

The School Lunch Experience Survey: Identifying Factors Influencing the Satisfaction of High School Students Participating in the National School Lunch Program



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PURPOSE

The purpose of this project was to develop a survey that identifies factors influencing the overall dining experience of high school students participating in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP).

METHOD

- Conducted focus groups with high school students from four USDA regions.
- Focus group discussions collapsed into eight meaningful categories:
 - Choices/Variety
 - Taste
 - Appearance
 - Customer service environment
 - Quality
 - Nutrition
 - Value
- A survey instrument was drafted to explore factors that impact the dining experience and satisfaction of high school students participating in the NSLP.
- Two rounds of pilots tests were performed and the survey was administered to 1281 high school students from 19 high schools (15 school districts) across the seven USDA regions.
- Exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses were used to statistically collapse responses into meaningful categories reflecting factors affecting the students' school lunch experiences.

RESULTS

SELECTED DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION ON PARTICIPATING HIGH SCHOOLS

| | |
|--|---------------|
| Number of high schools surveyed | 19 |
| Number of surveys administered | 1281 |
| Number of usable surveys | 1221 |
| Number of students who ate school lunch 3 or more times per week | 818 |
| Range (min, max) | Min Max |
| Enrollment | 616 3200 |
| Average Daily Attendance (ADA) | 83% 98% |
| Average Daily Participation (ADP) | 13% 74% |
| Percent of students eligible | |
| Free | 6% 73% |
| Reduced Price | 1% 12% |
| ADP per benefit category | |
| Free | 8% 81% |
| Reduced Price | 2% 35% |
| Paid | 6% 90% |
| Lunch Price | \$1.25 \$3.13 |



Results showed that 21 key indicators impacting the dining experience of high school students factor into three dimensions, namely food quality, program reliability, and staff responsiveness and empathy. Multiple regression analysis showed food quality had the greatest effect on the students' evaluation of their overall dining experience. Among the food quality indicators, "the food looks appealing", "the food tastes good", and "food is cooked to the proper doneness" have the greatest effects on the students' evaluation of overall food quality. Similarly, "the staff is friendly" and "the staff look like they enjoy their work" had the greatest effects on the students' evaluation of the overall service quality.

Key Factors that Affect the Students' School Lunch Experience (Generated by Factor Analysis)

■ Food Quality (9 items, $\alpha=.90$)

Examples:

- The food served is fresh.
- The food looks appealing.
- There is a variety of food items that I can choose from.

■ Program Reliability (7 items, $\alpha=.77$)

Examples:

- The amount of food I get is enough.
- The serving portions are consistent.
- There is enough seating space in the dining area.

■ Staff Responsiveness and Empathy (5 items, $\alpha=.75$)

Examples:

- The staff look like they enjoy their work.
- The service is friendly.
- I know that I can offer suggestions.

APPLICATIONS

- Implementation of the survey will aid SN professionals in establishing performance benchmarks and improving their programs based on customer feedback.
- The results of the survey can help SN directors focus improvement efforts on key factors that can influence the students' perception of and satisfaction with their school lunch experience.

Next Steps

- Development of a survey guide to provide step-by-step instructions on planning, administering, and interpreting the results of the School Lunch Experience Survey.
- Compilation of strategies for addressing unsatisfactory scores and development of a Best Practice Resource for increasing student satisfaction at the high school level.