Cottage Grove Research Team!

A YPAR Project in Collaboration with the No Kid Hungry South Washington County Coalition

youthprise
What is YPAR?
Youth Participatory Action Research is a youth-led research model that is informed by a social justice vision and mobilized to resist and transform social systems.

Who are we?
A team of high-schoolers from Park High School in Cottage Grove who are passionate about food justice and community!

Shayla
I’m 16 and a junior this year at Park High School. Some things I’m involved in before and after school are Key Club, National Honor Society, AVID, Student Council, Link Crew, and Homecoming Committee. I chose this research question because I thought the topic needed to be more recognized and it personally resonated with me.

Mariam
I’m a first generation Ethiopian. I’m the eldest of 5 soon to be 6 children. I’m a junior at Park High School this year. I am a Gemini. I’m involved in Social Justice Club, Speech, Mock Trial, Student Council, and Key Club. The reason why I chose this question was because this was something that has impacted me and something I’ve had experiences with my whole life. And, food insecurity and justice seems to be such a taboo topic and this was a way to break that barrier.

Hasate
I am a first generation Ethiopian. I am 10th grader at Park High School. I am in Social Justice and Key Club. I like to hang out with friends and watch the grapevine. The reason why I chose to be a part of this program is because I feel like this is a topic that we don’t really talk about in our society that much. So, I felt like it was a responsibility for me to get this message spread out in my community.

Sicilya
My name is Sicilya Knott, I’m 17 years old, and I am a senior this year at Park High School. I am involved in cross country, track, social justice club, band, AVID, YEB (youth executive board), the step team, and I am the Strawberry Fest Miss Queen Ambassador. I chose this research question because food security is something I’m very passionate about and something that I’ve come face to face with in my life. It’s something that I’d love to make a difference in because no one should question where their next meal is coming from.

Our Facilitators

Nadia
I am a Burmese and Taurus plant lover who works as a research associate and freelance photographer/designer for Youthprise. I have a degree in Child Psychology and am exploring potential graduate programs. My passions lie within youth, community, and immigrant focused work/organizing.

Irina
I am a Chicana Aries raised in Vegas and living in Minnesota. I spend my free time learning about plants and their healing properties. I lead Youthprise’s YPAR network, grants and programs. I earned an MSW from the University of Minnesota and I am a visual artist dedicated to producing affordable and accessible art.
Research Question

"How does the free and reduced meal program affect students and their families in South Washington County?"

Research Process

Choose Research Topic  
Review/Study Literature  
Create Research Design  
Collect Data  
Analyze Data  
Share Findings and Plan an Action

Critical Reflection and Community Involvement can be included at any step of the process.

Research Methods

Mixed methods:
- Surveys - in person and online
- In-depth interviews

Sample Technique:
- Convenience sampling
- Snowball sampling
- Very small sample compared to the number of students in the South Washington District

Challenges
- School was on summer break
- Summer school ended in June
- Connecting with students and their families in Woodbury
**Demographics**

**Total Interviews** - 32
- High School - 22
- Middle School - 5
- Parent/Guardians - 5

**Program Count**
- Free - 28
- Reduced-prices - 4
Data Overview

After collecting data and community analysis, we concluded on three themes and various sub-themes.

**Social Emotional Impact**
- Staff Impact on Student Experience
- Peers Impact Stigma
- Classism

**Food**
- Portions
- Quality
- Restrictions
- Frequency
- Dietary Restrictions
- Waste

**Knowledge**
- Knowledge Around Rules and Regulations
- Knowledge Based Off Experience

We held a community solutions workshop! The following pages are a summary of the analysis and solutions presented by the community and our team.
**Research Findings - Social/Emotional**

**Peers Impact Stigma**

**Analysis** - A student that receives free and reduced meals should not have to question whether someone knows that they are on this program. They shouldn’t have to question whether everyone is looking at them, and they most definitely should not have to answer to questions such as “...is it because you’re black?” Everything that peers do impact the thoughts of the students on the program, whether that be in a positive way or a negative one.

“I remember one time there was an issue with it about race, where someone was asked, ‘Do you only get free and reduced lunch because you’re black?’ Because a lot of the black kids at my school do get it, but it’s just because a lot of us have one parent or our parents don’t have very well paying jobs.” 17, African American/Black, Non-binary, Cottage Grove

**Classism**

**Analysis** - Students associated being a part of the free and reduced program with being lesser, some were called river rats, and some students of color were asked if they were on this program because they were “black.”

“They’ll say if you need to be on the free/reduced lunch thing so you pay for something, stay after. I guess that was kind of embarrassing for staying after to talk...it was embarrassing because I see that everybody around me has a lot more money and their parents are more wealthy, so I am able to see that and people kind of treat me different knowing my family struggles a bit more.” 15, Man, Biracial, Newport

“They call everyone from Newport, ‘River Rats,’ at East Ridge. So if you go to school at East Ridge, and you don’t live in Woodbury, they call you a river rat.” 14, Woman, European Descent/White, Newport

**Staff Impact on Student Experience**

**Analysis** - To go through the lunch line and have a staff member remember you by name or even just shoot you a friendly smile, it can really make a difference on how the rest of that students day goes. The same goes for if a staff member tells you that you have to go back in line to grab another item to complete the meal, it can cause feelings of embarrassment.

“In high school, the lunch ladies are also amazing, because they always have a smile. They’re always saying something kind, and they’re just incredible ladies, and I think they should get more recognition for that.” 17, Woman, African American/Black, Cottage Grove

“I mean the people in the lunch line are pretty nice and everything. The only thing is when they tell you you have to go back to complete the meal, other than those kind of experiences I’m sure are kind of awkward and it’s nothing really” 16, Woman, African American/Black, Cottage Grove

**Solutions**

**Embarrassment**

- For students that have F&R and that grab a wrong item have a go back bin so that students don’t have to walk back to put a food item away

**Staff Impact**

- During advisory hour, video of lunch servers and admin/staff explaining free and reduced meal program

**Angel Fund System**

- Have it with a pin system rather than have students fill out info in line or going to the office it hold up line and isolates them

**Anxiety that that lunch number or card won’t work or that there isn’t enough money**

- Provide a way to check your balance or receipts at the end of the week
- An app or website that lets you check balance

**River Rats Culture**

- Needs to be addressed by the Administration
- Educate people on the program to combat information and stereotypes
- Send pamphlets home so families know what they are doing
Research
Findings - Food

Portions

Analysis - We noticed that many of the interviewees are not getting enough of a food portion to last them through the school day. Being hungry affects the way students are able to learn and focus in school.

“I think the food servings for high schoolers shouldn’t be the same food servings that they serve to kindergartners... obviously a 5 year old would be eating different sized portions than a 17 year old. And, the food portions are just really, really small and they don’t really fill up people... I don’t get enough food to fill me up during the day.” 17, Woman, African American/Black, Cottage Grove

Quality

Analysis - Students believe that the quality of the fruit is not up to their expectations: from being spoiled, unhygienic or because they simply don’t like it.

“The food’s fake. I got this Teriyaki chicken thing going on and it tastes like rubber. And their orange chicken is hard. And their rice is plastic, and it’s rubbery. And their fruit and all that stuff isn’t fresh”. 14, Woman, European Descent/White, Newport

“I’ve seen hair in my food, and my friend has... a nail clipping in her food.” 14, Woman, African American/Black, Cottage Grove

Waste

Analysis - Issues with quality and dietary restrictions and forced food items affects the amount of food and waste in the garbage because kids are throwing away food that doesn’t need to be thrown away.

“Sometimes, if they make me get a fruit that I can’t have, because I’m allergic to some fruit. I think it’s kind of stupid to waste food like that, but I guess they have to do what they got to do.” 16, Biracial, Woman, Woodbury
**Frequency**

**Analysis** - Most people interviewed get lunch everyday and those who knew about the breakfast option sometimes did and sometimes didn’t. A majority of the students that did not eat breakfast was because it was served too early and didn’t have enough time to get through the line.

“I get lunch and try to get breakfast everyday. Sometimes I can't get breakfast because it is too early” 14, Woman, European Descent, Newport

**Solutions**

**Quality**
- Consistency of the quality of food
- Storage solutions that keep produce fresh
- Using steamed fresh veggies vs. canned
- Rice is often hard and undercooked
- Partner with community gardens
- Partner with local grocery stores
- Indoor gardening/aquaponics that can be used for lunch and giving family food during breaks

**Frequency**
- Grab and go breakfast and meals for those that are running late and don’t have time to eat
- Granola bar option or another small portion option for breakfast to make it quick for those who don’t have time
- More time during lunch, or make lines during lunch more efficient

**Dietary Restrictions**

**Analysis** - For some interviewees, the portion isn’t the problem, but the options that don’t cater to their dietary restrictions. We also noticed that a lot of our interviewees throw food away, typically the fruit or the milk because it’s a required item that is forced on the student even if they have an allergy or dietary restriction which prevents them from eating/drinking it.

“There are times where I’m fasting in my religion and everything so when we’re fasting we have to be vegan for... usually long periods of time, so there are periods during the school year where I can’t get anything from lunch really because nothing’s vegan” 16, Woman, African American/Black, Cottage Grove

**Portions**
- Increase size of portion as students get older
- Allow for everyone to get free fruit and veggies if still hungry
- Create a share table

**Restrictions**
- Monthly pass for an item from the a la carte
- Free food packs to take home after school
- Water is not included in F&R please offer disposable cups or a reusable water bottle for students to be able to drink water during lunch and school day.

**Dietary Restrictions**
- More vegetarian options
- Vegan options
- Removable cup of cheese in salads
Research Findings - Knowledge

Knowledge Around Rules and Regulations

Analysis - Many of the interviewees that we talked to had no idea of the rules and regulations of the free and reduced meal program. This is very important because many of them had no idea of what they could eat.

“...’cause they don’t go into detail. They just say “Oh you can get a free meal and you can get a free breakfast” and that’s it. They don’t say what exactly you can get” 16, Woman, Asian Pacific Islander, Cottage Grove

“I’ve kind of just ... I’ve always kind of been a rule follower so I didn’t really know the rules but I kind of guessed them. I was like, “Okay, yeah. I’ll just go along with this” 17, Nonbinary, African American/Black, Cottage Grove

Knowledge Based Off Experience

Analysis - We saw many cases where they figured out the rules by the experiences that they had. Some of those experiences were done with a room of people watching and hearing what was going down. These experiences could lead to people not only being embarrassed but also getting into a situation where they owe money and are not able to eat lunch.

“I’m not really informed about what I can and can’t get so then I would go to the line and everything, and I would be about to enter in the middle of the- putting in my pin and everything and afterward they’re like, oh you have to go get a fruit or veggie to complete your meal, and then I feel awkward because I have to go back and then I see people staring at me because I’m wasting their time and everything. So that’s ... I don’t like that, that’s kind of awkward and everything and I’m like, ugh” 16, Woman, African American/Black, Cottage Grove

Solutions

- Encourage all families to turn in Educational Benefit Applications
- Strengthen communication, education, and marketing around benefits
- Make pamphlets and flyers available to at lunch carts, front desk, and online
  - Email blast families and students
- Include Apps in iPads for students that have info and applications in other languages
  - Revamp websites to have an easy link to benefits
- Include meal info, guidelines, and information around benefits program on school website
Future Considerations

To Study Further

- Compare the social emotional impacts around hunger and food programs experienced by those in Minneapolis and St. Paul vs. those living in suburbs.

- Evaluation and feedback from community attending No Kid Hungry food events

Our Partners & Sponsors

A Special Thank You To

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CESkoolie
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Social Justice Club
Ms. Kai
Park Grove Library
HyVee Cottage Grove
Youthprise YPAR Network & Cottage Grove Research Team

For more information or if interested in YPAR, visit www.youthprise.org for more!