



K-12 director survey examines Gen Z food trends

Y-Pulse research shows made-to-order and hand-held foods popular across the board.

Foods that are made to order or prepared where customers can see production are particularly appealing to Generation Z customers, according to the latest Y-Pulse survey, which delved into the similarities and differences between elementary, middle and high school students when it comes to school meals. Meanwhile, hand held foods for on-the-go eating appeal to kids of all ages, with just the size and composition of the hand held items evolving (larger portion sizes appeal to kids as they grow up). For high school students, larger size portions to fuel those involved in athletic programs are particularly in demand.



Y-Pulse, a division of the Olson Communications research and consulting firm, surveyed leading school foodservice professionals online in July 2015 about their experiences and opinions about the eating habits and preferences of Gen Z consumers in elementary, middle and high school. The complete study includes 32 interviews with industry leaders prior to the School Nutrition Association (SNA) Annual National Conference in Salt Lake City, where Dr. Tami Cline led a discussion about its highlights.

When asked about up and coming menu items that elementary, middle and high school students are likely to be enjoying in the year to come, respondents noted several categories that cross all age groups, primarily fruit and veggie smoothies and Mexican foods. All Gen Z students also prefer foods made fresh, fast and from scratch, and they like to have more choices.

Children of all ages unsurprisingly also like pizza, chicken, sandwiches, salads and fruit but what emerged from the survey were up and coming items for children in elementary, middle and high school. Younger students tend to like simpler foods rather than combinations, but as they grow into middle school their tastes become more diverse to include more flavors and combinations, including many ethnic foods.

High school students' eating habits are beginning to look very similar to college students as they become

more conscious of food, nutrition and ethical values associated with food production and delivery. Meanwhile, their experiences and interests with ethnic foods also continue to grow.

“Whenever we survey school foodservice directors, we find their insight is very consistent with our direct surveys of children and young adults, they really know their customers,” said Y-Pulse Executive Director Sharon Olson in releasing the survey results. “Even though there are strong guidelines and powerful limitations on what they can serve in their operations, they are exceptionally in tune with what their students like to eat and how much they understand about food and nutrition.”

When asked about the biggest changes seen in students over the past year, respondents considered elementary school students less adventurous in choosing what to eat. Sticking with favorite foods remains a habit through middle school, though interest in ethnic offering has increased over the past year, but it is really not until high school that students become more adventurous. Desire for ethnic foods, fresh and local offerings increases with age.

Only 39% of participants said their elementary school students had a greater understanding of nutrition than the previous year while more than half said middle and high school students had a greater understanding of nutrition, at 52% and 57% respectively.

Among other findings from the survey, participating directors indicated that they are involved with parents and their communities, with more than half (53 percent) saying they invite parents to school to learn more about the meals served there while 44 percent said they present at parent-teacher meetings and 28 percent said parents regularly call them. Twelve percent actively survey parents about their school menus.

Participants in the leadership survey also talked about many of their challenges in menu planning, especially balancing nutrition targets, student taste preferences, food quality, prices and costs. Said one: “You have to offer items that reflect a perfect diet, serve within 5 minutes, hold the food less than 30 minutes, total cost for food and labor must be around \$2.50 for an entrée that includes 2-3 grains, 2 vegetables, 2 fruits and milk. . . and the menu mix must attract 80% of the students to participate.”