The Ability of Menu Planning Approaches and Credentialing of Menu Planners to Meet SMI Nutrient Guidelines for National School Lunches and Breakfasts

PURPOSE
The purpose of the study was to define the characteristics of schools, menu planning methods used, and the credentials of menu planners that were best able to meet School Meal Initiative (SMI) standards within the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program.

METHODS
• The current study used SNDA-Ill data gathered during the 2004-2005 school year from a nationally representative sample of 398 public schools in the 48 contiguous states.
• Questionnaires answered by the School Food Authorities (SFA) in the representative sample of schools provided the data for this investigation.
• School districts in the study used three menu planning methods:
  - Traditional food-based menu planning (TMP);
  - Enhanced food-based menu planning (EMP); and
  - Nutrient Standard Menu Planning (NSMP).

RESULTS
• The TMP was used most often in 193 schools serving 49.6% of the students nationally.
• Menu planning was reported to occur at the district level in 117 of 129 districts (90.7%).
• Registered Dietitians planned the menus for 39% of the schools (136 of 357 of reporting schools).
• Individuals possessing certification by the School Nutrition Association (SNA) planned 11% of the school menus (39 of 357 schools).
• TMP met the breakfast calorie standard more often (93% versus 84% for EMP and 75% for NSMP) than the other methods. However, this resulted in minimal differences in calories served between the methods.
• There were no differences in the percentage of students meeting the SMI calorie standards for lunch served between the three menu planning methods. However, the NSMP resulted in a higher percent of schools meeting the standard for calories taken by students (p<0.05).
• The major difference noted between the planning methods was in saturated fat served and taken by students.
  - The NSMP met the SMI standard for saturated fat served and taken of less than 10% calories from saturated fat more often than the other methods in both middle school and high school (served 94% and 76% taken in middle schools and 88% served and 82% taken in high schools).
• Menus planned by Registered Dietitians (RD) and school nutrition professionals with SNA certification met the Vitamin A SMI standard for lunch that was offered to students 92% of the time while menus planned by professionals with other credentials met the Vitamin A SMI standard 77% of the time (p<0.05).
• Elementary schools where menu planning was done by RDs and SNA certified professionals also met the SMI standard for lunch offered more often for total fat and saturated fat.

APPLICATION TO CHILD NUTRITION PROFESSIONALS
• None of the three menu planning methods stood out as being excellent methods of meeting all the SMI standards for the School Breakfast Program or the National School Lunch Program.
• There are many variables that may influence effectiveness of menu planning to meet SMI standards including the training of the menu planner.