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

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"