



Wisconsin Youth Conversations

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Children and Teens' Food
Environment & Behaviors
at Home, School, & in their
Neighborhood

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By Amanda Martinez,
Kalei Vasquez, &
Tatiana Maida



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INTRODUCTION

Children and youth in K-12 spend most of their day in school. Therefore, most of their food intake for the day comes from what they eat at school, and for many low-income children, it might be almost all their food for the day.

Beyond food access, school meals are critical to help shape food habits and behaviors that can positively or negatively impact children's health throughout their lives.

While healthy school meals are a basic right, there are complex issues that make it difficult to be a reality for all students in Wisconsin. The quality of food served, particularly in low-income communities of color, while responding to USDA nutrition standards, is far from responding to what students want and need in terms of appearance, taste, smell, quantity, culture, and nourishment.

Many have a say on what is served, from legislators, government, school administrators, dietitians, parents, and many advocates; but often the students' voices

and perspectives are limited or not included. This project intends to help fill part of this information gap and elevate youth and children's voices regarding school food.

healthTIDE and Kids Forward hosted four Healthy Food Youth Conversations with 30 middle and high school Latino, Black, and Asian students from Milwaukee, Appleton, and Stevens Point, which took place between December 2023 and January 2024. The goal of these conversations was to obtain honest information on their exposure, perspectives, and behaviors towards healthy foods at home, in school, and in their neighborhoods.

We hope the results of these conversations can increase understanding about the school food experience for children and youth in communities of color, and guide school food improvements that include their recommendations.

Disclaimer

Results from this work are not a representative sample nor reflective of the experience of all students in Wisconsin, therefore we want to avoid any kind of generalizations.

In addition, although these conversations include meaningful insight of the experiences of Latino, Black, and Asian students who live in large and small urban communities in Wisconsin (Milwaukee, Appleton, Stevens Point), these conversations are missing statewide representation from white, Indigenous, and rural students.

Lastly, these conversations are intended to capture and elevate the voice of students, often missed in decisions made on their behalf by organizations and institutions. This work is not research and more formal studies could be conducted to verify and deepen these preliminary findings.

Our Approach

We planned and conducted four youth conversations - Two in-person and Two virtual:

One conversation conducted in Appleton/Stevens Point

- High schoolers and middle schoolers (01/10/23 - virtual): 4 students, Asian and Latino background

Three conversations conducted in Milwaukee (*)

- High schoolers from the South side (12/05/23- in person): 10 students, Black, Asian and Latino background
- High schoolers from the North side (12/12/23- in person): 9 students, Black background
- Middle Schoolers from both the South and North sides (12/06/23 - virtual): 7 students, Black and Latino background

*For these conversations it was important to engage with students who live in the north and southside of Milwaukee, given the different demographic and environmental conditions in both places. The northside of Milwaukee tends to have predominantly Black and African American families (over 70% of the population) and the southside of Milwaukee tends to be predominantly Latino (also over 70% of the population).



CONVERSATION RESULTS

Healthy Food Knowledge

The first topic that we discussed in the youth conversations was healthy food knowledge. The participants were asked about what came to mind when thinking about “*healthy foods*”. Youth in all the conversations started by naming vegetables, to which other participants agreed.

Participants described healthy foods as “*green foods*”, “*fruits*”, “*vegetables*”, and “*low-calorie stuff*”. One participant said they thought of foods high in certain nutrients like fiber and protein. Another participant mentioned the word “*fresh*”, while another participant said the phrase “*healthy foods*” made them think of farmers.

Some Milwaukee youth connected healthy foods with a lack of flavor and as a limitation from other foods:

“They’re not my first choice of food options, I guess.”

“When I think of healthy foods. I just think of nasty foods, as I think of no flavor. Because for me, butter is flavor—butter isn’t healthy...Like, it’s just not giving tasty.”

“I think about limiting myself, like junk food and chips.”

Altogether throughout the conversation, the youth had a general understanding on what healthy foods are and focused on identifying and describing examples of what healthy foods are and what they are not.

Healthy Food Access at Home and in Their Neighborhood

The second topic that we discussed in the youth conversations was healthy food access at home and in their neighborhood. In all the conversations, most students felt like it was easy to access healthy foods and vegetables at home, specifically through neighborhood grocery stores. Although there is a consensus

that healthy food is easy to access in grocery stores, accessibility of healthy foods in neighborhoods varied by participant.

Many of the participants across the three conversations in Milwaukee felt that healthy foods are most commonly available in grocery stores and named specific stores where their families shop. The difference is that most participants who live on the North Side of Milwaukee said that grocery stores weren't close to their homes and as a result, it was not easy to find healthy foods, like vegetables. Some of those participants said that the stores near them were mainly gas stations and corner stores, which do not have fruits and vegetables. One middle schooler said that healthy foods can be found at "the grocery store or the nearest park where they grow." On the contrary, participants who live in the South Side of Milwaukee said that healthy foods were accessible through the several grocery stores they have access to in their neighborhood.

In the Stevens Point and Appleton conversation, participants also felt like it was easy to access healthy foods through grocery stores. There were mentions of other places, such as fast-food restaurants and farmers' markets.

"I live like 2 minutes away from Pick N Save... but I also live around a lot of fast food restaurants. You know, it's kind of in between."

"We also live like, right, close to Walmart. I wouldn't say it's too

close. But it's also not too far away. We have a farmers market downtown that happens around the summer. So we sometimes go down there. So it's good."

Gardening is a practice that allows some of the participants to access fresh foods primarily in the summer in comparison to the winter. Some participants expressed that gardening is a cultural tradition passed down from generation to generation.

"I would say it's pretty easy because at my house we have a garden on the side of our house so we get like fresh vegetables that we eat and we can cook so we don't have to go to the store and buy fruits and vegetables every single day and we just grow them natural and fresh."

"Winter is also well, kind of hard sometimes cause we also have two gardens, but it's kind of hard during the winter."

An Asian participant expressed, "I would say that it's pretty cultural for us, since my family they come from I think it was Thailand or Laos and they had farms there too. So they grew their own vegetables and fresh fruit that they went and sold. So they brought some of their

knowledge of that stuff here and they just built, put a garden in the backyard.”

Access to vegetables and other healthy foods can be dependent on the parent’s choice or needs. One participant specified that the reason there are healthy foods at their house is because his father is diabetic. A participant said that healthy foods are available in their home two times a week and that they are mainly fruits such as watermelon and strawberries. A participant also spoke about how parental perspectives or lifestyles determine the availability of healthy foods in their home:

“It depends which parents I’m with—my dad never has veggies, but my mom does. There’s a difference depending on the household...their mindsets.”

It was mentioned that healthy foods were expensive and that the fruits and vegetables at the supermarket were moldy or unripe. Some participants also talked about how the issues around healthy foods are complex and go beyond simply having access to healthy ingredients, like fruits and vegetables.

“It’s not about “finding” [healthy foods] because you kind of have to make healthy food. Pre-made healthy food isn’t really a thing. Pre-made food is fried stuff or something that I can just put in the microwave, or I’m air frying it. There’s not healthy air-fried foods,

not like that, or not as accessible as pizza rolls.”

“So it’s like the knowledge of vegetables...[Some people] don’t completely know how to prepare them, know when to use them, know if they should wait to use them.”

“I would also say a lot of families sometimes don’t have the proper, healthy options, so then the kids are not around them, so then at school, they’re not going to pick it unless they have a different mindset. So I feel like they are hard to come by sometimes. Especially because a lot of people are poor. So you don’t have the money for certain things.”

Culture and Healthy Food

When connecting food and culture, most participants expressed they had their own cultural food traditions. In this sense, there were three predominant cultures represented across the four conversations: Mexican cuisine, Asian cuisine, and Soul Food.

Many Latino/Mexican kids named foods like tamales, tacos, posole, caldo, tostadas, pupusas, soups, fruit salad, and other traditional Mexican dishes.

Black/African-American kids named dishes like macaroni and cheese (sometimes baked), barbeque, green beans, mashed potatoes, collard greens, cabbage, chicken, and other foods they identified as Soul Food.

Regarding the vegetables eaten at home, the participants said that their parents would often incorporate fruits or vegetables into every meal they ate at home, and named spinach and broccoli specifically. Participants generally said that they would eat vegetables at home, as long as they were cooked well with seasonings and in conjunction with other foods (one example given was steak and green beans). One participant said that usually, the vegetables they eat at home are ones they already like.

“It depends on [the vegetable], ‘cause I feel like my mom knows what me and my sister like, so she wouldn’t just put no stuff on a plate that she knows we wouldn’t eat.”

Asian participants expressed eating rice in almost all of their meals because it is part of their culture and how they were raised. Also, most dishes are meat and vegetable-based. Another Asian participant said that their culture does not necessarily eat a lot of fruits because the elders tend not to like sweet foods. Examples of vegetables and fruits included squash, cantaloupe, peppers, garlic, and shallots.

Participants who didn’t identify with a single cultural identity shared that they were open to all cuisines.

“That’s a loaded question for me

because I don’t really have cultural foods. I’m Black and White and both of those cultures, for me, don’t even know their culture for real. And I didn’t really grow up with—like, my mom will make tamales because she saw a tamale recipe. I learned how to make greens on my own. So it’s not really the cultural food for me, but I’d mess up* anything she made.”

*mess up is slang for eat up, enjoy, or devour

“I would say the same. I would say I more radiate toward other cultural foods. I think they’re better than whatever I am—I don’t know, like sauerkraut and a brat, that’s boring. But I love Mexican food, Asian food, top-tier food.”

These conversations brought up points regarding cultural identity and cultural customs. Some children who grew up in multiracial families, or those without a definitive culture or set of customs, may be less attached to one particular food culture and may branch out towards a variety of cuisines and cultural dishes.

Some children grow up in families where both parents share the same cultural identity and may be exposed to strong food traditions and therefore are inclined to prefer the traditional dishes from that culture.

Some participants also recognized that their cooking traditions often change when

their parents don't have time to cook, either because of time or work schedules. They would end up eating quick, frozen foods that could be cooked by microwave or air-fryer. Some of those meal examples include noodles, hamburger helper, ramen, chicken, rice, egg rolls, and pizza rolls.

In Milwaukee's North Side conversation, a few participants also said that they would eat fast food and snacks at home, such as "chips, candy," "hot fries, Cheetos, donut sticks, Gatorade, tacos," and "nachos."

When speaking about vegetables, some participants said that they were most commonly available at home in the frozen and canned form. One participant said that they did not often have fresh vegetables at home because of their short shelf-life and the time required to prepare them.

"It's two things, so time, I think it's just more convenient. And when we have vegetables, if it doesn't get used the first day, then we forget about it and it goes moldy and we'll see it in the fridge and it's like, oh, we gotta throw that away... Like it's once a month we get a pile of vegetables until they're gone. Then we'll get it next month."

Others said they usually have fresh vegetables at home as their parents "grow their own vegetables," Particularly Asian participants shared that their parents provide mostly freshly cooked meals and rely on their vegetable gardens as a source of fresh foods they use in daily cooking.

Across all the conversations, many participants agreed that they like the vegetables that their parents cook at home because they are cooked in an appetizing way and taste better.

"I feel like because I've grown up with the food that my mom makes. I like it. I'd prefer it over going out to eat honestly, so it just depends."

Healthy Food Access and Behaviors in Schools

When discussing healthy food access in schools, students from the four conversations agreed that they had access to vegetables and fruits in schools. However, the quality of those along with other foods in their cafeteria varied between Milwaukee and Stevens Point/Appleton.

In Milwaukee, participants across all three conversations said that fruits and vegetables were always part of the school lunch; however, they consistently remarked that the school's food was unappetizing overall. Some of the specific complaints were that they were old, cold, and tasted weird; for fruits, the most common issue participants had was that they were not fresh and often still frozen when served.

"I like [vegetables], I just don't like [the school] vegetables, or at least, when they do put vegetables in the lunch, I just don't eat them."

“They’re nasty. If you want to find some soggy peas, you can find them. Just like they be having spoiled milk.”

“[It] seems fake. It’s very processed, you can tell—like, how long has that been sitting there? How long have they had it? Cause it looks fine but tastes weird.”

“If [our school does] put vegetables out, it’s unseasoned and it’s normally drifting with dirty water. So it’s just, no.”

“Our school has fruits, but for some unknown reason, all of the strawberries are always old, molded, nasty.”

“It either is overcooked or undercooked. It never is just right and then every time I get to my food, it’s cold, it’s never hot and ready to eat.”

“What they are serving us, it won’t be fresh sometimes, it just be like they reuse and reuse and reuse it until it’s gone. They won’t get a new batch every day, they just serve us the old food.”

Two participants who attended non-Milwaukee schools shared that in their

schools they had access to fresh fruits and vegetables for the most part and that school administrators would conduct food preference surveys with kids and would include selected options in the lunch menu.

“I don’t go to school in Milwaukee...I get fresh fruit at school...I eat a hot lunch every day. I mainly eat the vegetables and their main course.”

“They put out trays of fruit and you could put how much you want in your plate and mostly half of the foods are fruits and vegetables that kids are asking for ‘cause they have us take a survey at the beginning of the school year about the vegetables and fruits we like.”

Participants in Stevens Point and Appleton expressed that accessing healthy foods in school was easy, but it may not always be appetizing, and the options were primarily American foods with a few exceptions. Foods or meals from cultural traditions were mainly not represented in school lunches. There was not strong excitement about the options available at school in general.

“We have a lot of options. I wouldn’t say some of them are very appetizing. Some of them are a little not so appetizing, I guess, but our salad is pretty popular, but I think that’s just because people like croutons...It’s switched up from

time to time, so we'll be introduced to new vegetables and fruits every now and then."

"Yeah, every week it's the same thing. So I get kind of tired of it, which is why lately I've been bringing my own food. Like I just realized, like, I've been bringing my own food because usually, like I said, it's kind of things that I'm used to and it has more veggies and it has more things that actually fill me up, whereas like if it's at school."

In general, it seemed that participants agreed that the lunches at their schools are often of poor quality or unpleasant and that kids often complain about it.

The participants in the Stevens Point and Appleton conversation shared that other students, including themselves, believe the way that foods look plays a role in a student's decision to try them. Schools attempt to bring in new foods that do not look appealing. Examples of this are stuffed bell peppers and grilled cheese with apples inside. Often mixing vegetables or fruits in meals does not appeal to many students. Additionally, students believe that the food needs more seasoning and they would like to see the food have better flavors.

"I guess there are a lot of students at my school that says that some foods need more seasoning as

they serve us like pastas or like some spaghetti at our school and some of them need like some more seasoning, but they don't have it available like salts and like peppers."

When asking the participants if they really preferred to be hungry during the school day rather than eat the school vegetables and lunch, there was a cacophony of yeses. They would wait until they went home to eat what their parents had, or, in some cases, try to bring something to eat from home.

"I think it's just the thought of school food. The smell, I don't know. I think that's what it is for me at least. Because I eat vegetables when I'm not at school, my mom's cooking or something. But just the thought of school food. I never really eat the lunch, I just don't want to."

"If it's my favorite school lunch, the pizza or the chili, then I'll eat it, but if it's not then I won't eat it."

"It depends. If it's a chicken leg or mini corn dog, yeah, if not, I don't be eating, I wait til I go home, 'cause that food be [visually indicates that it's bad], when I do eat, my stomach..."

“I wait [until I get home]. Nine times out of ten, I won’t eat the food that they make at school.”

In all conversations, participants gave many specific examples of the poor quality of the school lunches, from uncooked meat to a lack of seasonings.

“I mean, at all of our schools they do a variety of different foods. They’re just not executed well...A lot of times we know the lunch ladies are like, ‘Oh, we have to make a lot of food for a lot of kids,’ which, I definitely get that, but that doesn’t mean it has to be bland.”

“If I’m at my school and they serve me some unseasoned mashed potatoes, I’mma instantly throw that in the garbage, cause who taught you how to cook? It’s a no.”

The participants in the Stevens Point and Appleton conversation also shared more about other students’ behaviors. Students at schools are required to follow USDA regulations and get one fruit and vegetable on their lunch plate. After students go through the lunch line, the participants have observed students throwing out their fruits and vegetables.

“One thing I’ve noticed about my school is that lately... We are forced to get fruit or whatever. But like where the condiments are and

everything, people will leave a lot of fruit just left because nobody really eats some of them.”

“Yeah, I’m noticing that at our school too, they require us to take at least a main entree and like a fruit or vegetable every single time, and sometimes people just like to take the vegetable and then they just leave it or dump it. So it’s a little bit of a waste of food there.”

Asian participants from Stevens Point expressed a strong concern for food that was being wasted based on their cultural and family values.

“Well, if we’re being honest, there is a lot of food starvation, like there’s a lot of people who don’t have what we have. I think it’s something that our parents also taught us, like, don’t waste your food because it’s like something not a lot of countries have, people don’t even have food at all. I always eat my veggies or my fruit. I always get fruit and I always make sure it’s something I will eat. But yeah, I think it’s something that my parents taught me, like, just don’t waste your food, ‘cause it a bad thing.”

“Yeah, I think bouncing off of that, it’s also kind of like a cultural thing. You’re just kind of taught to basically eat everything that you get or just take what you can eat. So I think that’s also why I try to eat what I grab or like, I’ll grab something that I know I’ll eat for sure. But yeah, I think for my experience it’s based on just the way I grew up culturally.”

Another food access barrier in schools that participants mentioned was insufficient food and time to eat. According to them, in many schools, there was not enough food for all students, and the lunch period was too short; only 20 - 30 minutes in total time. This is insufficient time to get in line to get the food and eat it on time before lunchtime was over.

“That’s part of the reason why so many people don’t actually eat...’cause you have that little bit of time and then it’s already nasty. So it’s like, we’ll just use that as a break time or a chit-chat time instead of actually eating. Even though we’re here for so long.”

“We only get 20 minutes and I will be talking 10 minutes and then I eat slow, taking my time, I gotta

get all the flavors of the fruits and of everybody else’s chips. And the lunch ladies be mad ‘cause we are loud, and I’m like, man, we only 13 to 14 [years old]. We just having fun, living our best life.”

“I get 30 minutes but by the time I sit down with my tray or the food that I warmed up from home it’s a good 5, 10 minutes, it’s not a lot of time.”

“Sometimes people sit down and five minutes later the bell rings. But like, they’re still eating, right? That’s not fair.”

An exception to this was the experience shared by students who attended non-Milwaukee schools and had much longer lunch periods, up to 90 minutes.



YOUTH RECOMMENDATIONS

Improve school lunch in variety, taste, preparation, and appearance

Across all the conversations, participants expressed improving the school lunch preparation, taste, and appearance. Many of the participants said that they wanted schools to try cooking the foods in different ways and to add different food options each day. A suggestion that came up consistently was adding more seasonings to the food, or at least having a seasoning section in the lunch line so kids can add them to their own food (or out in the cafeteria).

“I feel like a lot of the food could be good if it had just seasoning on it. Like something as small as pepper or something. Seasoning do play a big part in food.”

“Definitely I would say [to] season more, I wish that they gave us salt packets and pepper packets. Like the mac and cheese at school is good, but it needs more flavor.”

“I want to get the spices, I want them to put their foot in it*. I just want them to try more. There’s no way your chicken should be cold and your fruit should be hot.”

*Participants explained that this is a saying in the Black/African-American community which means when someone puts all their effort into cooking something.

“It could even be the same foods that we have now just with better seasonings and I don’t know. And with the vegetables and fruit—I love fruit, I genuinely eat fruit all the time, but never at school because it’s not actually good and it does expire...Even when we do get pears, they’re all deformed pears. Like I don’t get where you guys are getting these fruits and things from, but it’s going to schools, not prisons.”

The participants shared it is important to not have the same food options and to incorporate a variety of fruits and vegetables each day.

“I’d say always having like a big variety of vegetables always like always switching it out and not having the same thing every single day so it wouldn’t get repetitive like change it up a little bit and like the same thing with fruits.”

Participants said that collecting advice and information from students at the school would be good. Schools could conduct surveys to inform lunch options regarding students’ preferences in variety and preparation. Schools must learn more about what types of vegetables and fruits students like and how they should be prepared. This can be accomplished by asking students directly for feedback on school food, especially when new foods are introduced and to identify what is missing from the lunch menus. Participants also said that collecting advice and information from students at the school would be good. One participant in the North side conversation said:

“They just put it on a plate but we don’t get to pick, and that’s why we don’t eat it, because that’s not what we want.”

Increase the availability of diverse and culturally appropriate meals

Participants raised awareness of the lack of availability of diverse and culturally appropriate meals. When asked if their respective schools served foods or meals from their cultures, the majority of participants in all conversations said that their schools did not. Some participants said that occasionally their schools served lunches that were structurally similar to their cultural foods, but that they were usually not prepared in the way they were supposed to be.

One Latino participant said that there were a few special occasions (ex. before Christmas break) where their school served posole or other cultural foods.

“No, that food be so lame. It doesn’t got no seasoning. Just black pepper.”

“We mostly have the same foods every week.”

“They got chicken but they don’t get the right chicken, they got baked chicken. If you’re gonna bake a chicken, put some seasoning on there.”

“They have stir fry sometimes or whatever but still tastes like school lunch food, there’s no soul in it at all. It’s gross, it’s just bland, boring.”

The participants in the Stevens Point and Appleton area are beginning to see some diverse cultural foods in their school food, including Italian, Mexican, and Asian foods. Sometimes they received meals like tacos and orange chicken, however, they would like to receive culturally related foods more often instead of only once in a while.

“Yeah, I would like to see that more because I feel like they would add on to our menu a lot because ours is really repetitive and sometimes we’ll have walking tacos every now and then, but I feel like it’s only like once every other month, every now and then. Or like the orange chicken, we see that once every other month, so it would be nice to see.”

Cultural foods are important because they help us to maintain a sense of connection to our cultures, which is especially important for Students of Color. These conversations with youth allow us to identify the experiences of Students of Color and the need to increase access to more cultural foods and meals in schools.

Provide hands-on education

Some participants shared that offering information about healthy foods is not enough to change students’ behaviors because many students may not prioritize healthy eating in this stage of their lives.

“I feel like even if you inform or teach kids about what vegetables can do to your body positively, I feel like they’re just going to go with what they want. They still gon eat hot chips, and they are still not gon treat their body like it means something at the end of the day. Me personally, I’m gonna eat my vegetables but I’m speaking [for others].”

“I don’t think that that is necessarily what is needed to be taught about. I think it’s more useful to put that money towards making [the food] better, so we’ll eat it. ‘Cause we get that it’s healthy but...just ‘cause you said it’s healthy doesn’t mean I’m going to eat it. So I think that it’d be a waste of the money to go towards education. ‘Cause then, I don’t know, that’s just too many people and that’s not really helping the problem I feel.”

Several other participants expressed that nutrition and cooking education can be

helpful if it increases awareness about the impact of unhealthy foods on the body (videos, documentaries) and teaches hands-on skills through activities such as cooking classes and taste-testing of healthy foods and vegetables.

“It’s kind of the person’s learning style too. Like, I’m hands-on. So if it’s something where you can do experiments or something, that’d be cool.”

“I feel like if it’s more hands-on learning—maybe teaching us how to cut vegetables, like put them in different dishes to make them good—then I think it’ll probably make students eat it more. But just throwing it in our face saying, ‘This is why vegetables are good for you,’ I don’t think that would work.”

“Yeah, [cooking classes] gonna get to me more than you saying, ‘Oh, vegetables gon do this, this, and that,’ and then move onto the next topic. It’s not gonna go in my head—it’s gonna go in one ear and right out the other.”

“Taste-testing sounds good and fun to take.”

“They could have a class where they teach you how to make foods from the source ‘cause then you know at least how to make dishes... It could help with people eventually grasping to eat better.”

Overall, it seems like additional education, with a preference for hands-on education, should be offered at the middle and high school levels.



CONCLUSIONS

All of the conversations resulted in deep reflections, based on the important and insightful comments of all the participants. An initial takeaway was that many kids, based on this sample, seem to actually like vegetables and appreciate freshness in healthy foods—something that is often thought to be a rarity. However, in context, it makes perfect sense: kids enjoy the foods that their parents make at home, especially homemade cultural foods, and oftentimes, cultural meals do include vegetables or fruits.

At the same time, many parents also have challenges providing children with a healthier food environment and with a variety of fresh foods due to: a lack of available grocery stores a close distance from their home and easy access to fast food and corner store options; insufficient income and time to prioritize healthy cooking versus easy-to-grab snacks or processed foods; and a lack of knowledge or know how to prepare healthy meals.

These barriers are also different for different families, neighborhoods, and cultural groups. There may be a higher tendency for Asian children to eat more vegetables when their parents are following their gardening and

cooking traditions and have them available at home. Versus Black kids living in Milwaukee, with parents more used to having frozen/ canned vegetables and grocery stores, are further away. While both Latino and Black neighborhoods include many fast-food restaurants, neighborhoods with a large Latino population have many grocery stores and supermarkets nearby offering access to a variety of fruits and vegetables. This may help explain why many Latino participants expressed having higher access to fresh fruits and vegetables at home.

On a positive note, there are a growing number of vegetable gardens at home and in Milwaukee neighborhoods which is part of a larger movement in the city to help counteract the lack of healthy and fresh food availability. Similarly, Asian students from Stevens Point also highlighted the importance of gardening as a practice for accessing healthy foods.

Regarding the school food environment, students in public schools in Milwaukee made it clear that they were not being served what they wanted to eat, and they preferred to go hungry rather than eat what was offered to them. Participants shared an overwhelming

amount of concerning, sometimes disturbing, criticisms about the foods their schools served them. They ranged from food tasting bad to the food being nearly inedible when it is not fully cooked or spoiled. While students from Stevens Point and Appleton area also expressed not feeling excited about school lunch, they also didn't convey the number of issues expressed by Milwaukee students.

The youth who participated in these conversations have verbalized that they are conscious, thoughtful, and autonomous people who have standards for what they put in their bodies. This invites school and district administrators to seriously consider and implement changes needed to provide options that respond not only to USDA's nutritional standards but also to the needs and desires of youth and students. The goal for school meals should be a way to ensure the nourishment for students and reduce food waste through the students eating the foods served.

School meals should taste and look good, there should be enough food for everyone, and they should reflect the cultural traditions of the demographic of students they serve. In simple terms, school meals should communicate that students are valued.

Lastly, schools should consider incorporating different hands-on healthy eating education and gardening practices and programs in schools to increase student's knowledge and exposure to healthy foods including vegetables. As many studies have demonstrated, gardens are not only a source of healthy fresh food, but when children/youth understand where their food comes from and are involved in the process of growing it, they are more inclined to enjoy it.



FOOD & MEAL PREFERENCES

Cultural Cuisine

- Mexican food
- Chinese food
- Italian food
- African food
- Jamaican food
- Japanese food
- Asian Food

Meals

- Pasta & pizza
- Sandwiches
- Parfait
- Tacos & nachos
- Burgers
- Chicken
- Barbeque
- Corn bread
- Banana bread
- Spaghetti w/ meatballs
- Baked mac & cheese
- Pupusas
- Soups

Vegetables

- Carrots
- Tomatoes
- Salad

- Cucumber
- Spinach & Lettuce
- Peppers
- Avocado
- Potato
- Cabbage
- Sweet Potato (fried)
- Green beans (steamed)
- Corn (on the cob)
- Asparagus (steamed)
- Broccoli (raw or steamed)
- Cauliflower (steamed)
- Squash

Fresh Fruits

- Apples
- Kiwi
- Grapes
- Watermelon
- Pineapple
- Strawberries
- Pomegranate
- Mangos
- Bananas
- Melons



SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Knowledge and association of healthy foods

Youth seem to have a clear connection between healthy foods with fruits and vegetables. At the same time, they also associate those with foods that either lack flavor or a flavor they dislike. Considering they said they preferred their vegetables at home but not in school, this could demonstrate a potential negative influence that school food may be generating in children and youth in terms of the mindset toward vegetables and other healthy foods.

Some youth might associate healthy foods with farmers, which can be connected with the several farmer's markets, community gardens, and urban agriculture-related nonprofits that work predominantly in the northside of Milwaukee.

Healthy Food Access

Youth participants shared that they have access to fruits and vegetables for the most part at home but there were differences regarding availability in their neighborhood. Milwaukee's north-side participants shared

not having access to fresh fruits and vegetables in their neighborhood, while the south-side youth expressed having easy access thanks to nearby grocery stores.

Beyond availability, youth also recognized that depending on poverty and the cost of healthy foods, some children might have limited exposure to them, as their parents can't afford them. In addition to this, knowledge of food preparation and cooking skills can be a major limitation to eating healthier for many families.

Healthy Food Culture, Exposure & Behaviors

Some of the children and youth seemed to be connected with the food traditions of their parents (mexican, soul food). Multiracial children may be less attached to one food culture from either one of the parents and may have learned to be more open to exploring different cuisines.

Beyond cultural preferences, lack of time for parents to cook is an issue according to many of the participants and as a result, parents need to rely on meals that are quick to prepare such as ramen or pizza, or frozen

meals that can be cooked in a microwave. In that sense, many get used to having snacks instead of more complete meals.

In the same way, many of the participants said they have vegetables at home and they are a combination of fresh, frozen, and canned. They also shared that for the most part, they like the vegetables at home because their parents season them in an appetizing way.

Many youth have strong cultural food traditions, including Latino, Black, and Asian families. Schools should consider incorporating nutritious foods from diverse cultures in the school lunch program. This is a key step towards creating an environment that is inclusive of all students. This also allows for students to be introduced to new foods.

School Food

Students attending public schools in Milwaukee, both from the north side and south side complained about the quality and appearance of the food they were offered. A

few students who attend charter, Christian, or private schools shared having fresh fruits and vegetables along with other healthy options in school.

Most of the vegetables that were mentioned as part of the list of desired vegetables were also in the list of vegetables they are accustomed to having in school (cauliflower, potatoes, carrots, peppers, broccoli, celery, radishes, jicama, corn, and green beans). However, again, participants in all conversations consistently remarked that the vegetables served at school are often unappetizing. Some of those vegetables may also be new for kids if their parents don't prepare them at home. Healthy food education or taste testing may help the acceptance of these 'new' vegetables.

Participants stated that during some holiday celebrations, they may be offered some cultural foods as school meals. However, for the most part, schools don't serve meals that are connected with their culture and if they do they are not typically prepared appropriately.



PROJECT TEAM

General Coordination:

Tatiana Maida
tatihealthtide@gmail.com
Amanda Martinez
amartinez@kidsforward.org

Recruitment:

Amanda Martinez
Karina Soto
Tatiana Maida
Andre Lee Ellis

Facilitation: Karina Soto

Analysis & Report:

Amanda Martinez
Kalei Vasquez
Tatiana Maida

Reviewer:

Amy Korth
Emily Miota

healthTIDE is a network of statewide and place-based community partners who work together to create change faster around healthy eating and physical activity. We work to connect, align, and unite multi-sector partners across Wisconsin who are working to make the healthy choice the easy choice and reduce health disparities so that everyone has the opportunity to thrive. We bring partners together to create lasting policy, system, and environmental changes related to healthy eating and physical activity.

Kids Forward is a statewide antiracist policy center that inspires action and advocates for children and families of color and those furthest from opportunity in Wisconsin. We envision a Wisconsin where every child thrives.