

WISCONSIN YOUTH CONVERSATIONS

Children & Teens' Food Environment & Behaviors

Healthy school meals are a basic right for every child in Wisconsin. But, decades of intentional disinvestment in schools and neighborhoods—particularly in communities of color—have left our children without enough nourishing food options.

To begin to address this, healthTIDE and Kids Forward hosted four conversations with 30 thoughtful middle and high school Latino, Black, and Asian students from

Milwaukee, Appleton, and Stevens Point during December 2023 and January 2024. The goal was to get their honest perspectives on healthy foods at home, in school, and in their neighborhoods. Decision makers and school administrators should invest in our children and implement the 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.

5 Takeaways

1 Some youth clearly connect healthy foods with fruits and vegetables, and some associate those with foods that either lack flavor or a flavor they dislike.

"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."

2 Most youth had their own cultural food traditions (ex. Mexican cuisine, Asian cuisine, Soul food) which can include fruits and vegetables. Other children and youth seemed to be connected with the food traditions of their parents.

"I don't really have cultural foods. I'm Black and White and I don't even know their culture for real. 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* (enjoy) anything she made."

3 Fruits and vegetables are always available in the school lunch, however they are highly disliked due to their poor quality and presentation.

"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."

4 Some children have limited exposure to healthy foods because of cost. Knowledge of food preparation and cooking skills can also be a major barrier.

"...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...Especially because a lot of people are poor. So you don't have the money for certain things."

5 Some youth have access to fruits and vegetables at home. 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. In Stevens Point/Appleton, participants felt it was easy to access healthy foods through grocery stores and gardening practices.

"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."

Recommendations

Make school meals look & taste good.

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.

"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."

The participants shared it is important 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."

Collecting advice and information via surveys, for example, from students at the school would be useful.

"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."

Offer foods that reflect the cultural traditions of the students they serve.

Schools should consider incorporating nutritious foods from diverse cultures. 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.

"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."

Provide hands-on education.

Nutrition and cooking education can be helpful if it increases awareness about the impact of unhealthy foods on the body 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."



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