



Determining Factors Impacting the Decision of Middle/Junior High School Students to Participate in the National School Lunch Program



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PURPOSE

The purpose of this study was to identify issues associated with the participation and satisfaction of middle/junior high school students in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP).

METHOD

- Focus group methodology was used to investigate the perceptions of middle/junior high school students regarding service and satisfaction with the school nutrition (SN) program and barriers with participation in the NSLP.
- The focus group discussions with SN professionals, which included SN directors and middle/junior high school SN managers, explored these same issues from their perspective.
- Four school districts in different USDA regions were selected to host focus group discussions. Following the transcription of focus group discussions, researchers summarized and grouped responses into emerging themes.

RESULTS

- Results identified five primary reasons middle/junior high school students eat school lunch: food preference, hungry, no choice, convenience, and socialize.
- Focus group responses indicated four primary reasons middle/junior high school students do not eat school lunch: food quality, customer service, sanitation, and long lines.
- SN professionals suggested the primary reasons students do not choose to eat school lunch were students want to socialize, peer pressure/cool factor, and long lines.
- Responses from both focus group discussions revealed there is a disconnect between the perceptions of middle/junior high school students and SN professionals regarding students' school lunch experiences.

APPLICATIONS

- Participation in the NSLP begins to decline at the middle/junior high school level. Focusing on a customer service oriented approach by involving students can assist SN professionals in developing strategies to increase customer satisfaction and retain these customers once they enter high school.
- Results from this study will guide the development of a customer service survey to assess the perceptions of middle/junior high school students and measure factors affecting participation in and satisfaction with the NSLP.

FOCUS GROUP QUOTES

MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS

What do you like about your school lunch?
"It's nice to have hot food not just sandwiches"
"There is a lot of it! Surprisingly, there is a lot of food"

What don't you like about your school lunch?
"Repeating foods, need to change it"
"Lines are long and there aren't a lot of choices left"

What would make you want to eat in the cafeteria?
"Nicer lunch ladies"
"Make the cafeteria pretty, it's so plain"

SN PROFESSIONALS

What do you like best about the school lunch you serve?
"We offer plenty of fruits and veggies"
"We serve a very healthy lunch"

In your opinion, why do students choose not to eat school lunches?
"The lines are long"
"They want to socialize"

What advice would you give SN professionals trying to improve participation in middle schools?
"Talk to students to get their input"
"Treat students the way you want to be treated"