

Messaging Guidance for an Effective School Food Campaign

Effective messaging is paramount to a campaign's success. In Summer 2020, the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) hired a strategic communications firm (Seven Letter) to test the effectiveness of school food messages with key audiences across the country. Through this exercise, Seven Letter identified which messages most resonate with voters and which are less effective. The results of these findings are summarized below.

Most Compelling Arguments for Healthier School Meals

Key messages

- **Focus on urgency and critical need for access and nutrition, particularly related to economic impact from COVID-19:** *"Ensuring students continue to have access to healthy school meals is more critical than ever. The school lunch program feeds 30 million children every day - most from families in need. And given the downturn in the economy and high rates of unemployment, school meals may be the only meals some kids get, so they should be as nutritious as possible."* **49 percent of respondents chose this as one of their top two choices for the most compelling argument (including 39 percent of Republicans, 58 percent of Democrats, and 50 percent of parents overall).**
- **Healthy meals support a good education:** *"Students are at school to learn. Studies show that kids who eat healthy meals at school perform better on standardized tests in both math and reading. Nutritious meals are critical to set kids on a path for success in the classroom and a lifetime of healthier eating habits. Our kids deserve the opportunity to succeed."* **41 percent of respondents chose this as one of their top two choices for the most compelling argument (including 42 percent of Republicans, 38 percent of Democrats, and 42 percent of parents overall).**
- **Ensure good use of taxpayer dollars:** *"When we're spending taxpayer money on kids, we should ensure we're contributing to their health - not harming it. School Nutrition programs, like the school lunch and breakfast programs, should provide good nutrition to kids."* **34 percent of respondents chose this as one of their top two choices for the most compelling argument (including 40 percent of Republicans, 28 percent of Democrats, and 35 percent of parents overall).**

Tip: While urgency is important, focus on the long-term benefits to students (not schools, teachers, or parents)

"We have the opportunity to improve our children's health for the long term. Nutritious school meals can create healthy eating habits early, reducing the negative long-term health effects and healthcare costs of diet-related disease like type 2 diabetes, heart disease, and obesity*." 60 percent of Republicans and 63 percent of Democrats found this compelling.

"By 2025, healthier school meals will decrease the number of childhood obesity cases by more than two million, saving nearly \$800 million in healthcare costs." One-third of respondents found this most compelling.

*2021 Update: While this statement tested well with participants in 2020, CSPI recognizes that mentioning obesity in this way may contribute to weight stigma. We recommend that campaigns remove the mention of obesity when using this statement in campaigns.

How to Respond to Perceived Roadblocks to Improving School Meals

The following are arguments that the general public and policymakers often raise as roadblocks to improving the nutritional quality of school meals.

Roadblock	How to Respond
Now is not the time to focus on school nutrition because of COVID-19.	The answer is a call for urgency, and to make the argument real by describing the critical nature of these meals and why it's so important that they remain nutritious: "Healthy school meals have never been more important. Because of the economic downturn, there are more children who rely on schools for their meals. Healthy school meals support kids who might not otherwise have access to nutritious food at home."
Kids might not eat healthier meals. Healthy food doesn't taste as good as the processed stuff.	CSPI suggests a focus on the evidence, such as, "Schools can do both: make meals that are both nutritious and appealing. Research shows schools with the healthiest meals have the highest participation, and kids are not throwing away more food now that meals are healthier."
It costs too much to make healthier meals.	Focus on long-term benefits and critical need for access and nutrition: "We shouldn't put a price on our kids' health and nutrition. We cannot subject them to higher rates of type-2 diabetes, heart disease and cancer. Nutritious school lunches can play a vital role in helping our kids build lifelong healthy habits, which will save money on healthcare costs in the long run."

How to Talk About the School Meal Rollbacks

Key messages

- *"Ensuring students continue to have access to healthy school meals is now more critical than ever. It's time for USDA to stop playing politics with children's health."*
- *"School meals have improved by 40% over the last several years. Instead of continuing that progress, USDA rolled back school nutrition. Our kids need healthy meals, not a return to saltier, less nutritious meals."*

Tip: Use "USDA" (U.S. Department of Agriculture) in place of "Trump"

When discussing the school meal rollbacks on the nutrition standards, it's better with the public or general audiences to use the more neutral term "USDA". Trump's name only breeds skepticism for Republicans who may otherwise be persuadable to support healthier school meals.

Most Compelling Arguments for "Universal Meals"

A majority of respondents (59 percent) support universal meals, including 72 percent of Democrats and nearly half of Republicans (48 percent). If you need to persuade someone, focus on messages that describe the direct benefits to students.

Key messages

- **Healthy habits:** *"If all students have access to nutritious food options at the critical time when they're developing their food preferences, they're more likely to develop healthy eating habits that will last a lifetime."* **47 percent of respondents** chose this as one of their top three choices for the most compelling argument (including 51 percent of Republicans, and 44 percent of Democrats).
- **Improved academic performance:** *"When all students have access to free, nutritious meals, they are nourished and ready to learn. This can help ensure all students achieve their academic potential."* **42 percent of respondents** chose this as one of their top three choices for the most compelling argument (including 46 percent of Republicans, and 42 percent of Democrats).
- **Removing stigma and shame:** *"Students who accept free or reduced-price meals are singled out and sometimes shamed in front of or by their classmates for something that's out of their control. Free meals for all children would eliminate this stigma."* **40 percent of respondents** chose this as one of their top three choices for the most compelling argument (including 37 percent of Republicans, and 44 percent of Democrats).

Use "Healthy School Meals for All" in place of "Universal Meals"

While the majority of respondents overall support a policy that ensured that all public school students receive school meals, the name "Universal Meals" ranked 13th when respondents were asked to choose a name for the policy that they liked. The top-ranked choices were "Healthy Schools, Healthy Kids" (34 percent), followed by "Healthy School Meals for All" (28 percent), and "Nutrition for All" (27 percent). "Healthy School Meals for All" is likely the best choice since it explains universal meals the most directly.

About the Methodology

Seven Letter conducted six focus groups (three "Likely Voters" and three "Opinion Elite") in San Antonio, Texas (July 8, 2020); Minneapolis, Minnesota (July 13, 2020); and Connecticut and Washington state (July 17, 2020). The 56 participants represented a mix of age ranges, employment status, and location (urban/suburban/rural). The ethnicity and ideology of each group mirrored Q4 2019 Census projections and 2016 presidential voting records, respectively for the respective state. At least three participants in each "Likely Voter" group were current or former Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) participants. Opinion Elite were defined by the following criteria: hold a four-year degree or higher, have an annual household income of at least \$75,000, engage in political activity, contact elected officials regularly, and consume news at least four times per week. The responses of this group were used as a proxy to represent the views of policymakers.

Additionally, Seven Letter recruited 1,200 likely voters for a quantitative survey between September 11-23, 2020. Likely voters were over the age of 18, absolutely certain they are registered at their current address and will register to vote, have thought about the November 2020 election, have been following the 2020 candidates at least "somewhat closely" and vote at least every four years, and voted in the last election.

For questions, please contact policy@cspinet.org.

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