



Got Milk? Exploring Students' Milk Preferences and Perceptions

INTRODUCTION

Many studies confirm milk consumption is beneficial for children. Even though milk contains many nutrients needed to support children's growth and development, past research has indicated a decline in milk consumption.

The school food environment has the ability to affect children's eating patterns, provide essential nutrients, and to deliver nutrition education. However, there is limited research on students' milk preferences and selection in schools. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to identify elementary and middle school/junior high school students' perceptions, preferences, and consumption of flavored and unflavored milk. This study also included school nutrition (SN) professionals' perceptions of operational issues associated with milk, students' milk consumption, and related behaviors.

METHOD

- An embedded, replicable, multiple-cases, case study design was the foundation for the research project.
- Case study protocol and instruments were developed, piloted, and revised by the Institute of Child Nutrition, Applied Research Division.
- Six research teams were selected and trained on data collection, data analysis, protocol, and reporting of data.
- Each team conducted four to six site visits in two United States Department of Agriculture regions to facilitate at least three focus groups with:
 - Elementary students in grades 3-5;
 - Middle/junior high school students in grades 6-8; and
 - School nutrition professionals.
- Researchers observed students' milk consumption and related behaviors during a meal period at site visits in 26 school districts.
- Data were analyzed to identify top themes and quotes about SN professionals and students' perceptions related to milk.

SELECTED RESULTS

- Elementary and middle/junior high school students recognize the importance of drinking milk.
- Though chocolate is the preferred flavor, students want a variety of flavors.
- Students with bagged lunches typically do not buy milk or bring milk from home.
- Students perceive the milk at school does not taste like the milk served at home.
- Students perceived the use of “milk” posters with famous athletes, actors, and singers as out-of-date and unrealistic.
- Students reported that adults need to model drinking milk to encourage milk consumption.

Barriers to drinking milk

- The milk tastes watery.
- The milk tastes like the carton.
- Milk at school does not taste like milk from the store.

Ideas to help students drink milk

- Offer larger cartons.
- Offer more flavors – Students suggest a flavor bar.
- Offer incentives to drink milk.
- Keep the milk cold.

For more information,
you can download the original technical report here:
<http://www.nfsmi.org/ResourceOverview.aspx?ID=591>

CONTACT US:

Institute of Child Nutrition
Applied Research Division
The University of Southern Mississippi
118 College Drive #5060
Hattiesburg, MS 39406
1-800-321-3054 • 601-261-2480

Visit us on the web at
www.theicn.org

Suggested Practices for School Nutrition Professionals

Purchasing

- Cut and adjust orders based on snow days.
- Cycle the menu – Offer cereal as a choice at breakfast to boost milk consumption, or offer “milk pairings” with meals.

Receiving

- Check for dates and carton cleanliness.

Storing

- Keep milk cold. Monitor temperatures in coolers, maintain temperature charts, and keep case lids closed between meal periods.

Serving

- Conduct trash audits, and control case rotation.
- Consider having a “milk tasting” to introduce flavors.
- Consider having milk at all points of service.
- Consider milk vending or other incentives to encourage milk consumption.



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