Data-Driven Decision Making:

Guide for School Nutrition Programs

National Food Service Management Institute
Applied Research Division • The University of Southern Mississippi

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The University of Mississippi

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National Food Service Management Institute
The University of Mississippi

Building the Future Through Child Nutrition

The National Food Service Management Institute was authorized by Congress in 1989 and established in 1990 at The University of Mississippi in Oxford and is operated in collaboration with The University of Southern Mississippi in Hattiesburg. The Institute operates under a grant agreement with the United States Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service.

Purpose
The purpose of the National Food Service Management Institute is to improve the operation of child nutrition programs through research, education and training, and information dissemination.

Mission
The mission of the National Food Service Management Institute is to provide information and services that promote the continuous improvement of child nutrition programs.

Vision
The vision of the National Food Service Management Institute is to be the leader in providing education, research, and resources to promote excellence in child nutrition programs.

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Introduction

The complexity of administering school nutrition (SN) programs is escalating. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) has established new meal planning standards; the cost of food is continuously rising; school enrollments across the United States continue to increase, and many SN directors are incorporating operational initiatives such as "breakfast-to-go" or "breakfast-in-the-classroom," in-school catering, the summer foodservice program, the HealthierUS School Challenge, chefs in schools, Farm-to-School, and school gardens, (School Nutrition Operations Report (2011). Meanwhile, SN directors are expected to operate their SN programs as successful businesses within their school districts. Therefore, a SN director must be a savvy business person and become skilled at strategic planning and critical thinking. Effective SN directors should know how to collect, analyze, interpret, and utilize data to make decisions that drive their programs. School nutrition programs create massive amounts of data. From addressing late lunch lines, to staffing issues, to justifications for major purchases, having the right amount and type of data is critical for making operational decisions in SN programs. Understanding the importance of objective information collected in a systematic process and analyzed appropriately can allow SN directors to make informed data driven decisions in their operations.

This resource is divided into two sections and was developed with the involvement of SN professionals. The first section, *Setting the Stage for Data-Driven Decision Making*, includes the following information:

- A definition of data-driven decision making
- Uses of data-driven decision making in SN programs
- Fundamental concepts essential to effective data-driven decision making
- Examples of continuous improvement models for problem solving
- Application of data-driven decision making to SN programs
  - Points to consider before beginning
  - Identification of data collection methods
  - Analyzing and interpreting the results
  - Benchmarking for school nutrition programs
  - Developing action plans and communicating findings

The purpose of the second section is to describe one method of gathering information that can be used by SN directors to aid in decision making. *Using Focus Groups to Gather Information for Decision Making* covers topics, such as:

- When to use focus groups
- Planning focus groups
- Conducting focus groups
- Analyzing the focus group results
- Communicating the focus group results

School nutrition professionals can use this resource to:

- Identify data they are already collecting in the SN program,
- Identify types of issues that can be addressed using data, and
- Identify strategies to communicate the findings.

SECTION I

Setting the Stage for Data-Driven Decision Making

Section I: Setting the Stage for Data-Driven Decision Making

Data-Driven Decision Making: Defined
Many school districts across the country have formalized the collection and analysis of data to aid in making more informed decisions regarding student performance and other district issues. This process has been termed "data-driven decision making" by the education community. In its most basic form, data-driven decision making is about:

- collecting appropriate and credible data
- analyzing the data in a meaningful way
- giving the data to the people who need it
- using the data to increase school district efficiencies and improve student achievement
- communicating data-driven decisions to key stakeholders

Uses of Data-Driven Decision Making
School districts are using data-driven decision making because they need reliable, current, and credible information to:

- assess the existing and future needs of students, parents, staff and community
- determine if goals are being met
- evaluate how well programs and activities meet stakeholders' needs
- guide curriculum development and revision
- identify the root causes of problems
- judge the effectiveness of reform efforts
- know which programs are producing the results the school district wants
- meet state and federal requirements
- monitor students' progress in meeting standards
- promote accountability
- select education programs and expertise that will solve problems and position the school district for the future

Fundamental Concepts of Data-Driven Decision Making
Some of the fundamental concepts that are essential to effective data-driven decision making include:

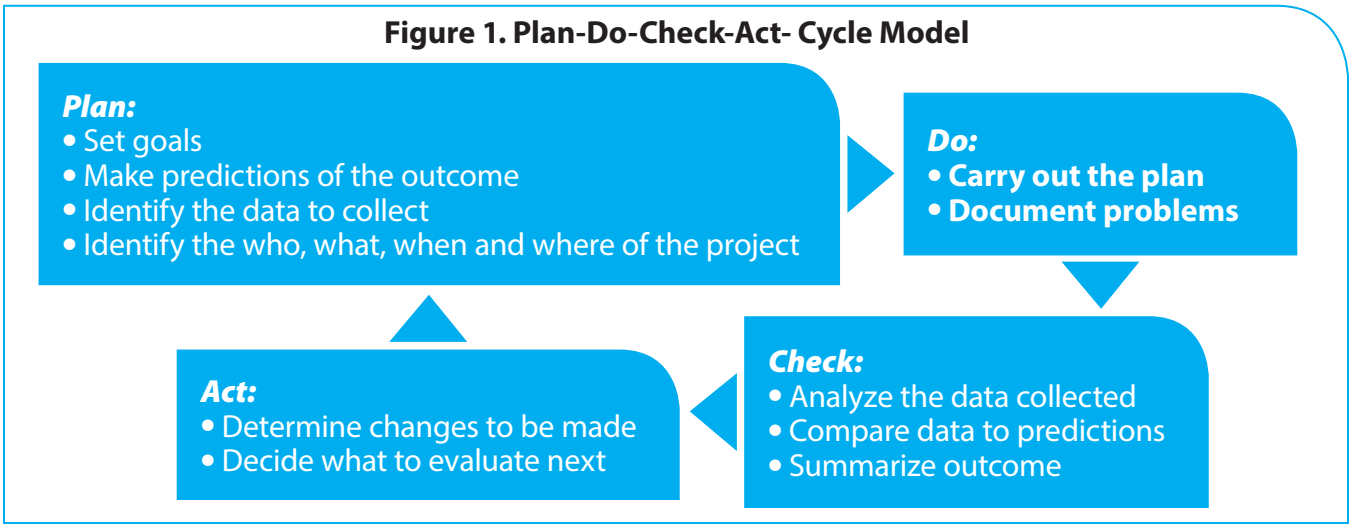
- A proactive leader who understands data-driven decision making, champions the cause, helps others realize the impact of data analysis, and understands that the entire process takes time.
- Data are gathered to answer questions.
- A data-driven organization continuously asks, "Why?" and supplies answers with factual information rather than opinions.
- A data-driven organization is one that uses information, collected formally or informally, every step along the way.
- Data-driven decision making is a process and a commitment to continuous improvement.
- The purpose is not to confirm the administration's preconceived opinions but to allow the process to reveal ideas and direction.
- Data comes from a variety of sources and a variety of data are needed to gain a full understanding of the issues.
- Data-driven decision making can make staff more accountable.
- Data should be examined over time. Data gathered at one point in time is not enough to serve as the basis for a long-term critical decision.
- Time is required to collect, analyze, synthesize, and interpret data.
- Communicating both the purpose and results of data-driven decisions to all stakeholders is critical to sustain improvement efforts.

Data-Driven Decision Making and Continuous Quality Improvement
Data-driven decision making is modeled on successful programs from industry, such as Total Quality Management, Organizational Learning, and Continuous Quality Improvement. These programs emphasize that organizational improvement is enhanced by responsiveness to various types of data. Data are integral to continuous quality improvement as the data patterns reveal strengths and weaknesses in the system and provide excellent direction. There are various approaches and tools available to assist school districts in their problem solving process, such as:

- Plan-Do-Check-Act Cycle Model (see Figure 1)
- Run Charts (see Figure 2)

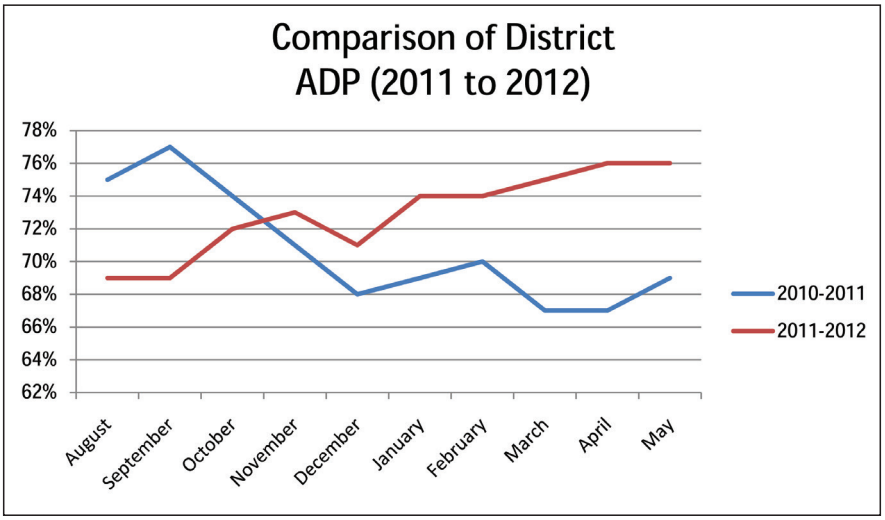
Additionally, the National Food Service Management Institute, Applied Research Division (NFSMI, ARD) has developed a resource that assists school nutrition (SN) professionals with the continuous quality improvement process. This resource, *Continuous Quality Improvement Process: Tailored for the School Nutrition Environment*, is located on the NFSMI Web site http://www.nfsmi.org/documentlibraryfiles/PDF/20080221022907.pdf.

Figure 1. Plan-Do-Check-Act- Cycle Model



Source adapted from Langley G., Nolan K., Nolan T., Norman C., Provost L. (1996). *The Improvement Guide: A Practical Approach to Enhancing Organizational Performance*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers. p 6-11.

Figure 2. Run Chart Example



Run charts are typically line graphs that indicate performance over time. They are useful in identifying trends and patterns in the data.

Application of Data-Driven Decision Making in School Nutrition Programs

School nutrition professionals are currently using data to make informed decisions, such as budgeting, procurement bid evaluations, production forecasting, menu changes based on customer feedback, and equipment purchase comparisons. Due to the regulatory requirements of SN programs, there is much data that can be utilized by SN professionals to aid in decisions. School nutrition professionals can utilize data-based decision making for different types of issues, such as setting and assessing progress toward goals, evaluating effectiveness of practices, assessing whether students' needs are being met, reallocating resources, or improving processes to enhance outcomes.

Points to Consider Before Beginning

One of the biggest challenges for SN directors who wants to formalize their data-driven decision making system is knowing where to begin. The following suggestions are points to consider:

- Be aware of the time commitment that will be needed to develop the infrastructure for data-driven decision making.
- Establish a leadership team from the SN staff to explore what data are critical to the school nutrition program.
- Develop policies and procedures to systematically collect data for the SN program.
- Examine the data that are routinely collected and collect additional data when needed to answer a key question or measure whether a key goal is being achieved.
- Explore if additional data are available but have not typically been examined or used, such as reports that can be generated from point of sale systems.
- Network with other district administrators on additional data that might be of use to the SN program.
- Verify data that is being provided by another department to ensure accuracy.
- Listen to input from the SN staff and other stakeholders. It is important to hear different perspectives to ensure that various sources of vital data are not overlooked. Discussions are richer and more diverse with numerous points of view and insights.
- Use data to determine the SN program's strengths, limitations, and emerging areas of interest.
- Use data as a tool for organizational learning, such as problem solving, problem finding, gaining new knowledge, and developing new insights to guide improvement.

Identification of Data Collection Methods

When the specific issue that needs further study has been identified, determine the data that will be collected to provide additional insight by:

- Identifying the types of data that are needed, such as cost data, participation data, or perceptions of various stakeholders.
- Identifying the appropriate person(s) to collect the data, depending on the type of data that is needed.
- Identifying the appropriate method to gather the data needed, such as observation, review of records, focus groups, or surveys.
- Exploring other resources/tools to collect data available from the state agency, United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), National Food Service Management Institute (NFSMI), and the School Nutrition Association (SNA). For example, NFSMI has developed surveys for addressing high school and middle/junior high student participation and satisfaction issues with the SN program.
- Networking with other SN professionals to determine any tools/resources they might have used to assist with data collection.
- Verifying that all stakeholders who will be influenced by the specific decision have an opportunity to provide input as this may be critical to gaining acceptance of the ultimate decision.
- Determining if information being used to assist in decisions is from credible and reliable sources. Be aware of internet Web sites that may not contain accurate information.
- Determining the appropriate schedule for data collection. Take into consideration school activities, day of the week, time of day, and school year. For example, do not gather student satisfaction or participation data too close to either the beginning or end of the school year.

Table 1 provides examples of issues where data collection may help SN directors make informed decisions. The table includes corresponding data that can be collected for each issue as well as methods for collecting the data and acceptable benchmarks for evaluating the data when available. As mentioned earlier, data from one school or district can be compared to the same school or district for a previous period. In addition, data can be compared between schools in a district (or schools outside the district), as long as differences in school size, demographics, and program operation are taken into account. *Table 2* provides some of the pros and cons associated with using each data collection method.

Table 1. Sample Issues, Data to Collect, Collection Methods, and External Benchmarks

Examples of Issues that need Further Study	*Data	Method to Gather Data	Acceptable Benchmarks (as available)
Food Safety (for example: monitoring food safety after beginning a program to serve breakfast to-go from a remote location on school campuses)	• Temperature logs for mobile serving line • Staff hand washing, wearing hair nets, wearing and changing gloves, as appropriate	• Formal monitoring • Informal monitoring	Food temperatures meet minimum established standards outlined by the state department of health
Food Quality (for example: monitoring food quality after adding new items to the menu)	• Customer opinions • Staff opinions • Teacher opinions	• Student Surveys • SN Staff surveys • Teacher surveys • Tray evaluations • Serving line temperature logs • Informal monitoring	
Meal Acceptability (for example: checking meal acceptability before and after making menu changes to meet new nutritional standards)	Participation rates	Average daily participation (ADP) = Number of lunches served per month ÷ Number of operating days per month	• ADP for lunch = 68% • ADP for breakfast = 24.9% • ADP for elementary school lunch = 73% • ADP for elementary school breakfast = 30% • ADP for high school lunch = 55% • ADP for high school breakfast = 15% • (School Nutrition Operations Report, 2011)
	Ratio of students eating school meals to student enrollment	ADP ÷ Enrollment	
	Customer opinions	• Food Satisfaction Surveys • Focus groups • Informal monitoring	
	Plate Waste	• Informal Monitoring • Formal Monitoring	

Table 1. Sample Issues, Data to Collect, Collection Methods, and External Benchmarks

Examples of Issues that need Further Study	*Data	Method to Gather Data	Acceptable Benchmarks (as available)
Perceived Value of Meal Prices (for example: determining acceptability of meal prices before and after raising meal prices)	Comparison of participation rate by meal status (free and reduce compared to paid)	ADP for free & reduced ÷ Number of enrolled students approved for free & reduced price meals (compared to) ADP for paid ÷ Number of enrolled students not approved for free & reduced price meals	
Appropriateness of Labor Expenditures (for example: evaluating the appropriateness of labor expenditures before and after switching from heat and serve to scratch food production)	Labor cost percentage	Labor cost (payroll, benefits, other related expenses) ÷ total revenue	**40-45% (or 80-85% labor cost and food cost combined)
Appropriateness of Food Expenditures (for example : investigating the appropriateness of food expenditures before and after switching vendors)	• Food cost percentage • Comparison of food cost percent with other school/districts of similar demographics that are engaging in scratch food production	Cost of food purchased used (see calculation below) ÷ Total revenue Cost of food purchased used = Beginning food inventory (purchased) – Food purchases = Total food available (purchased) – Ending food inventory (purchased) =Cost of purchased food used	**≤40% (or 80-85% labor cost and food cost combined)

Table 1. Sample Issues, Data to Collect, Collection Methods, and External Benchmarks

Examples of Issues that need Further Study	*Data	Method to Gather Data	Acceptable Benchmarks (as available)
Productivity (for example: measuring productivity before and after centralizing food production within the school district)	Meals per labor hour	Number of meals or meal equivalents for a day (see calculation below) ÷ Total hours paid daily including managers Meal equivalents: (add each item) Lunch = # of meals X 1.0 Breakfast = meals x.67 Snacks = # offered x. 33 A la cart = (see below) a la cart sales revenue (federal free lunch reimbursement + commodity value ÷ number of meal equivalents)	**18 meals per labor hour
Profitability/Breakeven	Cost-to-revenue	Total costs ÷ Total revenues	**97-98%
Cost to Prepare a Meal (for example: evaluating meal cost before and after beginning a farm-to-school program)	per meal cost	Total cost for the month ÷ Total meal equivalents for the month	
	Food cost per meal	Food cost for the month ÷ Total meal equivalents for the month	
	Labor cost per meal	Labor cost for the month ÷ Total meal equivalents for the month	
	Supply cost per meal	Supply cost for the month ÷ Total meal equivalents for the month	

Table 1. Sample Issues, Data to Collect, Collection Methods, and External Benchmarks

Examples of Issues that need Further Study	*Data	Method to Gather Data	Acceptable Benchmarks (as available)
Revenue Generated From Each Meal (for example: assessing the average revenue received per meal before and after implementing a marketing program)	Average revenue earned per meal equivalent	Total revenue for month ÷ Total meal equivalents for the month	

* Each category of data can be compared to data from the same school at an earlier time to data from other schools, within the same school district, before and after changes are made, and with other schools or school districts of similar demographics that have made similar decisions.

** Boettger, J. (2009, December). RX for a healthy school nutrition program. *School Business Affairs*.

Table 2. Pros and Cons of Data Collection Methods for Making Decisions in SN Programs

Monitors	Pros	Cons
Informal Monitoring (hand washing, wearing hair nets, wearing and changing gloves as appropriate, food temperature, food taste, food appearance, plate waste)	• Quick, simple • Reliable if routinely done in-person (by the SN director), but scheduled randomly with no advanced notice	• Difficult to compare objectively with other schools or to present in a report • Unreliable if not completed in-person (by SN director), if done sporadically or if scheduled with plenty of advanced notice
Serving Line, Holding Units, and Storage Facility Temperature Monitoring Logs	• Quick, simple • Easily comparable with other schools	• Easily falsified
Plate Waste (formal monitoring)	• Very Informative • Easily comparable with schools following the same menu • Reliable if routinely done in-person (by the SN director)	• Time consuming • Results are not comparable to schools with differing demographics or menus, or if the surveys have been conducted at times that are too far apart
Tray Evaluations	• Quick, simple, informative • Easily comparable with schools following the same menu • Reliable if routinely done in-person (by the SN director), but scheduled randomly with no advanced notice	• Unreliable if done sporadically or scheduled with plenty of advanced notice
Student Surveys	• Can be very informative • Easily comparable with other schools of similar demographics and when surveys are conducted around the same time period	• Time consuming • Requires preapproval • Results are not comparable to schools with differing demographics or menus, or if the surveys have been conducted at times that are too far apart
SN Staff Surveys	• Informative • Easily comparable with other schools of similar size and production methods	• Time consuming • Results are not readily comparable to schools of differing size or production methods • Results may not provide accurate information about students' opinions
Teacher Surveys	• Informative	• Time consuming • Results may not provide accurate information about students' opinions

Table 2. Pros and Cons of Data Collection Methods for Making Decisions in SN Programs

Monitors	Pros	Cons
Student Focus Groups	• Can be very informative	• Time consuming • Requires preapproval • Results are difficult to compare to other schools due to narrative nature of the data that is gathered
Average Daily Participation	• Very informative, especially when analyzed by students approved for free, reduced price, and paid meals • Collection is required for NSLP/SBP reporting • Easily comparable to other schools of similar demographics	• Not readily easily comparable to other schools with differing demographics
Labor Cost Percentage	• Very informative • Easily comparable to other schools of similar size, with similar menu complexity, and similar production styles	• Must be able to calculate total labor costs (i.e. payroll, benefits, and other related costs) for a specified time period and total revenue for a specified period • Not readily comparable to other schools of differing size, menu complexity, and/or production styles
Food Cost Percentage	• Very informative • Easily comparable to other schools of similar size, with similar menu complexity, and similar production styles	• Must be able to calculate cost of food used for a specific period • Must have an accurate beginning of period and end of period inventory • Must be able to calculate total revenue for a specified period • Not readily comparable to other schools of differing size, menu complexity, and/or production styles
Meals Per Labor Hour	• Very informative • Easily comparable to other schools of similar size, with similar menu complexity, and similar production styles	• Must be able to calculate meal equivalent served for a specific period • Must be able to calculate number of paid productive labors hours for a period • Not readily comparable to other schools of differing size, menu complexity, and/or production styles

Table 2. Pros and Cons of Data Collection Methods for Making Decisions in SN Programs

Monitors	Pros	Cons
Break Even	• Crucial for determining profitability of an operation • Easily comparable to other schools	• Must be able to calculate total costs for a specified time period and total revenue for a specified period
Per Meal Cost	• Very informative • Easily comparable to other schools	• Must be able to calculate total cost for a specified time period • Must be able to calculate meal equivalent served for a specific period
Food Cost Per Meal	• Very informative • Easily comparable to other schools	• Must be able to calculate total food cost for a specified time period • Must be able to calculate meal equivalent served for a specific period
Labor Cost Per Meal	• Very informative • Easily comparable to other schools	• Must be able to calculate total labor cost for a specified time period • Must be able to calculate meal equivalent served for a specific period
Supply Cost Per Meal	• Very informative • Easily comparable to other schools	• Must be able to calculate total supply cost for a specified time period • Must be able to calculate meal equivalent served for a specific period
Revenue Per Meal	• Very informative • Easily comparable to other schools	• Must be able to calculate total revenue for a specified period • Must be able to calculate meal equivalent served for a specific period

Analyzing and Interpreting Results

Once the data have been collected, the next steps will be to analyze and interpret the results.

- Examine the data. Consider the following questions:
  - What information patterns are emerging?
  - Are the patterns similar to previous results?
  - What trends emerge over the past several years?
  - What relationships among the data are surfacing?
  - Are these results unexpected?
- Remember to focus on the issue or question and analyze the data that is most relevant.
- Collaborate with the leadership team to determine what is emerging through the data analysis. Be sure to consider the data in light of the team's operational understanding of the issue/situation. Listen to all insights regarding explanations of the observed data.
- Transition from analysis into interpretation of the data. Step back from looking at the details of the data and examine the overall impact on the SN program.

Benchmarking for School Nutrition Programs

Consider using data that is collected for benchmarking. Data from benchmarking can be used to establish and evaluate financial objectives and goals, and help identify where improvements are possible or necessary. There are several types of benchmarking, but the two types most applicable in School Nutrition programs are internal and industry based (Hwang & Sneed, 2004; Leibfried & McNair, 1992; Spendolini, 1992).

Internal benchmarking is:

- collecting and analyzing data from a single school or district over time for comparison to itself for measuring school or district performance, and
- collecting and analyzing data from multiple units within the same organization (over time or for a specific time or period) for comparison to measure performance.

Industry benchmarking is evaluating a SN program based on industry trends:

- The *School Nutrition Operations Report* compiled by the School Nutrition Association provides some industry benchmark information, specifically, average daily participation.
- Another source of industry benchmarking data is the National Restaurant Association, which regularly collects and publishes operational data for restaurants, such as food and labor cost percentages and sales percentages from food and beverages.
- Unfortunately, at this time, there are very little industry data available that is specific to school nutrition programs except for that found in the *School Nutrition Operations Report*.

The steps in benchmarking are as follows:

- Determine what to benchmark
- Identify sources of benchmark information
- Collect and analyze data
- Compare results to the benchmark
- Take actions

Developing Action Plans and Communicating Findings

Once the results of collected data have been analyzed and interpreted, the next steps are to propose action plans and communicate the findings.

- Share the data with the people who need it most and encourage these groups to engage in dialogues that will help them come to a deeper and shared understanding of the data.
- Prioritize the results and weigh the relative merit of possible solutions. School nutrition programs must continue to look for new answers to old problems.
- Create action plans by developing improvement goals, designing specific strategies, and defining evaluation criteria. Consider the following steps:
  - Develop goals for improvement
  - Outline the actions that need to occur
  - Specify the resources that will be required, such as staff, money, or materials
  - List indicators of completion or progress
- Another approach to formulating action plans is to focus on these questions:
  - What do the data seem to tell us?
  - What do they not tell us?
  - What else would we need to know?
  - What good news is here for us to celebrate?
  - What needs for SN program improvement might arise from these data?
- Once the decision to act has been made and implemented, new data can be collected to assess the effectiveness of those actions, leading to a continuous cycle of collection, organization, and synthesis of data in support of decision making.
- Communicate data-driven decisions to key stakeholders. It is important to target the communication and tell the same story, or parts of it, in different ways to different groups.
- Demonstrate to administration and stakeholders how the SN program is being held accountable for results.
- Make the communication critical and concise. Be sure to allow individuals to ask questions.
- Use facts and data to justify decisions and present action plans for improvement.
- Present the data in easy-to-read charts or graphs and prepare short, jargon-free reports.
- Consider working with the public relations/media department to issue a press release to the community, as appropriate, highlighting lessons learned and any action that will be taken to respond to stakeholders' issues and improve the school nutrition program.

Figures 3 and 4 provide examples of how results can be prepared graphically for making decisions and for presenting these decisions to key stakeholders.

Figure 3. Meals Per Labor Hour portrayed in a run chart.

Figure 3 depicts meals per labor hour that has been tracked monthly for four schools in a district and the district as a whole for a year. The graph indicates that School 3 has the lowest productivity level, while School 1 has the highest productivity level. The graph also suggests that productivity for the district gradually drops between August and December, then gradually increases between January and March, then declines again in April and May. Information gained from this graph can be used to evaluate the effectiveness of the SN program for each school and the district as a whole. Some of the things to consider when comparing each school are the size of the school, the number of serving lines, the type of service provided, scheduling of meal periods, production systems, skill level of employees, and the complexity of menus. Another item for consideration is why productivity for the SN program for the district as a whole fluctuates the way it does throughout the school year. Once decisions have been made about data depicted on this graph, the graph can be used as a means to justify why changes are being made to stakeholders such as SN staff, school administrators, and the school board.

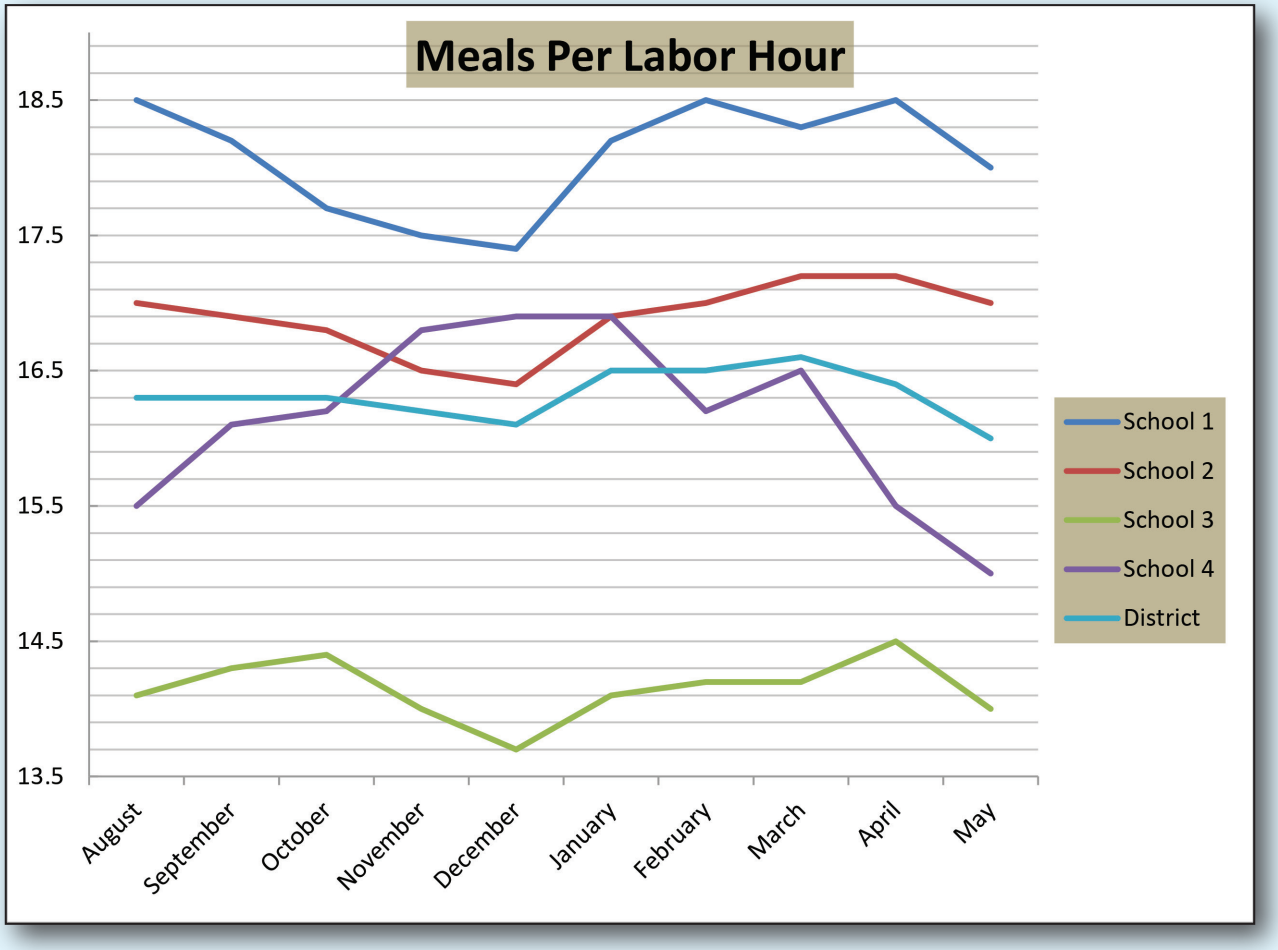
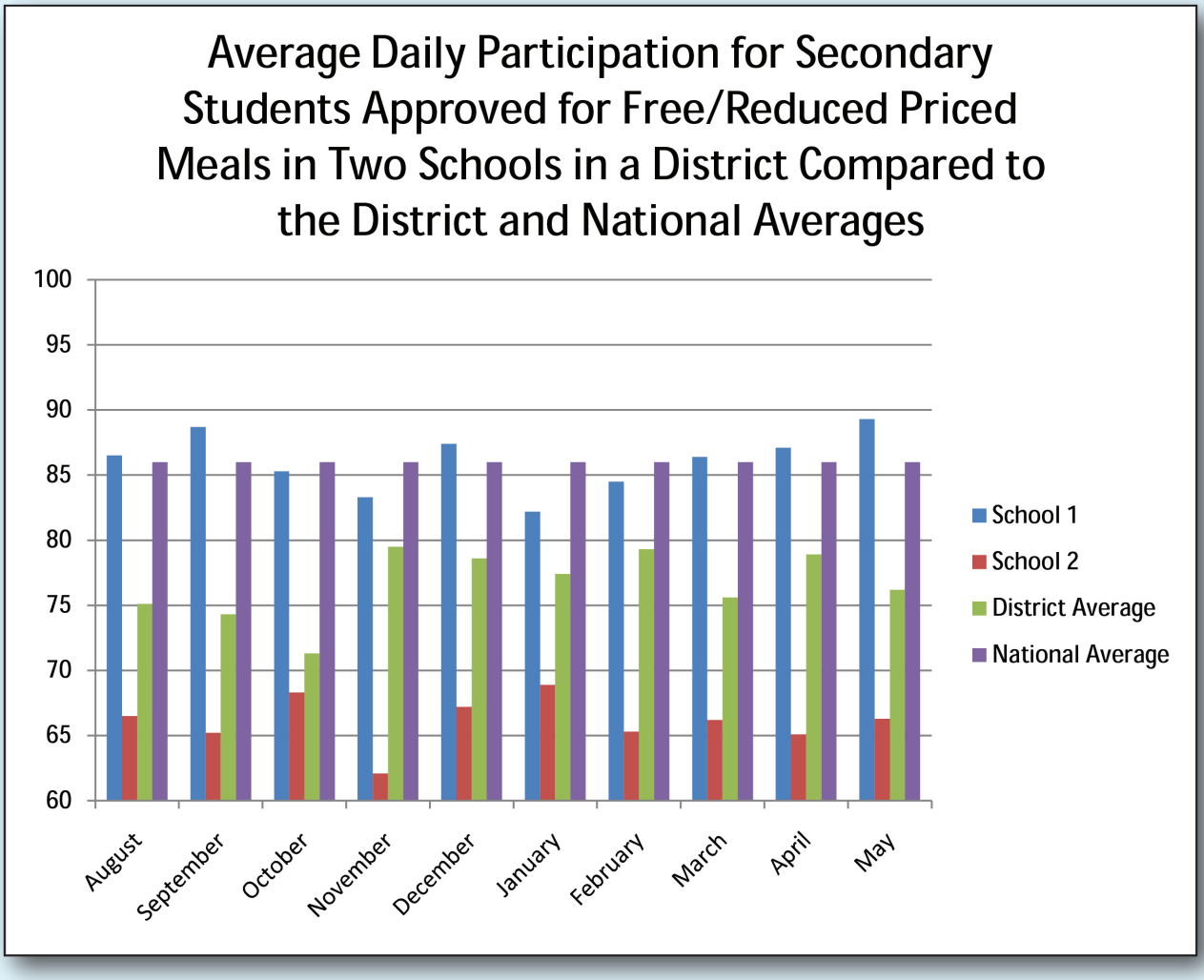


Figure 4. ADP for Secondary Schools portrayed as a bar chart

Figure 4 depicts average daily participation (ADP) for secondary students approved for free and reduced priced meals that has been tracked monthly for two schools in a district and the district as a whole for a year compared to the national average for ADP for secondary students. The graph indicates School 2 consistently falls below the district and national average, while School 1 consistently rises above the district average and near the national average. The graph suggests there are opportunities to improve secondary student free and reduced participation in School 2 and the district as a whole. Once decisions have been made about data depicted on this graph, the graph can be used as a means to justify how changes are being made to stakeholders such as SN staff, school administrators, and the school board.



Final thoughts on data-driven decision making

- School nutrition professionals use a variety of information to make operational decisions.
- The use of data for decisions is critical to continuous quality improvement in school nutrition programs.
- Data can paint a picture for decisions. Trends, patterns, and relationships can be identified.
- Communicate the results of data-driven decisions to all stakeholders.
- The following example demonstrates the types of data that could be gathered to evaluate various aspects of SN program initiatives, such as in-classroom breakfast.

Example of Collectible Data

Effectiveness of In-Classroom Breakfast

School districts across the country are implementing innovative breakfast concepts, such as "grab and go", distribution of breakfasts to each classroom, and mobile breakfast carts in hallways. In-classroom breakfast programs can increase student access to school breakfast, thereby increasing breakfast participation. District/school administrators may question the effectiveness of these breakfast programs. Rainville and colleagues (2012) described data that was gathered in five school districts with in-classroom breakfast programs to explore the

- financial impact on the SN program;
- student-related issues, such as attendance/tardies, disciplinary referrals, and nurses visits; and
- teacher/custodial requirements.

The first step is to select the issue to study, such as breakfast participation, financial impact or disciplinary referrals. Then determine the type of data that should be gathered to address that issue. There are a variety of data available in school districts that can be gathered to evaluate the effectiveness of in-classroom breakfast programs. Listed below are several examples.

Measurable Data and Sources

- Breakfast participation - records (month by month, year-to-date, school year to school year)
- Accountability for reimbursement - rosters and software
- Additional revenue - financial records (include income, labor cost, food cost, supplies cost)
- Service time - number of meals served per minute
- Food waste and disposable waste/recycling - weight in pounds
- Student diet quality/nutrient intake - can be determined from menus/nutrient analysis and plate waste data
- Custodial time - minutes and/or hours for clean up
- Disciplinary referrals - school records
- Attendance/tardies - school records
- School nurse/wellness office visits - school records
- Academic performance/test scores - school records

Other Data (Student and Stakeholder Satisfaction, School Culture and Climate, Perceptions, Opportunities, Barriers) and Sources

- Students - interviews, surveys
- School nutrition staff - interviews
- School nurse/wellness staff - interviews
- Teachers-interviews, surveys
- Principals – interviews
- Custodians-interviews
- Parents-interviews, surveys

If the in-classroom breakfast is a new initiative, look at similar data from previous years. Once all the data has been gathered, begin the analysis and interpretation. Put all the various data that have been collected together and review what has been found. Be sure to look at:

- what patterns are emerging
- what trends emerge over the past several years
- what relationships among the data are surfacing
- are these results expected or unexpected

The data that you have collected and analyzed should answer some of the questions related to the issue that is being studied. The final step is to develop action plans and communicate the findings. If barriers are identified, use the Plan-Do-Check Act model to identify action plans for improvement. If additional studies are needed to address additional questions, identify the data that should be collected and who should be responsible for that data. Use the analysis of the results to communicate the findings and the plan of action. Prepare bar charts or run charts to portray the findings to stakeholders.

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SECTION II

Using Focus Groups to Gather Information for Decision Making

Section II: Using Focus Groups to Gather Information for Decision Making

What are Focus Groups?
Focus groups are one method school nutrition professionals can use to gather information that will assist in decision making. Focus groups are carefully planned meetings of small groups of stakeholders to gain a better understanding of their perceptions regarding an issue, product, service, or idea.

When to use Focus Groups?
School nutrition professionals often are faced with decisions that if made in a vacuum, could have a negative impact. Focus groups bring together stakeholders to discuss their views prior to making a decision regarding an issue that would directly affect them. Focus group discussions can be used to collect information for many purposes, such as determining interest in an in-classroom breakfast program or evaluating specific services provided by the school nutrition program.

- Focus groups could be used to:
  - determine differing viewpoints between stakeholders
  - identify issues that influence opinions or actions
  - explore ideas for school nutrition program improvements
- Focus groups are not appropriate when
  - the information collected requires confidentiality,
  - consensus is needed, or
  - quantitative data is required.

Focus groups also can be used as the first step to assist school nutrition professionals in understanding the critical points of an issue. School nutrition professionals can use the information gained from the focus groups to develop a survey to distribute to a larger audience of stakeholders. The quantitative data gained from the surveys are another approach for gathering information to aid in decision making. Once school nutrition professionals have decided that using focus groups is appropriate several steps are involved in planning for successful focus groups.

Step 1 Planning Focus Groups

1. Collect information regarding the issue(s) being discussed.
- Utilize resources/research from the state agency, United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), National Food Service Management Institute (NFSMI), and the School Nutrition Association (SNA) to gain a comprehensive understanding of the issue(s), regulations, and impact on school nutrition operations.

2. Identify the stakeholders who should be involved in the focus group.
- To increase the probability of focus groups producing useful information, it is important that the participants represent the stakeholder group whose views are critical to understand.
- Focus groups are more successful when participants feel comfortable about sharing their opinions and likelihood of this occurring is increased when the participants represent the same stakeholder group.
- If multiple stakeholder groups will be affected by the issue, there may be a need to conduct separate focus groups to obtain the viewpoints of the various stakeholders. For example, if the issue is determining the interest in an in-classroom breakfast program, assess which stakeholder groups would be affected by the decision to determine who should be included in the focus groups. In this example, principals, teachers, school nutrition staff, custodial workers, and parents might need to be included in the focus group discussions.

Planning Focus Groups (Continued)

3. Draft focus group questions that support the issue(s) being discussed.

There are five types of questions typically used in a focus group discussion.

- **Opening questions** are ones that everyone answers at the beginning. These typically focus on characteristics that participants have in common and are short and easy to answer. All participants are asked to respond to a short, fact-based question that requires no more than a 30 second answer. The purpose of opening questions is to get the focus group participants comfortable speaking with one another.
- **Introductory questions** initiate the general issue that will be discussed. Plan to use open-ended questions that allow participants to express their feelings or beliefs. Use questions that begin with what, how, where, and when, and limit the use of questions that require a yes or no response. The purpose of an introductory question is to allow participants to reveal what they understand about the issue and their initial thoughts.
- **Transition questions** move the discussion toward the key questions. Plan to use questions that connect the participants to the issue that will be discussed. These questions allow the participants to become aware of how the other focus group participants are viewing the issue
- **Key questions** are the questions that drive the focus group and move the discussion from a general to a more narrow focus. Participants' responses to these questions will afford the greatest insights about the issue.
- **Closing Questions** encourage new views, summarize the key thoughts, and provide closure to the discussion.

4. Determine the number of focus groups needed and select focus group participants.

Keep in mind that the purpose of the focus group should drive who is selected to be a participant.

- Typically three to four focus groups are needed with each stakeholder group to ensure that all points of view on the issues have been addressed and that new insights have been brought forth.
- School nutrition professionals should establish criteria to select participants from the stakeholder group, such as high school students who eat school lunch, teachers in elementary schools, or parents of elementary school children.
- Utilize the assistance of other district/school administrators to develop a pool of eligible participants and then randomly select who will be invited to the focus group.
- If recruiting students, be sure to follow school district procedures to obtain parental consent.
- Encourage participation in the focus group by emphasizing the opportunity to share opinions.
- Confirm six to eight participants per group.

5. Select a moderator and assistant moderator to conduct the focus groups.

- The moderator will ask the questions and guide the focus group discussion. The moderator should be someone with whom the participants are fully comfortable sharing their views and knows the issue(s) well enough to probe participants' responses but not limit discussion. The moderator should be experienced in facilitating group discussions and have excellent listening skills.
- There may be occasions when it may be more appropriate to use an outside moderator to conduct focus groups rather than a school nutrition professional. For example, when the focus group centers on school nutrition staff issues, a moderator not associated with the school nutrition program might allow the staff to be more relaxed and openly discuss possibly sensitive issues. Possible outside moderators could be other district administrators, college faculty, or outside consultants.
- The assistant moderator is responsible for the room arrangement and any equipment that might be used. Their primary responsibilities are to take notes throughout the discussion, provide oral summaries, and debrief the session with the moderator. They do not participate in any discussion during the focus group.

Planning Focus Groups (Continued)

6. Plan the environment for the focus groups.

- Identify a date, time, and location convenient for the focus group participants.
- Plan approximately 90 minutes for the focus group discussion. It is possible to conduct a focus group discussion in 60 minutes; however, 90 minutes is ideal.
- Set up the meeting room so that it feels welcoming and comfortable to participants. If possible, use a round table with comfortable chairs. Consider providing participant tent cards to assist the moderator in identifying the names of the participants.
- If possible, arrange for the focus group session to be audio-recorded. This will assist in the analysis of the discussion. Check school district procedures regarding any confidentiality issues that might prevent audio recording.
- Have flip charts and markers available for recording notes and comments from the focus group discussions.

7. Pilot the focus group questions.

- Pilot test the questions prior to the focus group with several people similar to the focus group participants.
- It is important to determine if the questions are clear and understandable to the participants.
- The moderator should be able to ask the questions without reading from the script. The goal is to have the appearance of a free-flowing conversation.
- Ask the pilot test participants to answer the questions and then to provide their opinions on the questions.
- Estimate the time length for the focus group questions and finalize the number of questions to be asked during the focus group discussions.

Step 2

Conducting the Focus Groups

1. Establish a safe and comfortable environment for the focus group participants.

- The room should be arranged and all supplies in place before the participants arrive. Consider providing refreshments for the participants. The goal is to create a warm and friendly environment.
- The moderator and assistant moderator should introduce themselves, welcome the participants, and make small talk until all participants arrive.
- Observe the participants' interactions with each other during this time. You may be able to identify individuals who are shy and reluctant to talk, those who think they are experts, and those who tend to dominate conversations.

2. Begin the focus group.

- Have a bulleted outline to guide the discussion. Inform the participants of the topic that will be discussed, how they were selected to participate in the focus group, and how the results of their discussion will be used. Emphasize to the participants that the moderators are there to learn from them, and their opinions are valued.
- Discuss the guidelines or ground rules for the discussion. Examples of ground rules include:
  - Listen to all ideas
  - Everyone's opinions count
  - There are no right or wrong answers to the questions
  - If you don't want to answer, you do not have to respond
  - Your voice is very important
  - Informal environment

Conducting the Focus Groups (Continued)

- Be present in the discussion
- Be respectful of everyone's time
- Cell phones off or set on vibrate

- Inform the participants that the session is being audio-recorded and that the assistant moderator is capturing their answers on a flip chart, notepad, or computer. Assure the participants that only summaries of their responses will be used and names will not be identified.
- Begin the series of focus group questions.
  - Opening questions
  - Introductory questions
  - Transition questions
  - Key questions
  - Closing questions

3. Utilize effective moderator skills.

- The moderator' role is to facilitate the discussion by asking focus group questions and then allowing the participants to respond. The goal is to establish a safe environment in which participants are able to say whatever they are thinking.
- The moderator does not share his/her views on the issue during the discussions. The moderator is not to offer any answers, or even agree with any answers, but rather tries to get participants talking and thinking.
- It is important that the moderator keeps an open mind and forms as few preconceptions as possible about what the focus group participants are likely to say or not say. Maintain a pleasant expression and don't react to any comments from participants. Learn to use probes when more information is needed: Examples of probes are:
  - Tell me more about that. . .
  - Can you explain what you mean?
  - I hear what you are saying. . .
  - Is there anything else you can share on this idea?
  - Please describe what you mean.
  - Can you give us a specific example of that?
  - Has anyone had a different experience?
- The moderator should not send any verbal or nonverbal signals that might influence the participants. Examples of these signals include head nodding or short responses, such as "that's good," "excellent," "we have already heard from you," or "that comment doesn't apply to today's discussion."
- Consider the following tips for moderating focus groups:
  - Ask only one question at a time.
  - Try to avoid asking questions that have several components. If those components are necessary, the appropriate way to handle would be to structure the components as separate questions.
  - Repeat key phrases from the question frequently. Participants tend to lose focus on the question after other participants have responded to it. Repeating key phrases will help participants stay focused.
  - Be comfortable with silence. Some participants may offer more to the discussion if they have time to consider the questions before they speak.

Conducting the Focus Groups (Continued)

4. Prepare for unexpected situations.

- The moderator should be prepared to handle unexpected situations during the focus group, such as challenging participants (e.g., dominant talkers, shy participants, rambling individual) and time issues. If unexpected situations are not handled appropriately, the participants can disengage and the discussion shut down.
- Be sure to emphasize in the ground rules that everyone's opinion counts and the importance of hearing from all participants. It is critical that the moderator utilize effective facilitation techniques to ensure that all participants are engaged in the discussion. The following examples demonstrate effective facilitation techniques for specific situations:
  - If you identify that there might be a dominant talker among the participants, try to seat that individual near the moderator. The moderator can try to exercise control by the use of body language. The moderator can try techniques, such as avoiding eye contact with the dominant participant, turning their body away from him/her, or holding their hand in a stop position while addressing the other participants. When that strategy does not work, then try to verbally shift attention to another participant. For example, "Thank you Mary. Are there others who wish to comment on the question?" It is important that the moderator be tactful and kind as harsh comments may curtail spontaneity from others in the group.
  - The moderator must be aware of those shy and reflective participants who often have great insights. Extra effort may be needed to urge them to elaborate their views. If possible, the moderator should place shy respondents directly across the table to maximize eye contact. Eye contact often provides sufficient encouragement for shy participants to speak, and if all else fails, the moderator can call on them by name. For example, "Nancy, I don't want to leave you out of the conversation. What do you think?"
  - Another type of participant that may be encountered in focus group discussions is a rambler or an individual who uses a lot of words and takes forever to get to the point. An effective way to handle a rambler is to discontinue eye contact after about 20-30 seconds. The moderator should look at papers, look at other participants, turn their body away from the speaker, but don't look at the rambler. As soon as the rambler stops or pauses, the moderator should be ready to ask the next question or repeat the current question being discussed.
- The moderator may have concerns about completing the focus group discussion within the allotted time period and what to do if it appears the time is running out. The moderator's responsibility is to ensure that the focus group questions have been addressed. It is important that the focus group begin on time and the moderator be aware of the clock and the length of time required for the questions. If the discussions are taking longer than the moderator had planned, there may be a need to adjust during the focus group. The moderator can slightly increase the pace of the questions while monitoring the clock to allow sufficient time for all questions. If needed, some questions may have to be omitted to allow time for the key questions as they are the most important to be answered by the participants.

5. Emphasize the critical role of the assistant moderator.

The assistant moderator has several key roles during the focus group. These roles include the following:

- Take responsibility for any equipment and supplies that are being used, such as audio recorders, microphones, flip charts, etc.
- Arrange the table and chairs for an effective group discussion. Be aware of background noises that would affect the audio recording as well as room temperature and lighting.

Conducting the Focus Groups (Continued)

- Welcome participants as they arrive. If using name badges or participant table tents, provide markers and ask participants to fill in their names.
- Sit in a designated location outside the circle, preferably opposite the moderator and closest to the door. Greet any participants who arrive late and help them find a place to sit.
- Take notes throughout the discussion.
  - Use a flip chart, notepad, or a computer to record the discussion of the focus group.
  - It is important that the notes taken are very clear as others may be involved in the analysis of the focus group discussion.
  - Listen for statements or phrases that are particularly well-stated in illustrating the participants' points of view.
  - Capture the key points and themes for each question.
- Operate any recording equipment. It is important to be familiar with the audio recorder and have all supplies ready. Turn over or insert another tape as quietly as possible and label the tapes.
- Do not participate in the discussion. Talk only if invited by the moderator. It is important to control all non-verbal actions or gestures.
- Ask questions when invited. At the end of each question or at the end of the discussion, the moderator will ask the assistant moderator to review the comments captured to confirm all comments were recorded as intended and to provide one final opportunity for additional thoughts to be recorded.
- Provide a brief verbal summary and invite participants to offer additions or corrections to the summary.

6. Conclude the discussion.

The moderator has several options for ending the focus group.

- One option is to ask the assistant moderator to summarize the main points of the discussion and ask if this view is correct, then ask for comments or corrections.
- Another option is for the moderator to give an overview of the issue and ask one of the closing questions, such as "have we missed anything?" or "is there anything we should have talked about but didn't?"
- A third option is to include a written component following the summary, such as asking the participants to write down the top three issues that were discussed.
- Regardless of the option selected, remember to thank the participants for their input and provide a brief synopsis of the next steps. An example could be as follows: "Thanks for taking the time to share your viewpoints on this issue with us today. We will be talking to three other groups of parents this week to hear their thoughts as well. Then we will analyze the notes from all the focus groups and summarize what we have heard as we progress toward the decision for (insert topic)."

7. Debrief the focus group discussion.

- Immediately following the focus group discussion, the moderator and assistant moderator should discuss the session and discuss overall impressions, significant ideas, and how this group compared to other groups.

Step 3

Analyzing the Focus Group Results

1. Summarize each focus group separately after the focus group discussion.

- Timely analysis of the focus group information is important.
- If flip charts were used to capture the focus group discussions, type the notes immediately following the session. Listen to the audio recording to verify any questions or confirm discussion points. Prepare a transcript of each individual focus group in a question-by-question format.

Analyzing the Focus Group Results (Continued)

2. Examine the focus groups collectively.

- Read the transcripts from all the focus groups.
- Remember that the unit of analysis is the "group", not the "individual". Summarize the themes which came out of the focus groups, rather than what was said by individual participants.

3. Categorize the focus group responses to each question into themes.

- Consider using an old fashioned method of "cutting and pasting" the transcript notes to organize the statements into themes. You will need a large surface to spread out the statements. Color code the transcript summary from each focus group by changing the font color or printing the transcripts on colored paper. Cut each focus group transcript into strips.
- Read over each focus group question and all the responses for that question. Look for common themes, patterns, and key words. Group similar responses or thoughts together. Use your knowledge of the issue to guide this process, but do not overlook unexpected themes or findings.
- Once the categories are complete, brainstorm and reach consensus on words or phrases that describe the statements in that theme.

4. Repeat this process for each of the focus group questions.

5. Step back and review the results of the analysis.

- Don't get so involved in the analysis process that important themes are overlooked.
- Plan to review the analysis results after a few days to confirm the themes.

Step 4

Communicating the Focus Group Results

1. Share focus group results with the school nutrition program staff.

- Use the results to aid in decisions related to this issue.
- Look at ways the results can impact the school nutrition operation.
- Brainstorm with school nutrition managers and staff on how to use results for program improvement.

2. Present focus group results and recommendations to district administrators and school board, as appropriate.

- Provide a written and verbal report. Keep the report brief and to the point.
- Present the purpose of the project, a brief explanation of the focus groups process, and a summary of the findings.
- Share information learned and action that is to be taken.
- Link focus group findings to budget implications (pro or con) and/or operational changes.
  - Show potential participation percentage increase
  - Show potential revenue increase
  - Show potential for decreased revenue if suggestions are not implemented
- Use tables, charts, or figures to illustrate results. PowerPoint presentation software can be utilized to effectively illustrate this for a presentation.
- Present recommendations for action by the school board, as appropriate.

Communicating the Focus Group Results (Continued)

3. Share focus group results with school administrators, teachers, and/or parents, as appropriate.

- Depending on the issue, there may be a need to share focus group findings with other stakeholder groups.
- Prepare a brief report that could be shared at meetings with principals, teachers, parents, or other stakeholders.
- Include a summary of the process that was used in planning and conducting the focus group to demonstrate the integrity of the process, such as how questions were developed, how participants were selected and the number of focus groups conducted.
- Present the findings as information learned from the focus groups and next steps or action that will be taken.
- If there is disagreement regarding the focus group results, emphasize the integrity of the focus group process, the involvement of stakeholders, and systematic approach used to analyzing the results. Also, if needed, suggest the use of further studies to aid the decision making process, such as developing a survey to distribute to a larger group of stakeholders.

4. Work with the public relations/media department to issue a press release to the community, as appropriate.

- Determine if there are district procedures for a press release. Follow the district procedures in developing and distributing a press release to local media.
- Frame the release to position the school nutrition program in a positive way.
- Highlight lessons learned and action that will be taken to respond to stakeholders' issues and improve the school nutrition program.

Final thoughts on Focus Groups

- Don't be hesitant to explore the use of focus groups in your school nutrition program.
- Remember all people like to know that their opinions are valued. Most will appreciate that you wanted to hear their views on the issue.
- Careful planning is key to a successful focus group.
- The following example is of a focus group with high school students regarding why they eat or do not eat school lunch.

Example of Focus Groups with High School Students

1. Target audience
- High school students

2. Purpose
- To identify issues associated with participation of high school students in the National School Lunch Program

3. Focus group process
- Four focus group sessions with high school students
- Discussions lasted approximately 90 minutes
- Open-ended questions developed from issues previously identified as impacting participation
- At the end of the focus group, students used note cards to respond to the final two questions.

4. Selected focus group questions
- Why do you (don't you) eat school meals?
- What do you like (don't like) about your school meals?
- What do you think about the prices for school meals?
- How do you know what is being served in the school cafeteria?
- What types of menu choices/foods are important to you?
- Identify the top three reasons why you eat school meals.
- Identify the top three reasons why you do not eat school meals.

5. Results
- The focus group responses were categorized into eight themes. The themes are listed below with supporting student responses:
  - Choices/variety
    - Does not have what I want
    - Ran out of food
    - Same things every day, it gets old
  - Taste
    - The food doesn't taste good
    - I don't like the choice offered. I have tried it before and it doesn't taste good
  - Appearance
    - Presentation of food is not appealing
    - The food doesn't look good
  - Customer service environment
    - The cafeteria lines are too long
    - Lack of space in the cafeteria
    - Presented in an unclean environment
    - The workers are not friendly
  - Quality
    - Not the right temperature
    - Not cooked right
    - Not fresh enough
  - Nutrition
    - Food does not appear healthy or nutritious
    - I would like to see the nutritional content of food items, such as calories, fat, etc.
  - Value
    - Price for quantity of food is way too high
    - Lack of quantity
    - Not worth the price
  - Don't want to eat
    - I am too busy and need time to catch up on other projects
    - I like the freedom of leaving school – I need a break
    - I don't feel like eating
    - None of my friends are eating
- Discussions revealed that school nutrition programs have two distinct types of high school customers – those who eat school meals frequently and those who do not.

6. Communicating the Focus Group Results
- Issues emerged that the school nutrition director can directly respond to and take action. The school nutrition director can discuss results with the school nutrition managers and site staff on areas requiring action.
- Some issues would require the involvement and assistance of district and school administration. The school nutrition director can share the results with the district and school administrators and discuss the assistance needed for improvement. Summarizing the process and reporting the themes with supporting statements from the students lend credibility to the need for action by administrators.
- There are issues that revolve around some students' personal priorities. This is also critical to report to the district and school administrators. It appears that no matter what the school nutrition program offers, some students still may not eat school meals. This is not meant to be a negative association connotation on the school nutrition program, but more a reflection of students' preferences as they respond to the demands of the school day.

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