

LAURIE M. TISCH CENTER FOR
FOOD, EDUCATION & POLICY

— PROGRAM IN NUTRITION —

TEACHERS COLLEGE COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

NYC Schools Food Pandemic Grab n' Go Meals Focus Group Findings

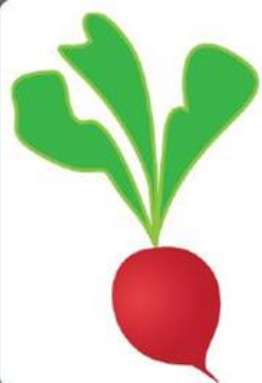
New York State Health Foundation

January 19, 2022 at 12pm EST

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The **Tisch Food Center** conducts research on food and nutrition education practice and policy. We translate our research into resources for educators, policy makers, and advocates to give people power to demand healthy, just, sustainable food.



NYC Public School Foods

Largest school system in the nation

- 1.1 mil children

- 1600 schools (1300 kitchens)*

- 75%+ eligible for free or reduced lunch

- Universal free meals Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) - 2017

Office of Food and Nutrition Services (OFNS)

- 8,000+ employees

- \$550 mil budget

- 860,000 meals daily (pre-COVID)

* Multiple schools can exist in one building; children may attend schools in differing neighborhoods.



Service During Grab n' Go

Three Main Meal Distribution Types

- In School
- Grab-and-Go – School Meals
- Grab-and-Go – Community Meals

Other logistics

- 500 - 1300 sites
- Various hours
- Open to the public
- Halal, Kosher, and vegetarian meals were available



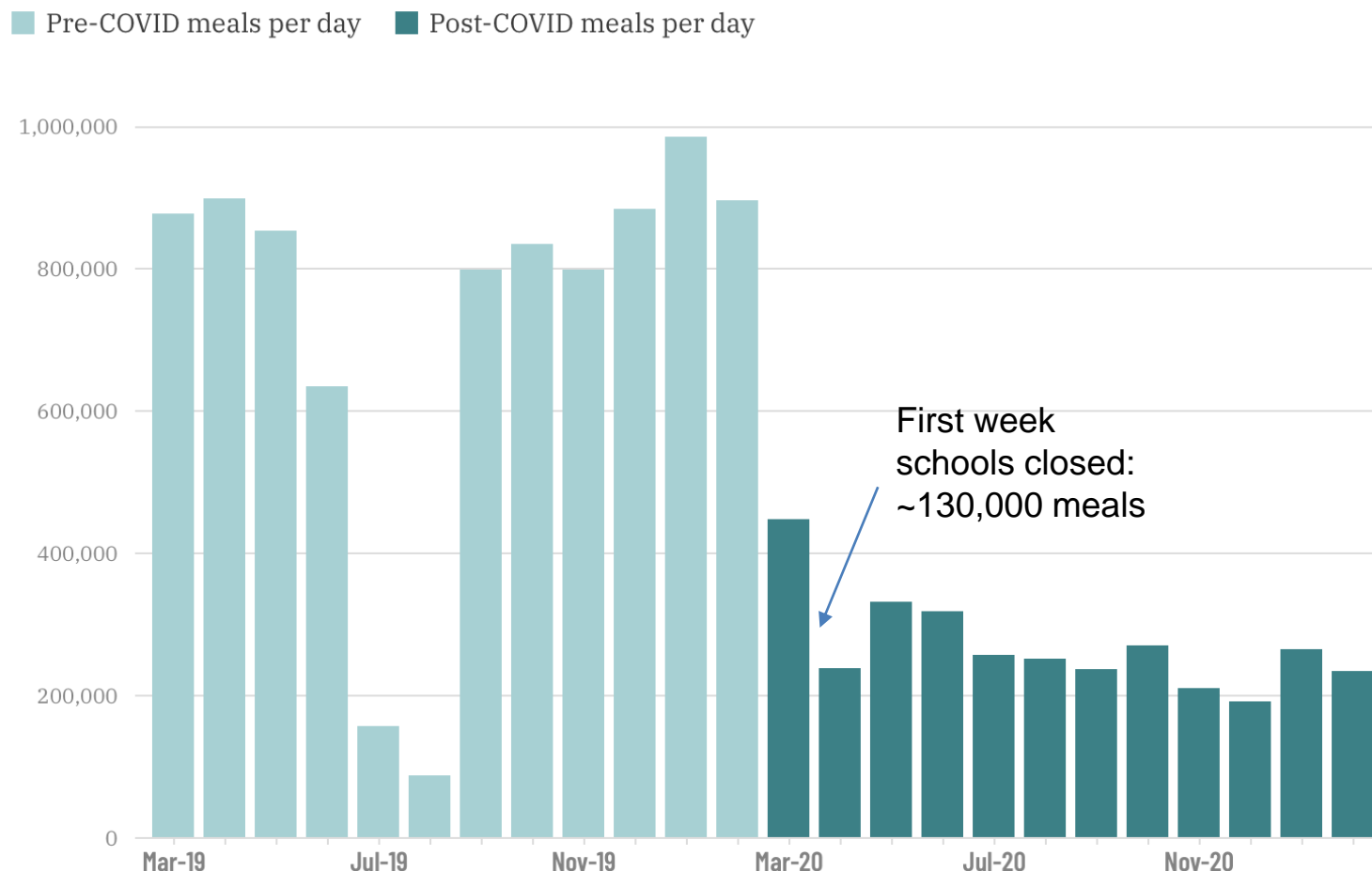
School Food Service Challenges

1. Chronically underfunded NYC schools & nationally underfunded school meals → Tough choices: Limited supervision & staffing
2. COVID challenges — supply chain & staffing & new requirements → low resilience
3. High fixed costs & low participation → reduced reimbursement
→ increased financial challenge

Overall lack of financial security → low resiliency



New York City schools distributed 60% fewer meals to children during the COVID-19 pandemic



Source: New York State Education Department

Credit: Gabrielle LaMarr LeMee / Chalkbeat

Zimmerman, A. *NYC schools served 96 million fewer meals amid the pandemic, new data show*. Chalkbeat. June 2, 2021. <https://ny.chalkbeat.org/2021/6/2/22465642/nyc-school-food-hunger-grab-go-pandemic>



Grab n' Go

Menu Examples*

Daily Options	Day	Menu
Peanut Butter & Jelly* (V) Cheese Sandwich (V) Hummus Grab & Go (V) 1% Low Fat Milk Fat Free Milk Fat Free Chocolate Milk Condiments: Ketchup/ Mustard/ Mayonnaise BBQ and Hot Sauce Fresh Fruit Dressings: Chipotle Ranch/ Balsamic Vinaigrette/ Ranch/ Asian Sesame/ Honey Mustard/ Caesar/ French/ Italian Vinaigrette	March 15 Mon	Red/ White and Green Panini (V) Ranch Carrot Snacker
	March 16, Tue	Assorted Cold Sandwiches Potato Salad Pickle Chips
	March 17, Wed	Chicken Tender Wrap Dipping Sauce Corn/ Peas and Carrots Chickpea Salad
	March 18, Thur	Assorted Cold Sandwiches Honey Sweet Potatoes Fresh New York Apples
	March 19, Fri	Assorted Grab and Go Salads Rold Gold® Heartzels

*DOE Website

Study Methods

- **Eligibility:**
 - Parent
 - 18+ years old
 - Participated in grab n' go
- **Recruitment:** Partners & FB
- **Survey & demographics**
- **One hour focus groups**
- **Compensation:** \$25 gift card
- **Focus Group Dates:** May – June 2021



Study Methods

Focus Group Questions

- What made it easy to get meals?
- What made it hard to get meals?
- What forms of communications were best?
- Were there other things available with school meals?
- How did school meals work for your family?
- Describe your experience with P-EBT
- What are your ongoing concerns?
- What one thing do you think is most important for improving family participation in school meals?



Results

- **Expressed Interest:** ~250 (96%F)
- **Screened & Eligible:** 127 (96% F) (Qualtrics)
- **All Five Boroughs**
- **Most Community School Districts:** 32/33
- **Interviewed:** 101 (96%F)
25 focus groups (~ 4 per group)



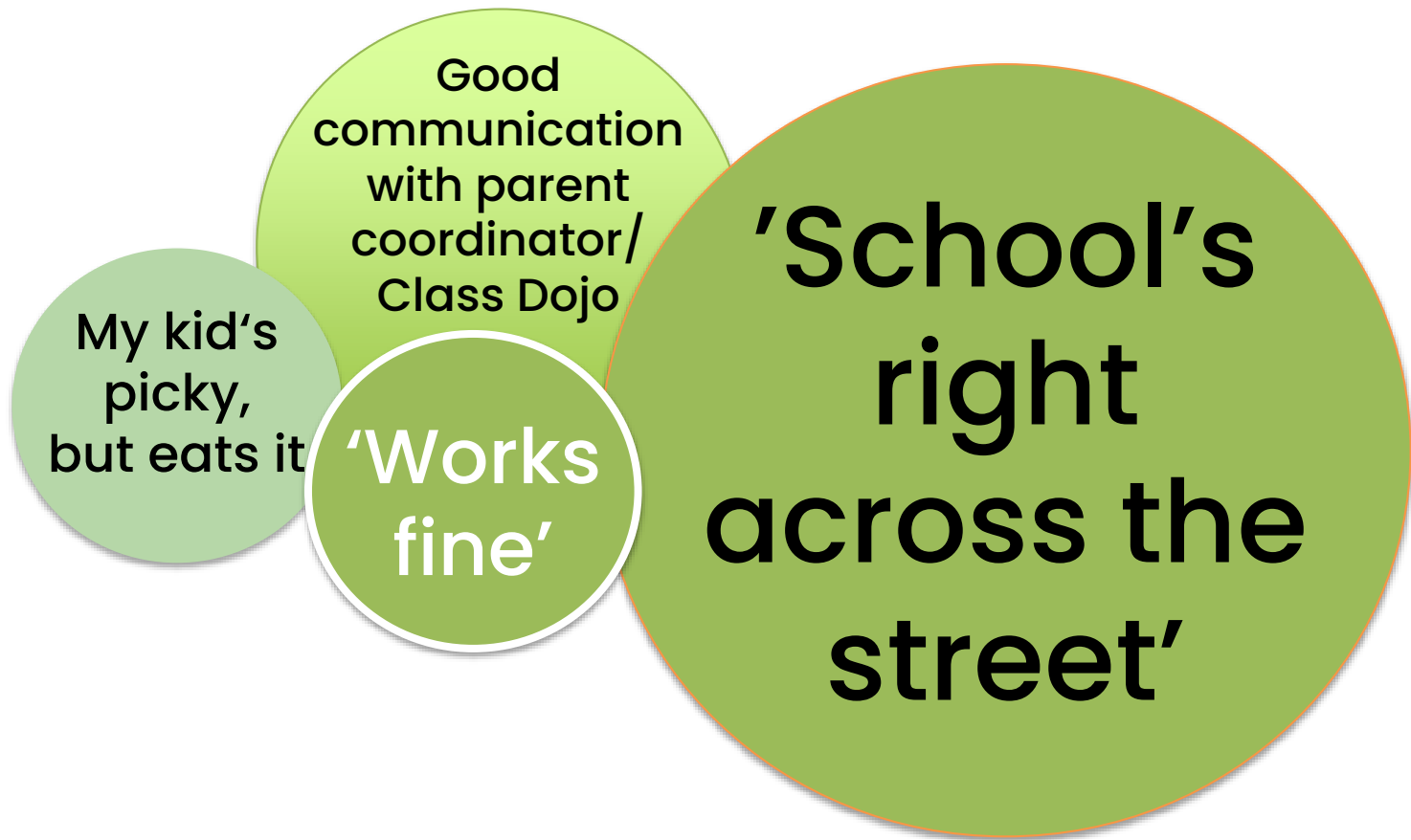
Big Picture

- Most parents expressed gratitude
- Majority faced multiple barriers
- Often reduced participation
(type of meals & number of days)

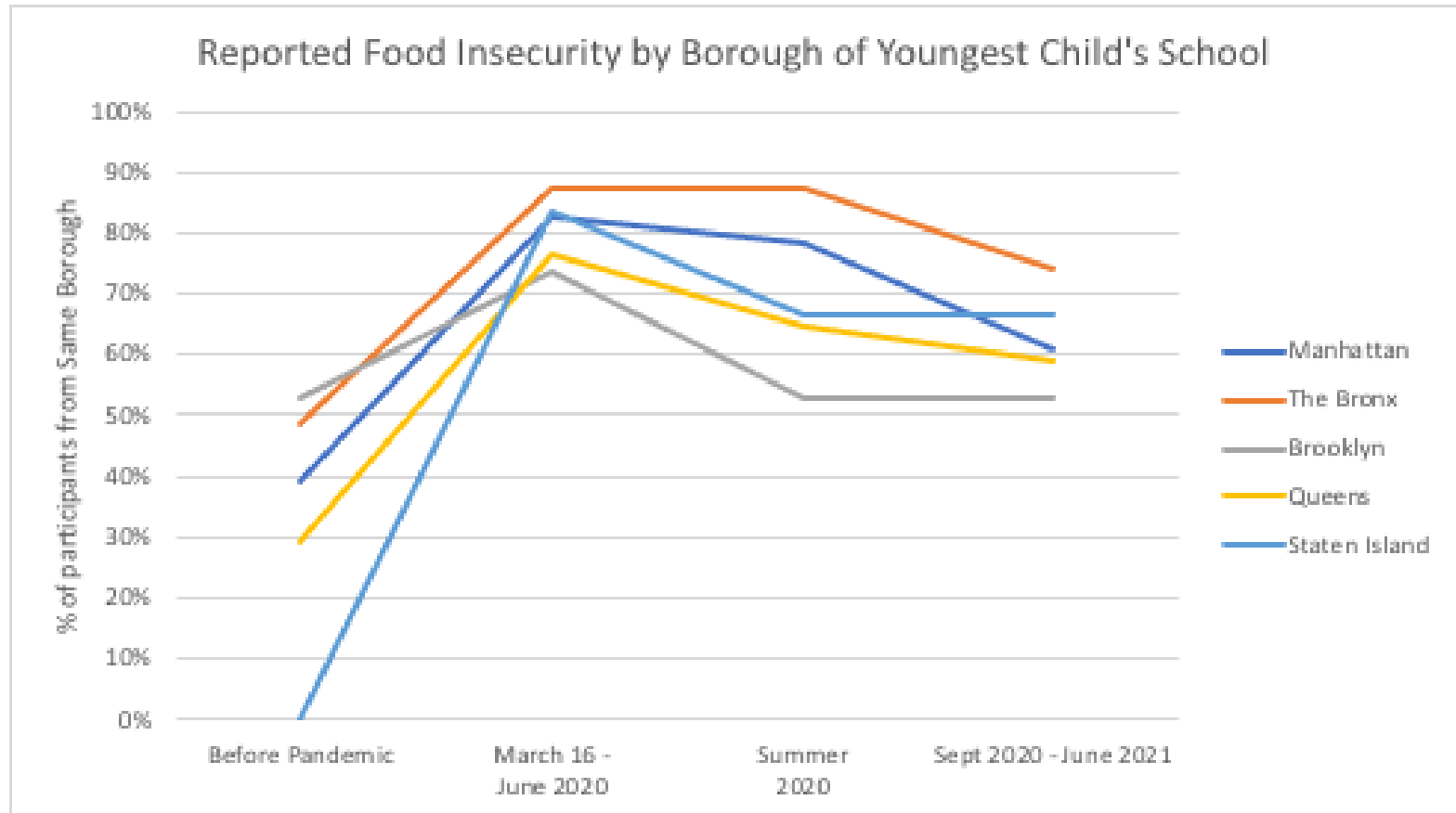


Finer Detail

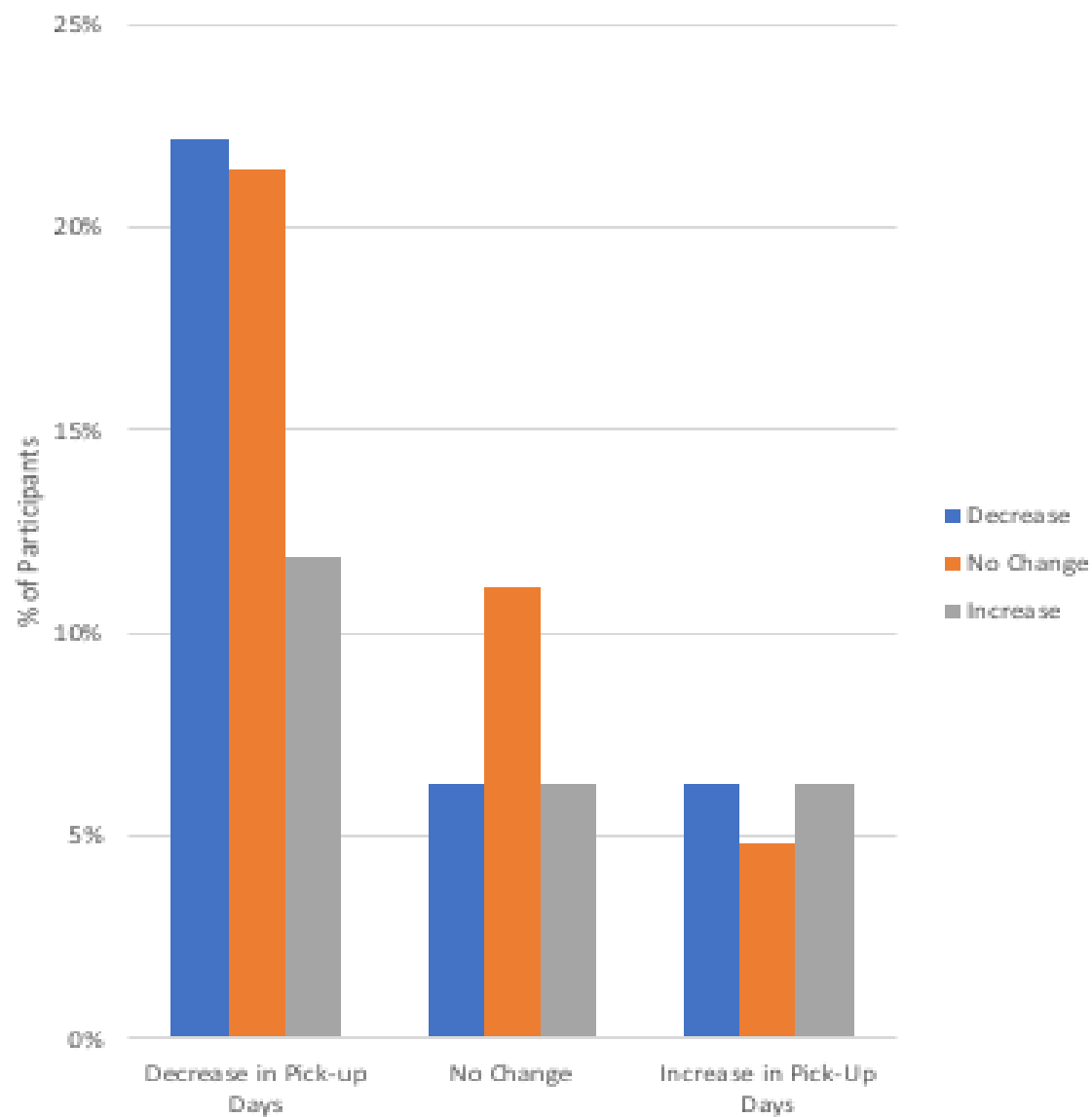
Those who continue to participate



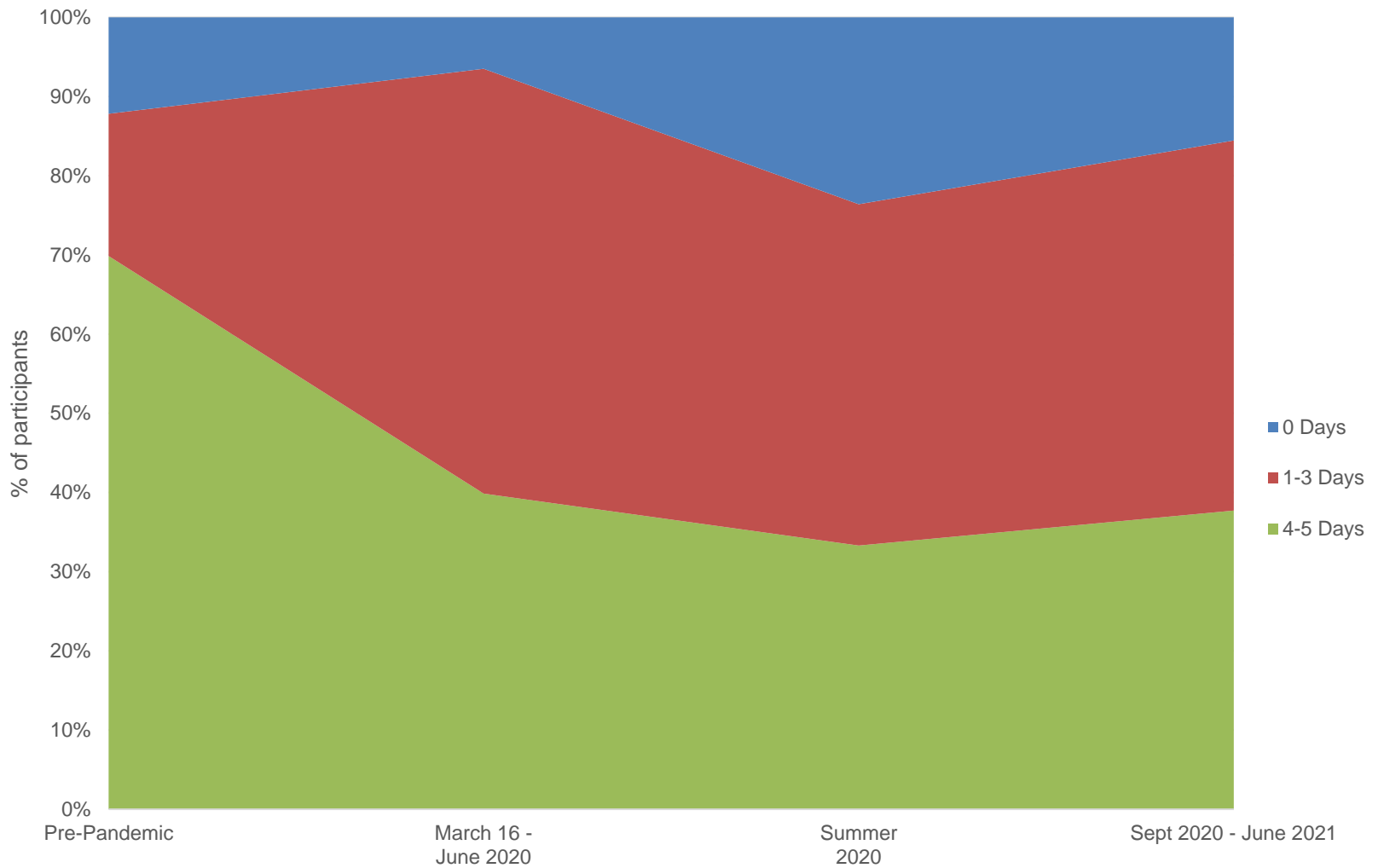
Some Quantitative Results



Changes in Youngest Child's Fruit Consumption by Changes in Number of Pick-up Days



Number of Days Families Participate in the NSLP



Participation Recommendations

Increasing Participation

1. Signage & 2-way communication (multiple languages)
2. Flexible pick-up times & welcoming locations
3. Pair with services
4. Involve & communicate with families in real-time
5. Bulk meals, home delivery, pick-up options



Satisfaction Recommendations

Increase Satisfaction

1. Add a personal touch
2. Periodic performance evaluations
3. Consistent variety (dietary/religious preferences, allergies, etc.)
4. Utilize NYC culinary expertise (appealing variety)
5. Hot grab n go meals



Key Take-Aways

1. Families participate if it's easy

- If it is easy to get → increased participation
- If kids want to eat it → increased participation
- If it becomes a pain point → reduced participation

2. Benefits & challenges of participation

- Higher participation → higher diet quality
- Higher participation → lower financial burden
- May be impacted by other factors

3. COVID meal service ↔ extra challenges

- Communications
- Higher costs, supplies, supply chain, staffing
- Other challenges



Policy Implications

1. School foods funding needs to be adequate
2. Targeted federal, state, local funding and technical support needed
3. Include student and families voices
4. Additional research needed



Questions? Comments?

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THANK YOU!

