



AgEcon SEARCH
RESEARCH IN AGRICULTURAL & APPLIED ECONOMICS

The World's Largest Open Access Agricultural & Applied Economics Digital Library

This document is discoverable and free to researchers across the globe due to the work of AgEcon Search.

Help ensure our sustainability.

Give to AgEcon Search

AgEcon Search

<http://ageconsearch.umn.edu>

aesearch@umn.edu

*Papers downloaded from **AgEcon Search** may be used for non-commercial purposes and personal study only. No other use, including posting to another Internet site, is permitted without permission from the copyright owner (not AgEcon Search), or as allowed under the provisions of Fair Use, U.S. Copyright Act, Title 17 U.S.C.*

No endorsement of AgEcon Search or its fundraising activities by the author(s) of the following work or their employer(s) is intended or implied.

CHANGES IN SCHOOL LUNCH PARTICIPATION

Walter Epps
(202) 447-7321

The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) provided meals to half of the Nation's 51 million school children on an average school day in 1977. Of the total cost of over \$4 billion, Federal contributions averaged 45 percent.

In the early 1970's, the nationwide growth in the number of full-price lunches slackened after two decades of expansion. The overall growth of the program has continued, though, because of increases in free and reduced price lunches. These more than doubled between 1970 and 1977. Of an estimated 4.2 billion lunches served in 1977, over 44 percent were served free or at reduced prices, compared with 21 percent in 1970. Expansion of the free lunch program meant that some students who formerly paid for lunches could receive them free once their eligibility was certified.

The character and setting of the paid-lunch program was changed in the 1970's in still other ways. Average lunch prices rose as some school systems adjusted prices to cover higher food and labor costs. A liberalization of the rules for serving a la carte foods provided other sources of food

at school. And school enrollments fell after rising for decades.

Higher lunch prices or access to lunch alternatives would be expected to reduce lunch participation. Similarly, smaller enrolments would be expected to reduce the potential for expansion of school lunch and other school-based feeding programs. And, to the extent that students who formerly paid received free or reduced price meals, the base of paying students would be decreased. This article assesses the effects of these changes on participation in the paid lunch program between 1972 and 1975.

Analysis of Participation

The samples—Two nationwide surveys taken in 1972 and 1975 obtained information about participation in the NSLP, lunch prices, availability of food alternatives, and characteristics of participating schools.

The average lunch price in 1975, at 48 cents, was 18.5 percent above the 1972 average. Lunch participation rates also were higher in 1975—48.7 percent compared with 43.1 in 1972. In 1972, over half of the schools surveyed were large—1,000 students or more—but

this dropped to slightly over 25 percent in 1975.

In both years, one in four schools permitted children to leave school grounds at lunch-time. And, in both years, one in 10 sample schools served food prepared at places other than the service site. On-campus alternatives were available in 50 percent of the schools in 1975, up from 42.9 percent 3 years earlier.

To summarize, the schools in the two surveys were similar with respect to lunch alternatives. They differed most in prices, participation rates, and average size of the school surveyed in 1975.

The model—For purposes of this study, participation was defined as the ratio of students buying lunches at the customary full price to the average daily attendance of potential buyers. Potential buyers included all those attending classes except those who had been certified as eligible to receive free lunches. This ratio was assumed to depend on lunch prices, lunch substitutes, lunch practices, and school size.

Results—The results show that participation in 1975 was significantly different from

1972. Although in both years participation rates were affected significantly by lunch price changes, the average response to a given price change was smaller in 1975. Lower participation rates were also associated with the availability of campus and off-campus meal alternatives. In the 1975 survey, participation rates were higher for schools preparing and serving lunches onsite. This difference was not found in 1972. And participation rates among students in large schools dropped significantly in 1975.

Prices—Although average participation levels in the paid lunch program were higher in 1975 than in 1972, the total number of paid lunches was smaller in 1975. In 1975, however, a smaller change in participation rates followed a given price change. Several features of the lunch program may account for this.

The effect of rising prices was probably reduced by tying lunch reimbursement rates to the cost index of food consumed away from home. This assured that Federal support for lunch programs kept pace with rising prices and, thus, preserved the real value of this subsidy to local programs. Some local school authorities, trying to hold prices down in an era of rapidly rising costs, either allocated additional funds to their lunch programs or paid outstanding indebtedness incurred by the lunch program as needed. Both of these actions tended to slow the rise

in costs and relieve some of the pressure on lunch prices.

Students' reactions are only one element—not always a dominant one—in lunch price changes. This is because the prevailing lunch price at a particular school reflects such factors as the perception of its "proper" level, the interval since the last change, the status of the school lunch fund, and other judgmental considerations.

Lunch alternatives—Schools offering alternatives to the regular lunch had lower participation rates in both years. This applied both to schools with no campus restrictions and to schools offering a la carte foods.

Between 1972 and 1975, the regulation affecting the sale of competing foods during lunch hour also was changed—to a less restrictive policy allowing greater competition to the regular school lunch from other sources of food on campus. Previously, students had to select individual foods served as part of an approved lunch. The new regulation permitted them to choose from a wider variety of foods.

Preparationsite—Schools that both prepare and serve lunches at one site have the potential for higher school lunch participation rates than those that serve lunches prepared elsewhere. Preparing and serving in one location puts the choice of food to be served, its preparation, and appearance under the exclusive control of one school's staff. In contrast, local control is more limited when central kitchens or other off-campus sources

handle meal planning and food preparation. Because they have greater latitude, onsite operations can take local tastes and preferences into consideration more easily and thus make lunches more acceptable to students. This is especially important when local lunch program managers must encourage continuing participation in the regular lunch program under pressure of rising prices and greater accessibility of lunch alternatives.

The higher participation rates among students in schools with onsite programs in 1975 lends support to the contention that greater flexibility and the control of food choice and service allowed those schools to maintain the quality of lunch preparation and service.

School size—In 1972, participation rates were the same in large and small schools. In 1975, students in large schools (over 1,000 students) participated in the school lunch program at a significantly lower rate. This may suggest that small schools are more adaptable to changed program conditions. Relatively more of their students are available for lunch compared with larger schools which often have programs that involve students who are officially attending school but are away from school part of the day. Small schools are also less likely to be located in urban areas, thus their range of lunch alternatives is likely to be narrower.