



# Insight

A Publication for Child Nutrition Professionals from the National Food Service Management Institute — Winter 2004

## NFSMI TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE SERVICE

### INTRODUCTION

In May 2002, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) granted funding for a Technical Assistance Service (TAS) to be managed by the National Food Service Management Institute (NFSMI). The service was intended to provide on-site technical assistance to local School Food Authorities (SFAs) on a no-fee basis and to promote the use of USDA's *Changing the Scene: Improving the School Nutrition Environment* kit by the participating SFAs and their school districts.

NFSMI contracted with consultants who had specialized knowledge, technical skills, and SFA experience to provide technical assistance as requested by the participating SFA. In addition to hands-on assistance, consultants provided an orientation to *Changing the Scene: Improving the School Nutrition Environment*.

This report presents findings from a telephone survey of site contacts and a review of reports and action plans submitted to NFSMI by the consultants after TAS visits for all 34 SFAs participating from June 2002 through December 2003. This evaluation was designed to answer three main evaluation questions:

- Is the service being delivered as intended?
- Is the service beneficial to the participating SFAs?
- What might be done to strengthen the service?

### METHODOLOGY

Telephone survey interviews were conducted with representatives from each of the 34 SFAs (100% response) participating in TAS from June 2002 through December 2003. The purpose of the telephone survey interview was to determine the effectiveness of the on-site visits from the SFAs' point-of-view and to identify changes that might make the service more helpful. Interviews were also intended to determine how the SFA contact learned about and decided to apply for the service and to elicit the contact person's thoughts about the:

- Logistics of the visits
- Effectiveness of the consultants providing the technical assistance
- Effectiveness of the orientation to the *Changing the Scene: Improving the School Nutrition Environment* kit
- Benefits of the assistance provided to the SFA
- Action plans developed in conjunction with the TAS visits

The telephone survey interview was designed by an independent evaluation consultant under contract with NFSMI. The structured interviews consisted of a series of open-ended questions, as well as probes. This format allowed the interviewer to build on language and phrases used by contact persons and permitted the interviewees to take the lead during the interview. Consequently, not all questions were asked of all interviewees.

Interviews varied from 10 to 55 minutes. Responses to the open-ended questions were analyzed using qualitative research methods, primarily thematic sorts. In addition to the telephone interviews, post-visit reports and action plans submitted by TAS consultants for each of the 34 SFAs were standardized and reviewed to document the *Changing the Scene: Improving the School Nutrition Environment* orientations and to develop an overview of the action plans.

### REGIONS SERVED

Figure 1 shows the number of SFAs receiving on-site technical assistance in each of the seven USDA regions. A wide variety of SFAs were served. Of the 34 SFAs, two were charter schools serving an Islamic population, two were residential schools, and two identified themselves as Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) schools. Some SFAs were located in populated urban areas, and others were in small, rural areas.

### APPLICATION AND SELECTION PROCESS

Interviewees were asked how they became aware of the TAS program. Of the 32 who could recall, 27 credited their state or regional Child Nutrition Program (CNP) office. Four contacts said they learned about the program from NFSMI. Three of these recalled hearing

about it during a teleconference, conference workshop, or reading about it in a mailing. One contact made a direct request to NFSMI, and two contacts recalled learning about TAS from a national professional organization publication or meeting. Two contacts said they found out about TAS from either the USDA Web site or a USDA mailing. Contact persons were asked their position title and who made the application for TAS. Twenty-five contact people identified themselves as the food service director or manager. Six were administrators with some responsibility for the SFA. In three cases, the state CNP representative made the TAS application for the SFA. SFA contacts mentioned a variety of factors that contributed to the decision to apply as shown in Table 1.

**Figure 1** Number of SFAs Served By TAS in Each USDA Region (N=34)



Consultants were selected based on their qualifications and competencies in one or more of the following nine areas:

- Customer Service
- Financial Management and Recordkeeping
- Food Production
- Procurement
- Program Accountability
- Menu Planning
- Personnel Management
- Marketing
- Nutrition Education

Consultants were matched to SFAs based on the experience and competencies in the areas of need as identified by the SFAs. In most cases, one consultant made the site visits, but in large school districts, teams of two or three consultants were assigned. With one exception, at least two on-site visits were made by each TAS consultant.

To determine the effectiveness of the TAS, contact persons were asked to evaluate the visit in general and to respond to follow-up questions. They were also asked the following questions:

- Was the service helpful?
- Did they get help in the areas they wanted help?
- Were the ideas suggested practical or applicable?
- Would they recommend the service to others?
- Suggestions for improving the service
- Need for this type of service

**Table 1** Reasons for Requesting Technical Assistance

Reason Cited	Number of Times Mentioned* (N=37)
Reputation of NFSMI	6
New to job or position: professional development establish credibility	5 1
Scarcity of resources for getting assistance	5
TAS was grant-funded or free	4
A difficult year as director or manager	3
Encouragement from others (State, staff or administrator)	3
Wanted new ideas, growth opportunity	3
Need for a morale boost	2
Upcoming review	2
Involvement in State policymaking	1
Ease of application	1
Positive experience with pilot program	1

\* Respondents sometimes cited more than one reason.

### CONSULTANT SELECTION

Sixteen consultants contracted by NFSMI provided the on-site technical assistance to participating SFAs.

### RESULTS

Each contact person was asked to rate the overall experience. Of the thirty-three SFA contact persons whose comments addressed this question, 29 indicated the visit was very positive or positive; two indicated it was "somewhat positive;" and two indicated the TAS visit was a negative experience.

Twenty-four (72%) of the respondents said the visit was very helpful, seven indicated it was helpful, and three indicated it was somewhat helpful. No contact person said the visit was not helpful. Seventy-one percent (26) of interviewees indicated they received help in the requested areas. Of these, four mentioned the help was not as detailed or as extensive as they would have liked. Five contact persons said they got help in most of the areas and three said they got help in some of the requested areas. One SFA contact, whose state CNP representative arranged the TAS and informed her that a consultant would be coming, mentioned receiving help in areas she did not believe were needed. Eighty-two percent (27) of the interviewees indicated they felt the suggestions were practical or applicable. Of the 33 contact persons responding, 30 (91%) would recommend the service. Two respondents indicated they would not recommend the consultants who visited their SFAs. One was not sure if she would recommend the service. When asked for

suggestions for improving the service, one interviewee suggested more use of examples, two suggested clearer itineraries or advance schedules, two mentioned getting the reports or final copies of the reports or action plans back more quickly, one suggested that the timelines on the action plans be extended, and one SFA contact thought there should not be so much emphasis on *Changing the Scene: Improving the School Nutrition Environment* and felt that any orientation activity should be optional and the sole decision of the SFA.

### EVALUATING THE ORIENTATION TO CHANGING THE SCENE: IMPROVING THE SCHOOL NUTRITION ENVIRONMENT

One of the goals of the TAS was to promote the use of the USDA *Changing the Scene: Improving the School Nutrition Environment* kit. Designed to promote healthy school environments, the kit includes a video, brochure, PowerPoint presentation, transparencies, CD-ROM, and information brief. The kit also includes a support materials booklet with scripts for easy use by school community members. To encourage use of the kit and implementation of strategies to improve the school nutrition environment, TAS consultants were expected to conduct an orientation to the goals and the components of the *Changing the Scene: Improving the School Nutrition Environment* kit. TAS consultants worked with the SFA contact persons to determine what was appropriate and feasible for each specific SFA. Consultants' reports were reviewed and analyzed to identify specific orientation activities that were included during site visits. To determine the effectiveness of the *Changing the Scene: Improving the School Nutrition Environment* orientation activities, SFA contacts were asked which components of the kit they had used and how the components were implemented in either the school or school district.

#### Activities

While different approaches were taken in providing the *Changing the Scene: Improving the School Nutrition Environment* orientation, each SFA contact reported participating in some type of activity regarding the kit during the site visit. Table 2 lists the frequency of each type of orientation activity.

**Table 2 Orientation Activities for Changing the Scene: Improving the School Nutrition Environment as Reported by Consultants and TAS Contact Person**

Changing the Scene: Improving the School Nutrition Environment Orientation Activity	Number of Times Mentioned*
One-on-one meeting (SFA Manager/Director)	15
Group discussion	11
Presentation	10
One-on-one meeting (District or School Administrator)	5
Training	1
Existing committee attendance	1

\*Total number of activities is 43. Two activities were conducted at six SFAs; three activities were conducted at one SFA.

### Participants

Table 3 lists the various participants and the number of times they were included in the *Changing the Scene: Improving the School Nutrition Environment* orientation activities conducted by the TAS consultant. The most frequently cited participant was the SFA contact person (typically school food service directors or managers). Administrators were the second most frequently cited participants, a finding that suggests TAS consultants were diligent in efforts to develop administrative awareness of and support for *Changing the Scene*. Administrators from 11 of the SFAs attended a presentation or other group *Changing the Scene* activity. In addition, seven administrators participated in one-on-one meetings with the TAS consultants. The third most frequent participants were SFA staff members. Other participants included vendors serving a charter school and a community official. SFA contact persons' comments and TAS consultants' reports suggested that turnout for orientation presentations was generally lower than expected.

### Implementation

Consultants took a variety of approaches to involve SFA contact persons in thinking about how they could incorporate the ideas in the *Changing the Scene: Improving the School Nutrition Environment* kit into their SFAs and schools. Two of the presentations, for example, included small group activities intended to help participants develop strategies or action plans for their schools. In addition, each of the small group discussions and kit reviews appeared to include opportunities for brainstorming ways to incorporate the ideas and use of *Changing the Scene: Improving the School Nutrition Environment*. One contact person observed that after the TAS orientation she ordered four more kits to be used throughout the school district. Fourteen of the SFA contacts developed action plans involving *Changing the Scene: Improving the School Nutrition Environment*, and four SFA contacts noted it as a resource to be used in other action plans. In addition, 12 SFA contact persons indicated schools within their district were using the kit prior to the TAS on-site visit. Eleven of these schools or districts were part of a larger grant program such as Team Nutrition, Kids First, or a *Changing the Scene* School. The nine SFA contact persons who reported that they were already using the kit indicated they were still using it. Two contact persons indicated they had used the kit for training employees. Nine contacts noted that they had plans in the immediate future to use the kit; nine suggested that they would probably use the kit sometime. Five SFA contact persons indicated that they would probably not use the kit.

### DEVELOPMENT OF ACTION PLANS

Each TAS consultation included the development of action plans, the result of a joint effort between the SFA and the TAS consultant. Consultants were expected to facilitate the process, resulting in a blueprint for reaching goals as determined by the SFA. In addition, the plans included steps to be taken, resources to be used, people to be involved, and dates for

**Table 3** *Participants in the Changing the Scene Orientation Activities*

Participants	Number of Times Mentioned (N=34)
SFA Director or Manager	33
Administrator (including Principals, CEO)	17
School Food Service Staff	15
Health or Physical Education Teachers	5
PTO	3
School Board Members	3
School Counselor	2
Other Teachers	1
Vendors	1
Curriculum Specialist	1
District Health Commissioner	1
School Health and Wellness Coordinator	1
Vendors	1
Satellite Outreach Coordinator	1

accomplishment. A total of 147 action plans were developed. The number of plans developed for each SFA ranged from two to eleven; typically three or four plans were developed for each SFA visited. Fifty-two percent of the action plans (77) targeted the school food service. Twenty-five percent of plans (38) targeted students; ten percent (15) targeted the entire school community; ten (14) percent targeted SFA staff, and two percent (3) targeted faculty or community health persons.

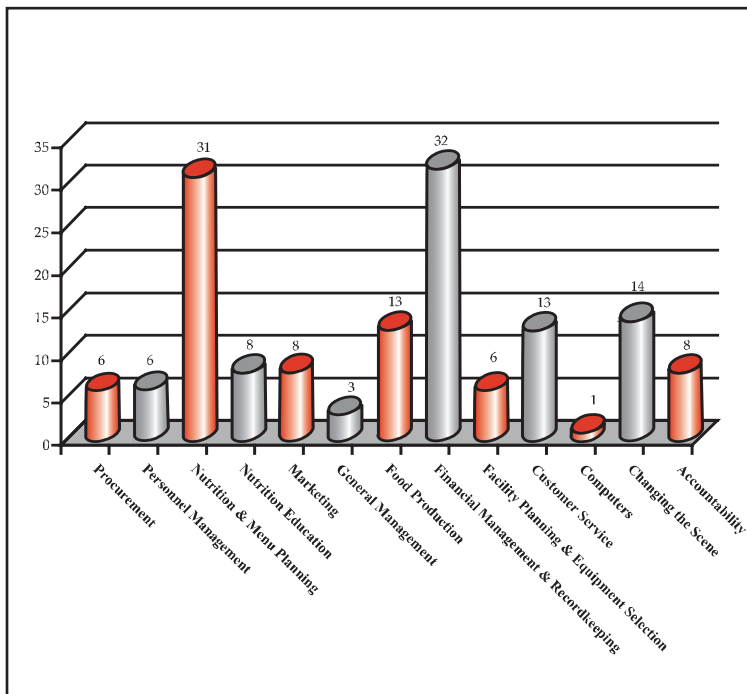
To develop an understanding of the areas targeted by the plans, each action plan was standardized and reviewed in conjunction with the reports submitted by TAS consultants. Following the review, the action plans were sorted into categories. These categories were derived from program documentation provided by NFSMI and from the publication, *Competencies, Knowledge, and Skill Statements for District School Nutrition Directors/Supervisors*. Figure 2 details the areas targeted by the 147 action plans. Five categories accounted for 70% of the action plans, and two of these (Financial

Management & Record-keeping and Nutrition & Menu Planning) accounted for almost 43% of the action plans.

To help determine the effectiveness of the action planning process, SFA contact persons were asked to comment on the development of the action plans, the timelines, the feasibility of the action plans developed, and progress on the action plans. Of the 31 SFA contact persons who commented, 29 (94%) of the interviewees described their role in the action planning process as active and in full partnership with the TAS consultant. In contrast, two SFA contact persons (6%) used the phrase “just going along with it” to describe their more passive role in the action planning process.

Eighty-three percent (26) of the contact persons indicated that the action plans were realistic or seemed realistic at the time. Nine percent (3) indicated that the plans were for the most part realistic, and six percent (2) said the action plans were not realistic. When asked if the plans were being used, 29% of the 31 contact persons who responded to this question indicated they were either using or planning to use the plans.

**Figure 2** *Groups Targeted by Action Plans (N=147)*



## PROGRAM IMPACT

### OVERALL BENEFITS

SFA contact persons were asked to detail what, if any, benefits resulted from the TAS. All 34 contact persons responded to this question. Moreover, although the follow-up interviews typically occurred within four weeks or less of the visit, 24 contacts said their SFA had already seen benefits from TAS. Many indicated they expected to see additional benefits in the future. Nine of the contact persons indicated it was too soon to tell, but that they expected benefits. Only one contact person was unsure regarding benefits from TAS. Both tangible and intangible benefits were noted. Table 4 lists all improvements reported and the number of SFA contact persons who reported them. The most frequently noted tangible benefits were

**Table 4** *Improvements Noted By SFA at the Time of the Follow-Up Interviews*

Improvements	Number of Times Mentioned (N=34)
More Efficient Food Production	7
Increased Morale or Other Intangible Benefits	7
Increased Participation	6
Cost Savings	5
Serving Better Products	4
Serving More Nutritious Food	3
Improved Overall Financial Status	3
Improved Food Safety	3
Lowered Food Costs	3
Preparation for State Review	3
Increased Management Capacity	3
Now Meeting USDA Guidelines	2
Improved Accountability	2
Vendor or Contractor Improvements	2
Better Portion Control	2
Better Use of Commodities	2
Improved Customer Relations	2
Better Use of Nutrient Analysis	2
Better Understanding of Cycle Menus	2
Broadened Menu Base	2
Improvements In Food Storage	1
Less Food Waste	1
Better Record-Keeping System	1
Jump-Start Nu-Menus	1
USDA Credibility	1
Improvement In Catering Service	1

increased efficiency in food production/preparation (7 comments) and increased participation in school meal programs (6 comments).

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### ROLE OF STATE OR REGIONAL CHILD NUTRITION PROGRAM AND SECONDARY SOURCES IN RAISING AWARENESS OF THE TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE SERVICE

Most interviewees learned about the TAS from the state or regional Child Nutrition Program offices. Twenty-seven of 32 (84%) interviewees' responses to a question about how they found out about the service mentioned a state or regional CNP office. Clearly, the CNP contacts are the key resource in marketing the TAS and other similar services. An initial "heads up" from colleagues, NFSMI mailings, and other professional sources helped lay the groundwork for formal notification from the state Child Nutrition Program offices.

### PRE-SITE VISIT COMMUNICATION AND PREPARATION

Good pre-site visit communication set the stage for a successful site visit. Interviewees credited their ability to complete needed activities within allotted time to good pre-site visit communication and preparation. Moreover, TAS consultants provided additional valuable insights into what might be included on pre-site communication checklists.

### VALUE OF THE CONSULTANTS' HANDS-ON EXPERIENCE

The hands-on experience of consultants with school food service appeared to have been the single most important factor in a site visit's success. Consultants were able to establish credibility based on real-world experience. Most consultants were praised for the depth of their experience and the practicality of their approach.

One of the few sources of tension during the site visit was that some consultants' recommendations did not reflect the operational realities facing the SFA (unions, lack of data, lack of administrative support, or an organizational structure inconsistent with what is considered by professionals as best practices). Again, the ability of the consultant to tailor recommendations to the specific circumstances facing an SFA was important to success.

## IMPORTANT RIPPLE EFFECTS (BENEFITS) FROM THE TAS

While some of the participating schools in the TAS are very small (e.g. charter schools), there were ripple benefits from the program that extended beyond the participating school or school district. For example, one site visit included a vendor. This vendor, in turn, communicated lessons learned to the other 12 schools served by the vendor.

## CREDIBILITY BROUGHT TO THE TAS BY NFSMI

NFSMI brought credibility to the service. It was an important part of interviewees' decisions to select the TAS. The TAS program reinforced the value of the NFSMI brand.

## NEED FOR THE TAS

The TAS is clearly needed. Many interviewees described sense of isolation that they frequently feel as food service directors. The TAS was a unique opportunity for school food service directors to receive assistance customized to their needs. Indeed, the more tailored the site visit was to a site contact's needs, the more successful it appeared to be.

## STAT FACTS

**91%** Would recommend the consultants to a colleague

**91%** Rated visits either very helpful or helpful

**88%** Rated the visits either very positive or positive

**71%** Identified benefits or improvements already occurring

## For More Information

### Resources:

Rainville, A. J. & Carr, D. H. (2001). *Competencies, knowledge, and skill statements for district school nutrition directors/supervisors*. University, MS: National Food Service Management Institute.

U.S. Department of Agriculture. (2000). *Changing the scene: Improving the school nutrition environment*. Alexandria, VA: Author.



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### **NATIONAL FOOD SERVICE MANAGEMENT INSTITUTE**

**The University of Mississippi**

Telephone: 800-321-3054

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**AUTHORS:** Jean A. Hovey, MPA, and Beverly Cross. Ms. Hovey is an independent evaluation consultant in Richmond, VA. Ms. Cross is Coordinator of Site Training at the National Food Service Management Institute, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

**EDITOR:** Denise M. Brown, PhD, RD. Dr. Brown is the Director at the National Food Service Management Institute, Applied Research Division at The University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg, MS.

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