



Perceptions and Practices of Incorporating Student-Centered
Menu Items in School Meals

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Perceptions and Practices of Incorporating Student-Centered Menu Items in School Meals

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Improve the operation of child nutrition programs through research, education and training, and information dissemination.

VISION

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MISSION

Provide relevant research-based information and services that advance the continuous improvement of child nutrition programs.

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PERCEPTIONS AND PRACTICES OF INCORPORATING STUDENT-CENTERED MENU ITEMS IN SCHOOL MEALS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Student-centered menu planning prioritizes learners' preferences, nutritional needs, traditional and community relevance, and engagement in the design of school nutrition program offerings. In educational settings, school nutrition program menus that align with student preferences and incorporate active student input are associated with higher participation in meal programs and increased consumption. This research assessed school nutrition professionals' perceptions, best practices, and strategies for incorporating students' voices into school-based menu development and modification.

This study used a participatory research model, engaging school nutrition professionals and administrators, United States Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Services (USDA) representatives, and State agency staff as both expert panelists and survey participants to assess student engagement practices in school menu planning. Three subject matter experts also provided feedback and insight to the researcher at each phase of the study. The researcher conducted a literature review to develop expert panel questions to elicit more input from school nutrition professionals who actively engage students in menu planning. Ten expert panel members responded to the qualitative questionnaire. The researcher summarized the data and drafted survey questions for a national online survey to identify perceptions, strategies, and practices for selecting and incorporating student-preferred menu items that reflect their input into school nutrition programs.

The draft survey was reviewed by 15 school nutrition program administrators and staff and revised for distribution as an online assessment tool. Of the 627 survey participants who read the survey consent form, 522 school nutrition professionals agreed to participate. They provided feedback on challenges, student engagement strategies, and their perceptions of the importance of including students' voices in menu planning. This study's results highlight the best practices and strategies that school nutrition professionals implement to create and modify school menus that reflect students' preferences. Many of the food service efforts and activities align with successful strategies found in existing studies. More studies evaluating students' selection, consumption, and acceptability of menu changes based on their suggestions are needed.



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