Learning About Lunch:
Lessons from a BC School District as it Introduced a New School Lunch Program

In June 2017, New Westminster Schools (SD40) passed a motion with the aim of nurturing a school district where "no child is hungry and every child eats healthy"

The 2019 Lunch Program

In early 2019, SD40 introduced Fuel Up!, a new lunch program that gave parents the option to order school lunches online. Fifty cents from each full-priced entrée went to support a subsidy program where families with financial need could apply for a full or partial subsidy. The cost for all entrées was $5.75, and optional side dishes (e.g., side salad, fruit or dessert) cost an extra $1.25-$1.50. Available drinks included milk (dairy or soy) for $1.25 and chocolate milk (dairy or soy) offered once per week for $1.50. Before Fuel Up!, previous lunch programs did not have capacity to offer lunch to all students or at all SD40 schools and were mainly designed to serve low income and vulnerable students.

What We Aimed to Learn

Staff from SD40 and the Fraser Health Authority teamed up with UBC researchers to learn about the school lunch experience of students at three schools (before and after Fuel Up! launched), with a focus on better understanding the complex factors that shape students' lunch experiences. We also wanted to learn about what parents thought were the benefits and challenges of the new lunch program.

Key Lessons Learned from School Lunch

Food is a Symbol of Care. Students often talked about food as care, whether this was being cared for by others through food or not feeling cared for. This study highlighted the social relationships and caring work involved in lunch, including some students expressing how much they missed the lunch workers employed at their schools who were in charge of the former lunch program.

Benefits of Fuel Up! Taste, variety, choice, flexibility, time savings and nutritional quality were raised as important perceived benefits of Fuel Up! through online surveys of parents and conversations with children and school staff.

Participation. Even though Fuel Up! lunches were open to everyone, program participation was low where fewer than 1 in 3 students had ordered school lunches in the highest use school in May 2019, and less than 1 in 10 were ordering in the other 2 schools. Despite the district's efforts to create a low barrier subsidy process, many students who could have benefited from regular access to a nutritious school lunch still did not participate in the new program.

Affordability. Parents, students and staff raised concerns about the high cost of Fuel Up! and barriers to obtaining the subsidy. Cost and perceived lack of access to the subsidy program were important barriers to more widespread use of this program.

Anonymity. The district made efforts to anonymize subsidies so that other students and staff would not know which students were accessing free or reduced priced lunches. However, given the low participation in school lunches in general and the depth of information students appear to have about each other and the food practices of peers, the approaches used in this program are unlikely to fully maintain the anonymity of subsidized students.

Educational Potential. No food literacy education or integration of the new lunch program in the school curriculum was offered as part of the 2019 lunch program. Sustained funding and investment is needed to support the full educational potential of school lunch programs.

Valuing Food Work. Students, staff and parents reported valuing the work and care provided both by school food staff and caregivers who prepare lunches. The school nutrition coordinator made a substantial contribution to the development of Fuel Up! and was pivotal for overseeing the nutritional quality of menus and supporting the rollout of the program.

This research indicates the importance of recognizing, valuing and supporting the caring work of those who make school lunch possible.

Questions: [Read the Full Report Here]   or contact **Jennifer Black** (j.black@ubc.ca) or **Sinikka Elliott** (Sinikka.elliott@ubc.ca)