

Study: Kids expect more from school foodservice than adults

A Y-Pulse survey of over 1,900 students and adults found they tended to like the same things but more kids expected to find the higher quality offerings in their cafeterias.

The [2017 School Meal Innovation Lab survey](#) of 1,020 adults and 900 K-12 students found that both tended to like the same foods but expectations on where they would find the higher quality dishes they liked varied. While both adults and kids had greater expectations of finding their higher scoring dishes in restaurants than in school foodservice, more kids also expected to find them in school cafeterias.



“The study found that both adults and kids liked the same foods but quite often expected to find them in restaurants rather than in school cafeterias,” said [Sharon Olson, executive director of Y-Pulse research](#), which conducted the survey. “This study points to an opportunity for school nutrition professionals to build awareness among their young consumers and their parents about the quality of school meals.”

For the study, [Y-Pulse worked with a team of chefs and dietitians to create restaurant-quality menu concepts that met school meal nutrition requirements](#). The study’s participants then evaluated them through photographs and menu descriptions.

What the results seemed to show was that [adults and kids rated many of the menu options very similarly](#). For example, both rated items such as the banana berry smoothie—described as “a creamy smoothie made with berries, banana, yogurt, milk, and topped with fresh fruit and homemade granola”—as their top choice. Kids gave the banana berry smoothie a score of 77 percent, while adults gave it a score of 71 percent.

Other top-scoring dishes with both age demographics included the Mexican tostada (“a crispy shell topped with refried beans, cheddar cheese, crunchy shredded romaine lettuce and diced tomatoes, drizzled with sour cream and lime”), overnight oatmeal (“creamy and hearty overnight oats in milk, layered with fresh fruit and yogurt, ready to grab on the go) and Tex-Mex breakfast bowl (“a breakfast bowl with a blend of eggs, cheese, and beans served on top of roasted potatoes, peppers and onions, with salsa on the side”).

However, while both adults and kids had greater expectations of finding their higher scoring meal concepts in restaurants than in school foodservice, [significantly more kids had expectations of also finding them in school foodservice](#).

For example, while 56 percent of adults and 46 percent of kids expected to find the banana berry smoothie in restaurants, only 17 percent of adults expected to find it on school menus, but 44 percent of the kids did. Similarly, only 16 percent of adults expected to find the Mexican tostada on school menus, as opposed to 26 percent of the kids. The story’s similar with the overnight oatmeal, with 30 percent of adults expecting it to be served in schools, compared to 53 percent of kids.

“The findings certainly raise interesting insights in how **adult and young consumers have lower expectations from school foodservice compared to restaurant dining,**” Y-Pulse observed in its release announcing the results, adding that “a robust communication plan [might] increase participation in school foodservice if kids and parents were educated on school menu offerings.”

Possibly, memories of what school food was like when they were growing up colored adult views while their kids have been experiencing greater quality and variety as found by the most recent School Nutrition Association (SNA) School Nutrition Trends Report. That report showed a boom on K-12 menus of fairly non-traditional fare such as the kind of international-flavored foods the Y-Pulse study included in its survey, such as the Mexican tostada and the Tex-Mex breakfast bowl. Other internationally flavored items it tested included honey Sriracha chicken flatbread, spaghetti with Korean meatballs, Jamaican pulled pork tacos with pineapple salsa and a Buddha bowl.

The study was designed to assess how culinary, nutrition and industry communication intersects in the K-12 school marketplace.

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