

## **Food Service Focus Groups Analysis**

### **October 2015**

In 2013, voters approved a \$160 million bond that included funds for a centralized kitchen. Before a group convenes to create a recommendation for the food services program, Bellingham Public Schools hosted a series of seven focus groups including students, parents, community members and staff. A few phone interviews were conducted with interested stakeholders who could not attend one of the scheduled groups. The focus groups and phone conversations took place between October 6 and 22 with approximately 75 participants. The information gathered in this process will be shared with the Food Services Advisory Group which will use the information to inform their work.

#### **Focus group participants were asked four main questions:**

- What do you like about our current Food Services program?
- What don't you like, or what could be improved?
- How do you define healthy?
- What is your ideal Food Services experience?

#### **Several themes emerged consistently across all the groups, including:**

- Increase the use of whole foods, with an emphasis on vegetables and fruits
- Significantly reduce or eliminate highly-processed foods and added sugars
- Desire for fresh, local foods that are sustainably grown and/or organic where possible
- Make the cafeteria an extension of the classroom
- Improve cafeteria atmosphere (décor, time, logistics, noise levels)
- Continue to expand the choices/variety available for students
- Students, especially at the elementary level, want more time to get food and eat
- Appreciation for food service staff, who are viewed as warm, hard-working and kid-centered

#### ***What do you like about the current food services program?***

While most of the food served in the everyday breakfast and lunch programs is not well-liked, people appreciate the changes that are already underway within the food services program.

Participants who know about the healthy snack program really value it (including kids!), and Harvest of the Month meals received near-universal high praise. More than a few folks commented that they wished the Harvest of the Month meals were representative of Bellingham's daily offerings.

People in all groups (parents, students, staff, and partners) value choices. Participants gave kudos to the salad bar, sub / deli bar, and the additional food choices available to older kids.

Many participants noted the importance of the free and reduced-price meal program. Some parents expressed generalized gratitude that their children are fed at school, noting the financial and logistical challenges that make it hard for many families to provide food from home. The parents who expressed that view most strongly also tended to emphasize the importance of making sure the meals are nutritionally well-balanced and "covered the food groups."

- Like that breakfast and lunch are offered for all kids
- Value the free and reduced meals program
- Harvest of the Month
- School garden program
- Healthy snack program
- Food services staff
- Favorite foods: salad / deli bar, hot dogs, pasta Mondays (HS students), fruits

### ***What don't you like, or what could be improved?***

On the whole, participants do not like the quality of the food served most of the time for breakfast and lunch. Most people feel that far too many processed food products are used and the meals are often not appealing. Opinions about breakfast tended to be particularly strong; people appreciate that breakfast is offered in all schools, but the quality and nutritional profile of the breakfast options is viewed as being particularly poor (heavily processed, too much sugar, not enough protein).

Time and atmosphere also emerged as issues of concern in every group. Participants in most of the groups felt that students – especially at the elementary level – need more time for lunch. Many participants talked about students who throw away food, don't bother getting a carton of milk, or have special arrangements to be able to finish lunch later in the day because they don't have enough time to eat after getting through the food line. The elementary participants noted that part of the problem around this is their desire to talk to friends, but they confirmed the concerns raised by adults.

Participants described most Bellingham school cafeterias as “institutional.” People would like friendlier, more welcoming décor, including brightly colored walls, food-related educational

materials, and furniture that is age-appropriate and comfortable. Many folks noted a preference for round tables to help support a sense of community around food. Noise is also often a factor that makes the whole meal experience less pleasant, particularly in multi-purpose cafeterias. There was a good bit of interest among parents around the idea of switching the lunch and recess times so that kids burn off energy at recess and come into the cafeteria hungry and ready to eat. This idea is already being piloted on a small scale this year and may be expanded in future.

The idea of choices came up as something participants value and also felt could be improved. They wish there were more choices, particularly for students with dietary restrictions, so they asked for more vegetarian / vegan options, gluten-free options, non-soy milk alternatives for the lactose intolerant, etc. They also noted that it is hard to accurately estimate carbs in school meals, so some students with diabetic issues face extra challenges.

Several participants who have experience with current school meals expressed concern about the amount of food that is wasted, especially when students are forced to take foods they don't like. Some of the high schoolers wished for larger portions.

Food services staff pointed out that current Bellingham schools have widely different kitchen facilities, and so a one-size-fits-all solution may be hard to achieve. They encourage the new system to have flexibility, both in terms of how food delivery is managed, and in terms of having the ability to tailor the menu to meet the tastes of different demographics.

- Less packaged, processed foods
- Less sugary breakfast (“Kids need brain fuel!”)
- More options needed for kids with dietary restrictions and allergies
- Need more time to eat, especially at elementary (long lines, some worse than others)
- Want to see recess before lunch districtwide
- Concerns about wasted food
- Improve atmosphere: reduce noise, add comfy furniture, attend to paint and decor
- Improve presentation of food, make it more appealing
- Limited by current equipment; school food service facilities vary widely
- Least favorite foods: pizza (“Can you believe kids don't like pizza?! But it smells like plastic!”), the whole-grain breads/bagels (“bagels have really gone downhill; they're rock hard”), breakfast, and hot vegetables (“they're steamed and really mushy”)

### ***How do you define ‘healthy?’***

The focus group facilitator noted that the word ‘healthy’ means different things to different people and asked the participants to share what is most important to them when they think about healthy food. Here's what they noted as most important:

- Whole foods, minimal processing
- Lots of fresh fruits and vegetables
- Local, local, local
- Sustainable and/or organic where possible
- Simple is best for kids (doesn't mean boring)
- Can read and know all of the ingredients in food

### ***What is your ideal Food Services program?***

Before closing out each focus group, the facilitator asked participants to think about their ideal school food services program. What would make kids want to run to the cafeteria each day? (Elementary students wisely pointed out that it is not ok to run in the halls, so we agreed that they would walk with purpose and excitement to the cafeteria.)

Here are the elements that participants described as being most important:

- The cafeteria should be welcoming, a place of community (less “institutional!”). It should look and smell good and be a comfortable place to gather. Look for ways to incorporate elements of “family style” dining.
- Food is appealing, varied, and it is easy for students to make healthy choices. Regular meals look more like Harvest of the Month meals.
- The logistics related to getting food and finding a place to eat should be easy and fast.
- Make the cafeteria an extension of the classroom, provide learning opportunities around food and nutrition.
- Provide increased student involvement with food. (Note: this was important to adults, but did not come up unprompted by either student group.)
- Include flexibility to prepare meal plans that are tailored to each school community's preferences and facility capacities

### **Comments from focus group members:**

*“Kids don't make the connection between how food impacts their body, we need to teach that.” - Parent*

*“Kids are learning a lot of great things in the classroom but there is a huge contradiction between what we are teaching them and what we give them in the cafeteria, it creates confusion.” - Parent*

*“We can teach our kids you don’t have to buy packaged food. You can make this fresh food and enjoy it. If we start this at a younger age we will see the difference when they are in high school.” – Food Services Staff*

*“I would like to see us not feel the need to cater to kids’ existing tastes. It would be great if we could offer kids opportunities to expand their palate.” - Community Member*

*“Make the food more interactive for kids, like ‘food adventuring’ to help them try new things.” - Parent*

*“When you’re with friends and family and you cook, it is fun. Ideally, it is where you center yourself. If you’re a cook in a cafeteria and you’re just re-heating chicken nuggets – it is kind of soulless work.” - Community Member*

*“Eating together is important, it’s a good place for learning manners and learning how to be together. I want us to shift away from the thinking of hurry up and eat so we can move on.” – Parent*

*“Even though we have to be very frugal, our kids are eating much better at home than they are at school. They eat simple, whole food at home. They don’t develop a taste for junk food until they go to school!” - Parent*

*“We have the same food every day. It is repetitive, like every Monday is the same thing and the pattern repeats.” – Student*

*“It would be cool to have a week that focused on different foods from different areas of the world.” – Student*

*“Cooking at schools is so much fresher. It makes the school smell like what you are cooking and it entices people to eat at school.” - Food Services Staff*

*“I would like to see every kid in the district have the option of hot lunch regardless of income level.” – Food Services Staff*