

# **The Impact of Healthy Menu Choices on School Nutrition Programs**



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**National Food Service Management Institute  
The University of Mississippi**

**Building the Future Through Child Nutrition**

The National Food Service Management Institute was authorized by Congress in 1989 and established in 1990 at The University of Mississippi in Oxford and is operated in collaboration with The University of Southern Mississippi in Hattiesburg. The Institute operates under a grant agreement with the United States Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service.

**PURPOSE**

The purpose of the National Food Service Management Institute is to improve the operation of child nutrition programs through research, education and training, and information dissemination.

**MISSION**

The mission of the National Food Service Management Institute is to provide information and services that promote the continuous improvement of child nutrition programs.

**VISION**

The vision of the National Food Service Management Institute is to be the leader in providing education, research, and resources to promote excellence in child nutrition programs.

**CONTACT INFORMATION**

**Headquarters**

**Administrative Division**

The University of Mississippi

Phone: 800-321-3054

Fax: 800-321-3061

[www.nfsmi.org](http://www.nfsmi.org)

**Education and Training Division**

**Information Services Division**

The University of Mississippi

6 Jeanette Phillips Drive

P.O. Drawer 188

University, MS 38677-0188

**Applied Research Division**

The University of Southern Mississippi

118 College Drive #5060

Hattiesburg, MS 39406-0001

Phone: 601-266-5773

Fax: 888-262-9631



# **Acknowledgments**

**WRITTEN AND DEVELOPED BY**

**Alexandra Castillo, MPH  
Researcher**

**Mary Frances Nettles, PhD, RD  
Director**

**Applied Research Division  
The University of Southern Mississippi**

**NFSMI EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR  
Katie Wilson, PhD, SNS**

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## THE IMPACT OF HEALTHY MENU CHOICES ON SCHOOL NUTRITION PROGRAMS

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The prevalence of childhood obesity has doubled within the past twenty years. Approximately one-third of our nation's children are either overweight or obese thereby increasing their risk for chronic diseases such as heart disease and type 2 diabetes (Briefel, Crepinsek, Cabli, Wilson, & Gleason, 2009; Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2009; Vanderhook, 2009). The United States (US) Surgeon General estimates that 70% of obese children and adolescents will grow to become obese adults and be susceptible to serious health problems. This current obesity trend indicates that the life expectancy in the US will start to decline and the present generation of children will live shorter lives than their parents for the first time in history (Snelling & Kennard, 2009).

In 2001, *Call to Action to Prevent and Decrease Overweight and Obesity* was released by the US Surgeon General with the intention of improving the health of children by bringing about changes in schools. This report identifies schools as an important environment to begin improving access to healthy foods, providing opportunities for physical activity, and providing children with both nutrition and physical education (Moag-Stahlberg, Howley, & Luscri, 2008). On June 30, 2004, the Child Nutrition and Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) Reauthorization Act of 2004 was signed into law requiring every school district that participates in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) to establish a local wellness policy (Public Law 108-265). The objective of the wellness policy is to promote student health, reduce childhood obesity, and prevent nutrition-related chronic diseases (Black, 2005).

Since the implementation of wellness policies, school nutrition (SN) programs are offering healthier menu choices such as whole-wheat, reduced-fat cheese pizza, a variety of fruits and vegetables, hummus and pita bread, fat-free flavored milk, and low-fat yogurt. However, SN programs providing healthier menu options are faced with challenges due to budget constraints, staff shortages, staff training, menu modifications, administrative burden, and lack of acceptance by school staff, students, and parents (Bartholomew & Jowers, 2006; Patel et al., 2009).

The purpose of this research project was to explore the impact of healthy menu choices on SN programs participating in the NSLP. Two expert panel sessions were conducted with 21 SN professionals to assist with the development of two comprehensive survey instruments, designed to assess the practices, perceptions, barriers, and training/resources related to providing healthy menu choices in SN programs. The qualitative information from both expert panels was used to develop two surveys, one for SN directors and an abbreviated survey for SN managers. A national review panel evaluated both draft surveys to assess the content, scales, readability, clarity, and flow of the instruments. Surveys were mailed to a random sample of 700 SN directors stratified by the seven United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) regions. An abbreviated survey for a SN manager was enclosed in each of the survey packets. Statistical analyses included descriptive statistics, exploratory principal components factor analysis, Cronbach's alpha, independent sample t-tests, and one-way ANOVA with Tukey's post hoc tests.

Results from the study indicated there were 10 factors that contribute to providing healthy menu choices among SN directors which included promotional practices, student benefits, operational practices, wellness policy practices, student focused practices, partnerships and resources, and positive program environment. All ten factors had significant differences

when compared to SN directors who purchase fresh fruits and vegetables from local farmers. This finding suggests these SN directors are more likely to be providing healthy menu choices and thus improving the wellness of students and increasing support for school wellness. Also, six factors had significant differences when compared to SN directors who have received the USDA HealthierUS School Challenge (HUSSC) award. This finding suggests these SN directors are more likely to be providing healthy menu choices and thus increasing stakeholder's support and improving operational, promotional, and wellness efforts in schools.

Barriers identified by SN directors included increases in food, production, and labor costs, recipe development, and students' perception. The resource materials most often used to develop and incorporate healthy menu choices were state agency resources, USDA resources, and networking with other school districts. SN directors identified state agency training, School Nutrition Association (SNA) conferences, and SNA webinars as the trainings they most often attended. Additionally, results indicated there were four factors that contribute to providing healthy menu choices among SN managers which included student focused practices, healthy environment, and operational practices. Barriers identified by SN managers included food, production, and labor costs, knowledge and skill of SN staff to prepare healthy menu choices, and SN staff's willingness to change. SN managers identified training by SN director, state agency training, and SNA conference as the trainings they most often attended.

These are all important factors for SN professionals, either directors or managers, who are considering developing and incorporating healthy menu choices in their SN programs. SN professionals can also use this information to assess their school district's local wellness policy, menus, promotional efforts, and nutrition education with the intention of investigating the possibility of attaining the USDA HUSSC award.