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## Engaged Scholarship Pilot Grant 2016-17

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### Regional Need

The Fort Atkinson school district, like other districts in the region, has experienced a drop-off in student participation in its free and reduced-price lunch program from elementary school to high school. This drop-off is of concern for two main reasons:

1. It is likely that some high school students who are actually eligible to participate in the free and reduced-price lunch program are not participating, and so they may not be receiving benefits to which they are entitled and as a result may not be eating nutritionally complete meals at lunchtime.
2. Reductions in the number of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch can affect a school's federal funding to assist low-income students (Title I) and at a time of declining fiscal support for education, school districts are interested in additional sources of revenue such as those available from the federal government.

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### Community-Based Research

A number of research activities were carried out as part of this community-based project:

- A literature review of the academic research on student participation in free and reduced-price lunch
- An anonymous online survey of high school seniors with questions about the district's school lunch program
- Data analysis of redacted free and reduced-price lunch applications for the 2015-16 and 2016-17 school years

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### Results and Recommendations

There was strong support for free and reduced-price lunch among Fort Atkinson's high school students, and so social stigma was unlikely to be a reason for reduced participation even though it had been identified by the literature review as a potential cause. Analysis of survey results suggested the lunch itself and the manner in which a la carte items were offered might be dampening participation, which led to a recommendation for the district to consider the quality of its hot lunch. A primary finding of the project, based on analysis of applications, was that many families which qualified for free or reduced-price lunch in 2015-16 but did not qualify in 2016-17 had not filled out applications in 2016-17 (for other families that no longer qualified it was due to an increase in family income or a change in the number of household members). For districts experiencing this problem it is recommended that they encourage families of students to apply for free or reduced-price lunch every year, even if families are unsure if they will qualify.



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### Jeff Zaspel, Superintendent

Administrator of a district with 2,900 students in four elementary schools, a middle school, and high school

### Tom Dembski, Student Nutrition

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