

Practices and Perceptions of School Nutrition Programs Toward Obtaining the HealthierUS School Challenge Award



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Purpose

The purpose of this study is to explore the impact of obtaining the HealthierUS School Challenge (HUSCC) award on school nutrition (SN) programs participating in the National School Lunch Program.

Method

- Site visits to SN programs that received HUSCC awards.
- An expert panel of SN professionals identified the impact of obtaining the HUSCC award on SN programs.
- Information gathered from the expert panel was used to develop a national survey.
- An online survey was sent to SN directors who had successfully applied for and received HUSCC awards (N=266).

Results

- One hundred thirty-nine survey recipients responded to the survey for a response rate of 52.2%.
- Majority of participants reported receiving a Bronze award (56.8%).
- Approximately one third of respondents (34.5%) reported it taking between two to four months to complete the HUSCC application process, while 26.6% reported it taking between five to seven months to complete.

HUSCC Award Practices

- SN directors (93.5%) and SN staff (79.1%) were most frequently involved in preparing for a HUSCC award.
- The most prevalent roles of SN directors in the HUSCC award process were “coordinating with staff and administration” (93.5%) and “leading efforts to meet HUSCC criteria” (79.1%).
- Most school districts developed a team to assist in the HUSCC application process (69.8%)
- Most HUSCC teams included a SN director (92.8%), SN staff (80.4%), physical education teacher (68.0%), and principal (55.7%).
- Nutrition education was most often offered to students during core curriculum classes (74.6%) and physical education classes (71.7%).
- The most common responses received by SN programs as a result of achieving HUSCC award status were “pride from principals/administrators” (79.0%) and “validation and recognition of school foodservice” (74.6%).

Perceptions of School Nutrition Directors

- 43.2% of respondents reported they would not be applying for a higher level HUSCC award, and the most frequent reasons given were “currently have the highest level award” (40.9%), “student participation” (38.6%), and “physical education” (22.7%).
- When asked if they would be applying for a HUSCC award at the middle or high school level, 43.9% of respondents said no; the most common reasons given were “à la carte foods” (45.7%) and “student participation” (32.6%).
- Barriers to obtaining the HUSCC award with the highest mean ratings were:
 - Increase in cost (3.1 ± 0.7)
 - Application process (3.1 ± 0.7)
 - Time constraints (2.9 ± 0.8)
 - Competitive foods (2.9 ± 0.8)

Scale: 4, strongly agree to 1, strongly disagree

Top Five Perceptions Toward Obtaining the HUSCC Award Status

Increases recognition among other SN programs

Improves the perception of school lunch

Enhances school pride

Increases positive feedback from the community

Improves stakeholder support

Application

Achieving a HUSCC award positively affects school districts by:

- increasing recognition among other SN programs,
- improving perception of school lunch,
- validating and recognizing school foodservice,
- enhancing school pride,
- making principals/administrators proud,
- raising awareness of the SN program in the community,
- increasing positive feedback from the community,
- improving stakeholder support,
- increasing SN staff morale,
- empowering SN staff, and
- improving communication with stakeholders.

Recommendations for HUSCC Applicants:

- ✓ Apply for bronze first, taking small steps toward success
- ✓ Do not try to achieve HUSCC awards for every school in district at once; Apply for one or a few schools first
- ✓ Expect the application process to take two to seven months and plan accordingly
- ✓ Create a HUSCC team with the SN director, SN staff, the principal, and the physical education teacher as the primary/base members
- ✓ As SN director, plan to be the HUSCC team leader
- ✓ When looking for venues to provide nutrition education consider core curriculum classes, physical education classes, and testing activities
- ✓ When promoting HUSCC award status, consider banners in the school, local media, board meetings, websites, menus, and district awards ceremonies