# **Engaged Scholarship Pilot Grant 2016-17**

### **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 reducedprice lunch can affect a school's federal funding to assist lowincome 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.

### **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

### **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 reducedprice lunch every year, even if families are unsure if they will qualify.

### SCHOOL DISTRICT OF







FORT • ATKINSON

### Jonah Ralston, Principal Investigator

Assistant professor and coordinator of UW-Whitewater's public policy and administration program

### Nate Kelty, Student Researcher

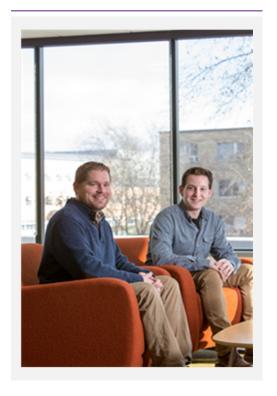
**UW-Whitewater undergraduate** student majoring in political science

## 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

Director of Fort Atkinson's school nutrition program



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