How to Communicate the Benefits of Values-Aligned Universal Meals

Tested Narratives and Messaging from National Farm to School Network’s “Who’s At the Table?” Campaign

Background

At the National Farm to School Network, we believe that we need a system of school meals that serves all kids and values the people who get it to the table. But what are the best ways to communicate how our shared values can create healthy school meals for all kids and advocate for the policies to do that?

We answered these questions by conducting a series of message and narrative testing with various audiences—the results from this message testing were used to inform the strategy for our Who’s at the Table? school meals campaign, which provides tools to communicate how our shared community values have the potential to radically transform our food system for the better.

Core Narrative

The following emerged as the core narrative that resonated with testing participants. The intrinsic values embedded in this final recommended narrative include community, being part of nature, healthy environment, knowledge, total wellbeing, and peaceful world.

“Schools are the best places to spark thinking about how we all live together in communities. Farm-to-school meals and accompanying activities provide opportunities to understand how the food on our plates affects us. From the wellbeing that good nutrition gives our kids, to the broader worlds of local economies, chronic disease prevention, climate impacts, and more! Even better, when our kids learn about the hard working farmers, fishers, and ranchers that feed us, schools become places that help us connect—as parents, students, teachers, and neighbors—to the land and to one another.”
The results also demonstrated the following as areas of broad agreement across audiences:

1. Supporting small farms, customizing meals to local cultural traditions, and learning about where food comes from
2. Teaching children practical knowledge and life skills through food
3. Care and inclusivity for students and community members evokes warm, positive feelings
4. People love images of people, and bright, high-contrast colors connote a friendly inviting atmosphere
5. Simple and specific language and actions are key. Common vocab used by participants: inclusive, welcoming, care, equality, community, small town feel, healthy/unhealthy

Messaging Insights and Considerations

- Many participants expressed interest in the path that food would take from the farm to the student’s plate.
- The majority of participants thought it was critical for kids to know where their food comes from.
- It’s important to clarify that these would be small, local farm providers.
- There’s a need for clear, concise messaging that can resonate with children.
- Language or messaging that may be understood by campaign advocates may be received as academic, abstract, or overly conceptual to large swaths of the public.
- Directly address main areas of skepticism: 1) kids not wanting fresh meals; 2) higher cost; 3) the impossibility of changing the system due to perceived bureaucratic, political, or other logistical challenges.
"Values-Aligned?"

- Using the phrase “values-aligned school lunches” may not be clear unless there are shared definitions and consensus in these values.
- The values need to be defined upfront and be broadly resonant (like community care) to move the needle on community-led advocacy in various settings.

About the Test Design

In March 2022, National Farm to School Network worked with Next Big Thing to test a series of draft campaign core narratives. The messaging tests took place in two rounds of testing:

The first round of testing featured 49 participants, ages 19-73, from over 30 states, and across a mix of ethnicities and political, social, economic, educational, professional, and cultural backgrounds. Participants were recruited through national market research platform dscout’s recruitment tool. The resulting sample aimed to be representative of the U.S. general population.

The second round of testing was recruited from NFSN’s stakeholder groups, and featured 40 participants, ages 15-71, from 24 states and with a diverse range of ethnicities and backgrounds. The following stakeholder categories were represented:

- Parents
- Students
- Farmers, food producers, and food workers
- Teachers, principals, school food service staff, and other school administrators
- Policymakers

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