducted cafeteria taste tests and collected data with comment cards containing survey questions and an

open space for students to write down their suggestions. Analysis of the comment cards revealed that 61% of students liked the new recipes, and 57% of students would try the recipe again. In a follow-up qualitative survey with school nutrition staff, staff valued the student feedback gathered during this intervention and indicated they gained a better understanding student meal preferences. Some staff anecdotally reported increased lunch participation after this intervention.

In a similar pilot intervention, an upstate New York high school hired a professional chef to develop and train foodservice staff to serve NSLP-compliant recipes for three types of pizzas, two types of burgers, and a green salad with a raspberry vinaigrette.¹³ The high school held an after-school tasting event the day before the new recipes were served to encourage students to interact with the chef. The following day, the chef's pizzas, burgers, and salad were served to the student body. Lunch participation among all students on the day these meals were served significantly increased by 5.7% (representing a percent-increase of 19.3%). The participation rate among students who had previously participated in lunch program significantly increased by 9.3% that day. Unfortunately, the researchers did not measure long-term meal program participation following this intervention. When comparing baseline tray waste data to intervention tray waste data, students consumed more of the vegetable serving during this intervention, demonstrating favorable perceptions of the green salad with raspberry vinaigrette. The authors estimated the intervention cost only \$360 to pay for ten hours of the chef's time, and noted that using ingredients readily available in school kitchens helped lower costs for this intervention.

3.1.3. Policy, Systems, and Environment-Targeted Reforms

School districts have engaged students at the local level by implementing a PSE-targeted intervention,^{15,19} through the foodservice model or cafeteria setup,^{15,25,30,33} or by implementing a strong Local Wellness Policy.^{29,30} State laws addressing school nutrition can influence school lunch participation¹⁴ and school districts' involvement in student engagement activities.^{31,32} Finally, grey literature demonstrates how schools have used social media to engage students and families.^{26–28}

3.1.3.1. Local-Level PSE Changes to Engage Students

Lepe and colleagues engaged students by implementing a Policy, Systems, and Environment (PSE) intervention with fifth-graders at two Rhode Island elementary schools.¹⁹ Four elementary schools undergoing an eight-week nutrition intervention from SNAP-Ed and USDA's Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program participated in this quasi-experimental pilot study, with two intervention schools receiving the PSE intervention and two schools acting as controls. During the PSE intervention, staff from University of Rhode Island's Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program taught ten 30-minute PSE-themed lessons to participants. The lessons were intended to increase fruit and vegetable consumption through PSE-targeted interventions, with titles such as "Taste Testing," "Media and Food Ads," and "Taking a Poll." Students in the intervention group solicited fruit and vegetable recipes from parents, taste tested the recipes, selected a winning recipe, and served the winning recipe to the student body. The students marketed the recipe using knowledge from the PSE lessons, and the winning recipe was eventually added to the school menu. Qualitative data from student focus groups indicated that students consumed more fruit and vegetables as a result of this intervention. During another focus group, a teacher reported, "the program made them realize they had a voice in their school and were being heard."

Data from a San Francisco-based pilot intervention describe how a school district changed their school lunch structure and serving model to increase student participation.¹⁵ In 2009 and 2010, the San Francisco Unified School District removed competitive meal and à la carte offerings in two high schools and one middle school, eliminating their "two-tiered lunch system." Previously, the school district maintained two lines and purchasing locations in school cafeterias: one for NSLP lunches, and one for non-NSLP competitive foods and à la carte offerings, dividing the two lunch lines by socioeconomic class and reinforcing social stigma of FRP lunch participation. With this tiered system, the school district also reported a low rate of participation among non-FPR eligible students. The school district, in partnership with San Francisco Department of Public Health, drastically reformed the lunch environment in the three pilot schools by removing competitive foods and à la carte offerings, adding additional NSLP

lunch items, and installing a new Point-of-Service system which decreased stigma by masking FPR lunch-eligible students' eligibility status. One school in this pilot also installed a student-designed mural as part of this intervention. After implementing this intervention, total lunch participation increased 12-68%, while participation among FPR-eligible lunch increased 13-154%.

Several additional articles, including both cross-sectional analyses and an interventional study, also discussed or tested serving models or cafeteria setup in relation to student participation.^{25,30,33} Cross-sectional data examining nationwide school breakfast practices show that students in school districts which offer universal free school breakfast are more likely to participate in the school breakfast program on a given day.³⁰ However, this article also found that students in school districts with a policy requiring universal free school breakfast are less likely to report liking the school breakfast. The association between free breakfast and student participation has been replicated in a cross-sectional study examining school breakfast practices among public schools in North Carolina.³³ According to this analysis, over half of North Carolina public schools only offer school breakfast using the traditional model (before the start of the school day), yet fifteen and sixteen percent of schools offer the innovative Breakfast in Class and Grab n' Go breakfasts, respectively. The Breakfast In Class and Grab n' Go breakfast models were more likely to be offered free to all students than the traditional model.

In an effort to engage students with innovative serving models, several California middle and high schools implemented mobile serving carts to serve hot lunch and vending machines to serve cold lunch in a multi-pronged multi-year interventional study.²⁵ The schools in this intervention also redesigned their cafeteria layout based on student input. Unfortunately, these changes produced inconsistent results.¹⁷ In schools with both vending machines and carts, participation significant increased among non-FPR eligible students, but participation significantly decreased among FRP-eligible high school students.

School districts' Local Wellness Policies are associated with student engagement²⁹ and meal program participation outcomes.³⁰ In a cross-sectional analysis of Pennsylvania schools, Jomaa and colleagues examined the association between school districts' Local Wellness Policy strength/comprehensiveness and district-set goals for student involvement in school

wellness.²⁹ A list of district-set student involvement goals included in this analysis are listed below and ranked from most frequently included in districts' Local Wellness Policy to least frequently included in districts' Local Wellness Policy:

- 1) Student participation in ongoing wellness committees
- 2) Sharing nutritional content of school meals with students
- 3) Student involvement in annual revisions of LWPs
- 4) Encouraging students to be role models of healthful behaviors
- 5) Student surveys
- 6) Involving students in menu selection

This study found a positive association between Local Wellness Policy strength and comprehensiveness and school districts setting goals for student engagement. In other words, districts with stronger and more comprehensive Local Wellness Policies set a higher number of goals for student involvement than districts ranking lower on Local Wellness Policy comprehensiveness and strength. Researchers considered a policy strong if the language specified a requirement rather than a suggestion, such as "schools must collect feedback from students" instead of "schools may collect feedback from students." Policies were graded on comprehensiveness based on the number of non-student engagement goals specified in the policy, because student engagement goal-setting was the outcome variable in this analysis. Interestingly, this analysis found that socioeconomic and geographic factors were not barriers for districts in setting goals for student involvement.

A similar cross-sectional analysis found that students in school districts which maintain a strong policy (as compared to a weak or no policy) addressing access and promotion of the SBP are 86% more likely to participate in the breakfast program on a given day.³⁰ Furthermore, students in school districts which maintain a strong policy on increasing student participation in meal programs are much more likely to report liking school breakfast. Policy strength was assessed using a method developed and validated by Schwartz and colleagues in a separate analysis.³⁵ If a policy addresses a topic with clear language in which an observer can easily determine if a school is acting in compliance with the policy, it is graded as 'strong' for that

topic. If a policy addresses a topic with vague language, or as a recommendation instead of a requirement, it is graded as 'weak' for that topic.

3.1.3.2. Association Between State Law and Student Engagement Strategies

In a before-after study comprising of thirty-seven Massachusetts school districts, meal program participation significantly increased after a statewide competitive food law went into effect.¹⁴ In 2010, Massachusetts passed a law requiring schools to offer competitive foods according to strict nutrition standards, which closely match USDA's Smart Snacks standards. This law, along with the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act lunch reforms, went into effect during the 2012-2013 school year. Between the spring of 2012 and the spring of 2013, the mean lunch participation rate among schools in this study significantly increased by 13.6%, from 56.5% to 70.1% participation. This analysis also found that students improved their diet after Massachusetts schools implemented the competitive food and Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids reforms. Based on 24-hour recall data collected from 160 participants, students purchased fewer snacks after school and consumed twenty-two fewer grams of sugar per day between the spring of 2012 and the spring of 2013.

In a cross-sectional study using national public school data from the School Nutrition and Meal Cost Study and data from the National Wellness Policy Study, McLoughlin and colleagues examined the relationship between state laws addressing stakeholder engagement in school meal programs or the Local Wellness Policy and a list of school nutrition managerreported student engagement activities.³¹ The list of student engagement activities is outlined below, and ranked from most frequently reported by school nutrition managers to least frequently reported by school nutrition managers:

- 1) Conducted a taste test activity with students
- School nutrition manager (or staff) participation in school/district meeting on local wellness policy
- 3) Sought student input into vegetable offerings in school meals
- 4) Involved students in planning school meal menus
- 5) Set up booth at school event to advertise school meals

During the 2014-2015 school year, districts presiding in a state with a law addressing stakeholder engagement in the school meal program or wellness policy were significantly more likely to report participation in the student engagement strategies listed above. School nutrition managers in states with a law addressing stakeholder engagement participated in, on average, 18% more promotion strategies as compared to school nutrition managers in states without a law requiring stakeholder engagement.

A similar cross-sectional analysis compared state laws requiring stakeholder engagement in school meal programs to school districts' participation in a list of sixteen engagement strategies identified by the authors:³²

- 1) Collected suggestions from students about the school nutrition services program
- Collected suggestions from students' families about the school nutrition services program
- 3) Conducted taste tests with students
- 4) Conducted taste tests with students' families
- 5) School has committee with students who provide suggestions for the school nutrition services program
- 6) Made menus available to students
- Made information available to students on the nutrition and caloric content of foods available to them
- 8) Placed posters or other materials promoting healthy eating habits on display in cafeteria
- 9) Placed posters or other materials promoting healthy eating habits on display in school
- 10) Included nutrition services topics during school announcements
- 11) Included articles about the school nutrition services program in a school newsletter, newspaper, website, or other publication
- 12) Made menus available to families
- 13) Made information available to families on the nutrition and caloric content of foods available to students
- 14) Made information available to families on the school nutrition services program

- 15) Met with a parents' organization, such as the PTA to discuss the school nutrition services program
- 16) Invited family members to a school meal

The authors found that school districts presiding in states with a law requiring stakeholder engagement were significantly more likely to participate in five out of the sixteen engagement strategies, whereas schools were equally as likely to engage in the other eleven strategies regardless of state law. The five engagement strategies from the above list associated with the presence of a state law are: 1) Collecting student suggestions, 3) Conducting taste tests with students, 4) Conducting taste tests with families, 10) Including nutrition services topics at school announcements, and 16) Inviting students' family members to a school meal.

3.1.3.3. <u>Using Social Media to Engage Students and Families</u>

Grey literature reported how schools and school districts are leveraging the tools and reach provided by social media to engage students and their families. In response to diminished school meal participation during the COVID-19 pandemic, Los Angeles-based Vaughn Next Century Learning Center Charter Schools' meal program held four parent forums over Zoom and live-streamed on Facebook.²⁶ During the parent forums, held in both English and Spanish, parents were given the opportunity to learn about changes to meal program operations, ask questions, and offer feedback. Across the country, Joe Urban, Director of the Food and Nutrition Services for Greenville County Schools in Greenville, SC, maintains a robust social media presence through Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook.²⁷ He regularly posts exciting recipes and beautiful photos served through his school district, such as meatloaf biscuit sandwiches and southern tomato pie. During remote schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Edmonds School District in Edmonds, WA sent 7-day meal kits to families and posted a video on YouTube describing the meal kit contents.²⁸

3.2. Opportunities for Schools to Engage Students

Several articles have generated rich qualitative data regarding students' perceptions, desires, and recommendations regarding school meal programs.^{21,23,24} Students have voiced concerns over school food quality (particularly with the heat-and-serve foodservice model),^{23,24} and have requested school meal offerings which are more tailored to their tastes and preferences.^{21,23,24} Students also want to be considered key stakeholders and have a voice in the school meal program.^{21,23,24} Finally, schools may be able to engage students and increase participation by addressing social stigma associated with meal program participation.^{15,24}

3.2.1. Change Food and Meal Offerings

In a qualitative study consisting of five focus groups with high school students at Youth for Healthy Schools conference and several subsequent follow-up interviews, students reported wanting more fruit and vegetable options (including salad bars) in the school meal program.²³ Additionally, students from these focus groups strongly supported the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act nutrition reforms, but also expressed feeling misrepresented in various media portrayals showing student distaste for healthier school meals.

Students also expressed a desire for better quality and palatability in school meal programs, with one student wanting "a grain that can be eaten that is good and milk that is not spoiled, fruit that is not bruised, like the apples."^{21,23} Students in two qualitative studies perceived school meals from the heat-and-serve foodservice model to be lower in quality and reported interest in more scratch-cooked meals,^{23,24} and one qualitative study reported that students didn't trust school breakfast foods that were not prepared on site and were shipped in a container.²⁴

In qualitative studies, students recommended that schools serve foods they like as part of the school meal program.^{21,23,24} After gathering feedback and surveying the student body, eighth-grade students involved in a community-based participatory research pilot project recommended increasing frequency of certain meals on the menu while decreasing others, and recommended adding more cold sandwiches as an alternative to the hot entrée.²¹ In a qualitative study with middle-school students and parents in Philadelphia, parents reported

they preferred to serve breakfast at home and forgo free school breakfast so they could ensure their children ate a breakfast they liked and enjoyed.²⁴ Students in this study indicated they preferred hot breakfast items like eggs, bacon, and waffles over cold breakfast items like cereal and yogurt.

Reports from the grey literature demonstrate that schools and nutrition departments have adapted their menus to meet stakeholders' food preferences. According to Chickasaw Nation Nutrition Services in Oklahoma, families served through their afterschool and summer meal programs also requested menus according to their preferences.³⁶ Vaughn Next Century Learning Center Charter Schools in Los Angeles and a group of rural school districts in South Dakota called "The Dakota 10" have taken steps to adapt the menus to fit students' taste preferences.^{26,37}

3.2.2. Include Students as a Key Stakeholder

Students expressed feelings of inefficacy to change the school meal program,²¹ and wished to have a voice in planning, decision-making, and evaluation of school meal programs in several qualitative studies.^{21,23,24} To engage students as key stakeholders, school districts and schools can offer students taste tests of menu items.^{21,23,24} Additionally, students would like the opportunity to share feedback, potentially through comment boxes and surveys.^{21,24}

Schools can treat students as key stakeholders by increasing communication between nutrition services and administration departments and the student body. Based on qualitative evidence, students recommended that schools communicate more nutrition information about school meals, particularly the importance and guidelines supporting the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids nutrition reforms.²³ In a pilot project with eighth-graders, students learned why their school required them to take certain components of the school lunch in order to receive NSLP reimbursement.²¹ Additionally, students requested more communication and education regarding nutrition, healthy eating, and the importance of school meals.^{23,24}

3.2.3. Address Social Stigma

Some students fear stigma associated with participating in school meal programs, particularly when participation among students ineligible for FRP lunch is low.^{15,24} In the qualitative study of middle school students' and parents' perceptions of the SBP, one parent who volunteered in the cafeteria regularly observed other students ridiculing students for getting an SBP meal, stating, "Kids will pick at them and say, 'Ew, you're getting that."²⁴ In this study, students reported that many students would rather go hungry or skip breakfast than receive social backlash for eating school breakfast. To combat social stigma of food insecurity, a Colorado leadership program for children called Kids at Their Best hired teenagers from local communities with high rates of food insecurity to run their summer meal sites in those same communities.³⁷ San Francisco Unified School District has also reduced stigma by removing competitive foods and à la carte offerings, and by implementing a new Point-of-Service system to integrate the formerly two-tiered lunch system.¹⁵

3.3. Facilitators and Barriers to Student Engagement

Implementing and evaluating student engagement interventions revealed several facilitators and barriers to successful implementation. Researchers gathered this qualitative data through surveys,^{12,22} semi-structured interviews,^{19,22} and observations from the research team.²¹ This information is presented in Table 3.1.

Interventions			
Barriers to Implementation:			
Miscommunication between			
stakeholders ¹⁹			
 Lengthy lessons¹⁹ 			
Lack of time to implement			
intervention ²²			
• Lack of administrative buy-in ²²			

Table 2.1. Departed Eacilitators and Parriers to Implementation from Student Engagement

٠	Technical assistance provided from:	
	 School administration to students for data collection²¹ 	
	 Professional chef to school foodservice staff to implement new recipes¹² 	
٠	• Supportive administration ²¹	
 Student desire for change in school lunch environment²¹ 		
 Reserving time in the school day for students to complete wellness activities²² 		

4. Sustaining Engagement Efforts

Out of every topic examined by this literature review, sustainability and continuation of engagement efforts was discussed the least in published peer-reviewed articles and in the grey literature. Only one study measured long-term outcomes after the intervention had concluded.¹⁸ The authors found that tray waste returned to baseline levels three months after the implemented food systems curriculum concluded, but then decreased again after student-designed food waste posters were placed in the lunchroom. This result suggests that interventions may need to be reinforced over time. Other articles and grey literature sources described sustained engagement efforts, which can be described in two categories: 1) Policy changes, and 2) Program and environment changes. Several articles also described facilitators and barriers to sustaining wellness interventions.

4.1. Policy Changes

Three articles described sustaining engagement and wellness efforts by changing policy or incorporating the studied intervention into policy^{15,38,39}

- After a pilot project reformed the "two-tiered" lunch system by removing competitive foods and a la carte offerings from three schools, the San Francisco United School District decided to turn the pilot intervention into a permanent policy applying to all district schools.¹⁵
- Several school teams implementing the School Wellness Integration Targeting Child Health planned to implement this programming into the school's wellness policy.³⁸
- 3) One school implementing Fuel Up to Play 60 during the 2012-2013 school year maintained program goals by aligning the nutrition services department policy to mirror the program's nutrition standards.³⁹

4.2. Program and Environment Changes

Schools, school districts, and meal programs have made efforts to sustain a wellness intervention or initiative after the implementation period by making changes to the program or to environment in which the program operates. These efforts are listed in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1: Efforts to Sustain Student Engagement Interventions				
Action Taken to Sustain Intervention:	Example(s):			
Continue developing relationships with students	• After a pilot intervention which helped school nutrition departments build relationships with students, several foodservice directors indicated they planned to continue interacting with students. ²⁰			
Added recipe to menu rotation	 After a professional chef helped foodservice staff to taste test new NSLP-compliant recipes, some cafeteria managers indicated they would include these recipes in the regular menu rotation.¹² During a pilot study, students participated in a fruit and vegetable recipe contest in which the winning recipe was taste tested with the school and added to the menu.¹⁹ 			
Institutionalizing the program	 One school implementing FUTP60 "institutionalized" the program by creating new school traditions and by implementing other programs school wellness programs.³⁹ 			

Posters and visual aids	 One school implementing FUTP60 continued the program by leaving up FUTP60 posters and visual aids promoting school wellness after intervention conclude.³⁹
Continued evaluation	 Chickasaw Nation Nutrition Services in Oklahoma holds regular "listening sessions" at community events to gather feedback on the summer and afterschool meals program.³⁶

4.3. Facilitators and Barriers to Sustaining Efforts

Schools, school districts, and meal programs report several barriers and facilitators to sustaining student engagement efforts. In a 2019 systematic review among a wider body of literature (including non-US studies), Cassar and colleagues found numerous facilitators and barriers to sustained school-based physical activity interventions, many of which are similar to the present review.⁴⁰ Facilitators and barriers are presented in Table 4.2, and similarities with the Cassar et al.'s systematic review are noted in bold typeface.

Table 4.2: Reported Facilitators and Barriers to Sustainability of Student EngagementInterventions				
Facilitators to Sustainability:	Barriers to Sustainability:			
 Student interest and involvement intervention³⁹ 	 Insufficient staffing and overload in staff responsiblities³⁹ 			
 Staff responsiveness to student interest³⁹ 	 Implementation phase too long³⁹ Intervention requires too many 			
 Strong relationships between stakeholders^{38,39} 	commitments, such as regular testing and paperwork ³⁹			
• Continuing intervention with small and easily implemented actions ^{37,38}	• Lack of support from school leadership or adminstration ³⁸			
Bold typeface describes facilitators and barries review by Cassar et al.	rs which were also reported in systematic			

5. Conclusion

Schools have engaged students directly through interventions and initiatives, through policy or law, and through social media. Interviews and focus groups with students and families provide information for schools who wish to further engage students in the meal program. Many of these engagement efforts have produced promising results, particularly in regard to increased meal program participation rates. However, little research has examined the longterm effects and sustainability of student engagement efforts. Future research should include long-term follow-up to further reveal facilitators and barriers to sustained positive results.

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