

**Determining Factors Impacting the Decision of  
Middle/Junior High School Students to Participate  
in the National School Lunch Program**



National Food Service Management Institute  
The University of Mississippi  
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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY .....	8
INTRODUCTION .....	11
Research Objectives	
METHOD .....	14
Focus Group Design	
Participants	
Focus Group Discussions	
Informed Consent	
Data Analysis	
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION .....	18
Characteristics of Participating School Nutrition Programs	
Focus Groups with Middle/Junior High School Students	
Focus Groups with School Nutrition Professionals	
CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS .....	29
Education and Training Implications	
Research Implications	
REFERENCES .....	33

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## LIST OF TABLES

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Table 1: Middle/Junior High School Students' Focus Group Questions and Percentages of Responses.....	20
Table 2: Focus Group Summary: Reasons Why Middle/Junior High School Students Choose to Eat School Lunch.....	24
Table 3: Focus Group Summary: Reasons Why Middle/Junior High School Students Choose Not to Eat School Lunch.....	25
Table 4: School Nutrition Professionals' Focus Group Questions and Sample Responses.....	26

**DETERMINING FACTORS IMPACTING THE DECISION OF  
MIDDLE/JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS TO PARTICIPATE  
IN THE NATIONAL SCHOOL LUNCH PROGRAM**

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

School nutrition (SN) programs across the country have experienced a steady decline in high school participation in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP). This is a major concern and challenge for SN professionals since student participation is essential to the financial stability and success of SN programs. Previous research has indicated that this decline in participation begins at the middle/junior high school level, grades sixth through eighth (McConnell, Matta, & Shaw, 1997). Since the vast majority of middle/junior high schools do not allow students to eat lunch off campus, middle/junior high school students are considered a captive audience. However, extensive research on factors affecting middle/junior high school participation is lacking.

Previous National Food Service Management Institute, Applied Research Division (NFSMI, ARD) research showed that at the high school level, there are two distinct groups of students to which SN programs cater. One group of students participate an average of two or less days per week, and the second group of students participate an average of at least three times per week in the NSLP. Each group of students has a different set of concerns. Taking a proactive approach to address students' concerns will provide students with a sense of empowerment and may have a positive effect on their decision to eat school lunch (Roseman & Niblock, 2006). Middle/junior high school students' satisfaction and positive perceptions of the SN program may lead to a greater willingness to participate in the NSLP once these students transition into high school.

The purpose of this research was to identify issues associated with the participation and satisfaction of middle/junior high school students in the NSLP. Focus group discussions were conducted in four school districts with two groups of participants. The first group was middle/junior high school students and the second group was SN professionals, which included SN directors and middle/junior high school SN managers. Focus group discussions with middle/junior high school students investigated their perceptions regarding service and satisfaction with the SN program and barriers with participating in the NSLP. The focus group discussions with SN professionals explored these same issues from their perspective. Responses from both focus group discussions were transcribed, summarized, and grouped into emerging themes.

The focus group discussions with middle/junior high school students indicated that there are two distinct groups of middle/junior high school customers: students who participate daily in the NSLP and students who participate occasionally or not at all in the NSLP. Results from the middle/junior high school focus groups identified five primary reasons middle/junior high school students eat school lunch: food preference, hungry, no choice, convenience, and socialize. Findings from the focus group also identified four primary reasons middle/junior high school students do not eat school lunch: food quality, customer service, sanitation, and long lines. SN professionals suggested that the primary reasons students do not choose to eat school lunch were (a) students want to socialize, (b) peer pressure/cool factor, and (c) long lines. In addition, SN professionals identified some challenges with middle/junior high school student participation: school administrators/principals having restrictions regarding socializing during lunch, perception of school lunch, and menu fatigue.

Responses from both focus group discussions revealed that there is a disconnect between the perceptions of middle/junior high school students and SN professionals regarding students' school lunch experiences. Middle/junior high school students have grown up frequenting restaurants with their parents and expecting good customer service. This new generation of customers has learned to recognize brands and make decisions on the foods they will or will not eat. Communication between SN professionals and students is a key factor for improving SN programs. To improve participation, SN professionals need to communicate with students to identify reasons they do not eat school lunch and explore the best course of action to address their customer's wants and needs. Focusing on a customer service oriented approach by involving students can assist SN professionals in developing strategies to increase customer satisfaction and retain these customers once they enter high school. Obtaining a deeper understanding of middle/junior high school students' perceptions will support the efforts of SN professionals in providing products and services to satisfy these customers.

## INTRODUCTION

Student participation is essential for the financial stability of school nutrition (SN) programs participating in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP). Participation at the high school level continues to decline and is one of the greatest challenges facing SN programs in the NSLP (Gilmore, Hutchinson, Brown, 2000). Past research has shown that this decline starts at the middle/junior high school level, sixth through eighth grade (McConnell, Matta, & Shaw, 1997). Middle/junior high school students are experiencing emotional, social, and physical changes that influence the choices they make, including participating in the NSLP. During this age period, adolescents are slowly becoming liberated from their parents and seeking freedom to make their own decisions. One decision making aspect they learn to control is their choice of foods (Meyer, 2000). Middle/junior high school students begin to choose whether they will or will not eat school lunch and to select what they will eat from the choices offered with very little to no parental influence. Sixth graders, on the other hand, are more inclined to be influenced by what their parents want them to eat than seventh and eighth graders (Roseman & Niblock, 2006).

Middle/junior high school students are still considered a captive audience, since most if not all middle/junior high schools do not allow students to eat lunch off campus as they do at the high school level. However, there is a lack of research on the wants and needs of middle/junior high school students regarding the NSLP. Available information attributed participation and satisfaction for middle/junior high school students to key factors such as length of time spent in the lunch lines, quality and variety of food, dining atmosphere, choice to eat or not eat the school lunch, perceived healthfulness of menu, visual attractiveness of foods, willingness to try new foods, and value for price paid (McConnell et al., 1997; Meyer, 2000; Roseman & Niblock, 2006). Children today are more knowledgeable about food since they have grown up frequenting

restaurants, grocery stores, and convenience stores with their parents. They are also exposed to numerous food advertisements on a daily basis and have learned to recognize brands (McConnell et al., 1997; Meyer, 2000).

A previous study conducted by the National Food Service Management Institute, Applied Research Division (NFSMI, ARD) showed, through a series of focus groups with high school students, that students who eat school lunch three or more times per week have different concerns from the students who eat school lunch two or less times per week (Asperin, Nettles, & Carr, 2008). Addressing the different concerns of students proactively will give students a sense of empowerment and may positively influence their decision to eat school lunch (Roseman & Niblock, 2006). SN programs can benefit from asking students to participate in the process of implementing changes in the school lunch. Student feedback can assist SN professionals in developing strategies to increase participation and customer satisfaction. Focusing on customer retention and student involvement can be advantageous to SN professionals in determining what factors affect customer perceptions regarding their school lunch dining experience (Wojcicki & Heyman, 2006).

School nutrition professionals can also apply this customer oriented approach to middle/junior high school students in an effort to gain a better understanding of their wants and needs from a school foodservice operation. Positive perceptions of the SN program and student satisfaction at the middle/junior high school level may lead to a greater willingness to participate in the NSLP once these students move to high school. It is important to identify barriers to student participation and to explore perceptions regarding service and satisfaction at the middle/junior high school level. Thus, the purpose of this research study was to identify issues associated with the participation of middle/junior high school students in the NSLP.

### **Research Objectives**

The specific objectives of this project included the following:

- Identify factors that can influence the middle/junior high school students' perception of the services offered by the SN program;
- Identify barriers to participation of middle/junior high school students in the NSLP; and
- Identify important components of a customer service survey that will aid SN professionals in providing products and services that middle/junior high school students desire in a school foodservice operation.

## **METHOD**

### **Focus Group Design**

The purpose of this study was to explore perceptions regarding service and satisfaction with the school nutrition (SN) program and identify barriers to participation in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) as identified by middle/junior high school students and SN professionals. Researchers used focus group methodology by Krueger and Casey (2009) as the foundation for this qualitative research study. Researchers conducted focus group discussions using a systematic approach by asking semi-structured, open-ended questions developed from previous National Food Service Management Institute, Applied Research Division (NFSMI, ARD) research related to participation of high school students in the NSLP (Asperin, Nettles, & Carr, 2008). Minor revisions were made to some of the questions to improve clarity for middle/junior high school students.

### **Participants**

Four school districts located in four geographic regions defined by the United States Department of Agriculture (Mountain Plains, Southwest, Southeast, and Western), were selected to host focus group discussions. There were two focus group discussions per school district: one with middle/junior high school students and the other with school nutrition (SN) directors and their middle/junior high school SN managers. E-mail invitations describing the research objectives were sent to SN directors in these regions to determine their willingness to host the focus groups. Follow-up phone calls with SN directors were conducted to answer any questions and/or concerns they may have had prior to sending confirmation letters to those who agreed to participate. A parental consent form was provided for use if school district protocols required it.

Parents were provided an overview of the project and the rights of their child as a participant of the focus group.

### **Focus Group Discussions**

Participating host SN directors were asked to recruit eight to ten middle/junior high school students to participate in the focus group and to provide names of four to five SN directors from adjacent school districts whom they believed would be interested in participating in the SN professional's focus group. Three of the four host SN directors chose to invite adjacent SN directors and their middle/junior high school SN managers to the focus group discussions. Researchers provided these three SN directors with overviews of the project and e-mail invitation letters. One of the host SN directors provided researchers several names of adjacent SN directors. Researchers contacted each of the SN directors to provide an overview of the project and invite them along with their middle/junior high school SN managers to participate in the focus group discussion. Confirmation e-mails were sent by researchers to all participating SN directors with the date, time, and location of the focus groups.

Focus group discussions were held at participating middle/junior high schools for the students and at the participating local school district offices for the SN professionals. The number of participants in the focus groups ranged from seven to ten middle/junior high school students and ranged from five to eight SN professionals. A student assent statement was read to the middle/junior high school students prior to beginning the focus group discussion. Students were assured confidentiality of their responses and their rights as participants of the focus group. A participant assent statement was also read to the SN professionals prior to beginning the focus group discussion. The focus group discussions lasted approximately 90 minutes, and included semi-structured, open-ended questions on issues associated with the participation of

middle/junior high school students in the NSLP. Focus group discussions were also used to explore perceptions regarding service and satisfaction with the SN program as well as barriers to participation as identified by middle/junior high school students and SN professionals.

For the focus groups with middle/junior high school students, the questions focused on: why they chose to eat or not eat school lunches; descriptions of quality, value, choice, and healthy meals; attributes that students like or do not like about school lunches; and other expectations and/or concerns about school lunches. Following the focus group discussion, middle/junior high school students were given index cards and asked to list the top three reasons “*Why I eat school lunch*” and the top three reasons “*Why I do not eat school lunch.*” The focus group questions for SN professionals centered on their role in providing a satisfying school lunch experience for students, reasons why middle/junior high school students choose to eat or not eat school lunches, and efforts to address any issues related to participation at the middle/junior high school level. Focus groups were facilitated by an NFSMI, ARD researcher with an assistant moderator/recorder capturing the participants’ comments. Both focus group discussions were audio recorded and transcribed by researchers. Following each of the focus group discussions, researchers reviewed the transcripts and grouped emerging themes.

### **Informed Consent**

Researchers followed consent procedures established by the Human Subjects Protection Review Committee at the University of Southern Mississippi for this research project.

### **Data Analysis**

Researchers used a systematic process to identify emerging themes. At the end of each focus group, researchers met to discuss the results from each of the focus group discussions to correlate similar responses from different participants. Responses were then calculated for each focus group to quantify the discussions. Descriptive statistics were utilized and consisted of frequencies and percentages of the total responses from the focus group discussions.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Characteristics of Participating School Nutrition Programs**

Four school districts representing Mountain Plains, Southwest, Southeast, and Western USDA regions participated in the focus group discussions. Middle/junior high school student enrollment at the participating school districts was between 200 to almost 2,000 students. The number of middle/junior high schools per district ranged from one to almost forty. Average daily participation in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) varied from 30% to 97%, with an average participation rate of 63.5%. The percentage of middle/junior high school students approved to receive free and reduced priced meals ranged from 28% to 99% at the participating school districts.

### **Focus Groups with Middle/Junior High School Students**

Thirty four middle/junior high school students from four school districts participated in the focus group discussions. Fifty percent of the students eat lunch in the school cafeteria, 26.5% do not eat lunch in the school cafeteria, and 23.5% sometimes eat lunch in the school cafeteria. Results from the focus group discussions suggest that at the middle/junior high school level there are two distinct groups of customers that school nutrition (SN) professionals should recognize: one group participates in the NSLP daily, and the other group participates occasionally or not at all in the NSLP. Of the students who eat lunch in the school cafeteria, some of the reasons stated were (a) hunger (36%), (b) don't have to carry lunch/make lunch (18%), and (c) no other choice (9%). For the students who do not eat lunch in the school cafeteria, 29% do not like the appearance and taste of school lunch, 29% prefer food from home, and 14% do not participate because of the bad reputation of the cafeteria. The most cited attributes students like about their school lunch were the following: desserts, specific food items (such as wing baskets, popcorn

chicken, and pretzels), and hot foods. Undercooked, hard, rotten, expired, cold, not fresh, and soggy foods were the most cited attributes students do not like about their school lunch.

When students were asked “*Do you have enough time to eat?*” 19% responded they eat in a hurry in order to socialize, 14.3% do not have enough time to eat, and 14.3% depends on when you get in line. A few of the reasons stated for why they do not have enough time to eat were (a) schools try to cram too many things into one day (53%), (b) long lines (17.6%), and (c) distance to the cafeteria (11.8%). Favorite food/menu items among the middle/junior high school students included the following: desserts (22.6%), Chinese (16.1%), chicken (12.9%), pizza (9.7%), and frozen treats, such as slushy and Icee (9.7%). Over 10% of the students think school lunch is healthy, approximately 68% think school lunch is not healthy, and 21.4% think some things are and some things are not healthy. When the students who think school lunch is healthy were asked “*How are they healthy?*” the responses were (a) grilled food items, (b) use soy in place of meat, and (c) they wouldn’t make it not healthy. When students who think school lunch is not healthy were asked “*What do you think would make it healthy?*” the responses were (a) fresh/home cooked food, (b) baked instead of fried, (c) more fresh fruits and vegetables, and (d) cook the food properly.

On a scale of one to ten, participants rated their school lunch: five (30.8%), four (19.2%), six (15.4%), two (15.4%), and three (11.5%). Their responses to “*How they can make school lunch a 10*” were (a) make it more appealing, (b) better quality and well-cooked food, (c) make the food like they do in restaurants, and (d) have better desserts and more selection. When students were asked “*What would make you want to eat in the school cafeteria?*” 19.2% want good customer service/nicer lunch ladies, 15.4% want better appearance/décor/themes, 15.4% want different drinks/more selection, and 7.7% want music. For most of the focus group

questions, middle/junior high school students gave multiple single responses that were unrelated to the other responses and thus categorized as “*Other*.” Examples include “*I get à la carte everyday and my parents complain,*” “*can take things into study hall but only from the cafeteria,*” “*don’t like wheat stuff,*” and “*first person in line gets the best food.*” Table 1 illustrates the middle/junior high school student focus group questions and responses.

Table 1

*Middle/Junior High School Students’ Focus Group Questions and Percentages of Responses (N=34)*

<b>Focus Group Questions</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
Do you eat lunch in your school cafeteria?		
Yes	17	50.0%
No	9	26.5%
Sometimes	8	23.5%
On the days that you don’t eat lunch at the cafeteria, what do you eat? Where do you get your food from? (n=14)		
Home	5	35.7%
Do not eat	3	21.4%
Vending machine/à la carte	3	21.4%
Other	3	21.4%
What do you like about your school lunch? (n=32)		
Desserts	8	25.0%
Specific food items (wings basket, popcorn chicken, pretzels, etc.)	6	18.75%
Hot food	2	6.25%
Sometimes they have good food	2	6.25%
Quantity	2	6.25%
Other	12	37.5%
What don’t you like about your school lunch? (n=43)		
Food (undercooked, hard, rotten, expired, cold soggy, not fresh, etc.)	29	67.4%
No variety	4	9.3%
Other	10	23.3%

<sup>a</sup>Other. Represents multiple single responses given by middle/junior high school students.

*Table 1 continues*

(Table 1 continued)

*Middle/Junior High School Students' Focus Group Questions and Percentages of Responses (N=34)*

Focus Group Questions	N	%
What do you think about the prices charged for school lunch? (n=28)		
À la carte/snack bars too expensive	6	21.4%
Too high especially for what you get (amount & quality)	5	17.9%
Price difference between vending machine & cafeteria	3	10.7%
Other	14	50.0%
What do you do if you are not happy with the food you got from the school cafeteria? (n=29)		
Tell either the lunch lady or principal but they don't do anything about it	6	20.7%
Throw it away	4	13.8%
Don't tell anyone	3	10.3%
Give it to someone else	3	10.3%
Other	13	44.9%
How long are your lunch periods?		
35-40 minutes	10	29.4%
20-30 minutes (group was unsure)	9	26.5%
24 minutes	8	23.5%
30 minutes	7	20.6%
How do you know what is being served in the school cafeteria? (n=19)		
Bulletin	4	21.0%
Posted in cafeteria	4	21.0%
See the food when you get to the cafeteria	3	15.8%
Other	8	42.2%
What do you like about the menu in your school cafeteria? (n=9)		
Notifies us what is going to be served	2	22.2%
Different types of food	2	22.2%
Other	5	55.6%

<sup>a</sup>Other. Represents multiple single responses given by middle/junior high school students.

*Table 1 continues*

(Table 1 continued)

*Middle/Junior High School Students' Focus Group Questions and Percentages of Responses (N=34)*

Focus Group Questions	N	%
What is your favorite food/menu item from the school cafeteria? (n=31)		
Desserts (Fruit desserts & cookies)	7	22.6%
Chinese	5	16.1%
Chicken	4	12.9%
Pizza	3	9.7%
Frozen treats (slushy/Icee)	3	9.7%
Other	9	29.0%
Do you think school lunches are healthy? (n=28)		
Yes	3	10.7%
No	19	67.9%
Some things are. Some things are not.	6	21.4%
On a scale of 1-10, how would you rate your school lunch? (n=26)		
5	8	30.8%
4	5	19.2%
6	4	15.4%
2	4	15.4%
3	3	11.5%
What is the first thing you think of when someone asks you to describe your cafeteria? (n=34)		
Nasty/gross	5	14.7%
Ok	4	11.8%
Undercooked/unsanitary	4	11.8%
Food	4	11.8%
Not good quality (rubber, plastic, bland)	4	11.8%
Other	13	38.1%
What do you like about going out to eat at restaurants? (n=39)		
Good customer service	11	28.2%
Can have anything you want/customize order	8	20.5%
Bigger menus/more choices/variety	7	18.0%
More sanitary	3	7.7%
Other	10	25.6%

<sup>a</sup>Other. Represents multiple single responses given by middle/junior high school students.

*Table 1 continues*

(Table 1 continued)

*Middle/Junior High School Students' Focus Group Questions and Percentages of Responses (N=34)*

Focus Group Questions	N	%
What would make you want to eat in the cafeteria? (n=26)		
Good customer service/nicer lunch ladies	5	19.2%
Better appearance/décor/themes	4	15.4%
Different drinks/more selection	4	15.4%
Music	2	7.7%
Other	11	42.3%
Top 3 reasons - Why I eat school lunch (n=94)		
Food preference/certain food items	21	22.3%
Hungry	15	16.0%
No choice	12	12.8%
Convenience	10	10.6%
Socialize	7	7.4%
Other	29	30.9%
Top 3 reasons – Why I do not eat school lunch (n=99)		
Food quality	49	49.5%
Poor customer service	12	12.1%
Sanitation	8	8.0%
Long lines	7	7.0%
Other	23	23.2%

<sup>a</sup>Other. Represents multiple single responses given by middle/junior high school students.

The results of the focus groups identified five primary reasons why middle/junior high school students choose to participate in the NSLP: food preference, hungry, no choice, convenience, and socialize. Table 2 illustrates the themes and statements provided by students from most cited to least cited.

Table 2

*Focus Group Summary: Reasons Why Middle/Junior High School Students Choose to Eat School Lunch (N=34)*

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Statements</b>
Food Preference	Sometimes they serve my favorite food Can have something you wouldn't usually have for lunch Because they have some good food If they have certain food/menu items
Hungry	So I am not hungry all day We are starving To not be hungry Because I'm hungry
No Choice	Have no other choice Nothing else to eat It's the only cooked food we have I have to
Convenience	Saves time from making your lunch Don't have to waste time packing food for your lunch Don't have to carry a lunch I can sleep in longer
Socialize	Social time My friends are in the cafeteria Because of friends It's the only free time we get

Middle/junior high school students identified four primary reasons why they choose not to participate in the NSLP: food quality, customer service, sanitation, and long lines. Table 3 illustrates the themes and statements provided by students from most cited to least cited.

Table 3

*Focus Group Summary: Reasons Why Middle/Junior High School Students Choose Not to Eat School Lunch (N=34)*

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<b>Themes</b>	<b>Statements</b>
Food Quality	Undercooked food
	Not fresh
	Rubber/plastic
	Expired foods
Customer Service	Mean lunch ladies
	Poor customer service
	Mad lunch lady
	No friendly service
Sanitation	It is not all that clean
	Unsanitary
	Lunch room cleanliness
	The lunch room is not clean
Long Lines	Long lines
	I have to wait forever

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Focus group responses indicated that middle/junior high school students evaluated food items based on the following attributes: quality, appearance/presentation, freshness, properly cooked, taste, and variety.

### **Focus Groups with School Nutrition Professionals**

Twenty-nine SN professionals, 13 (44.8%) school nutrition (SN) directors and 16 (55.2%) middle/junior high school SN managers, participated in the focus group discussions. The most cited responses for what SN professionals like best about the school lunch they serve were (a) lots of fresh fruits and vegetables, (b) options/variety/choices, (c) very healthy, and (d)

high quality food that taste good. SN professionals identified hot and spicy food, fast food, and grab and go items as the type of food items middle/junior high school students prefer. When the SN directors and middle/junior high school SN managers were asked, “*In your opinion, why do students choose not to eat school lunches?*” the two primary responses were “students want to socialize” and “peer pressure/cool factor.” Some of the challenges they identified with middle/junior high school student participation were (a) school administrators/principals having restrictions regarding socializing during lunch, (b) perception of school lunch, and (c) menu fatigue. Table 4 illustrates the SN professionals’ focus group questions along with sample responses.

Table 4

*School Nutrition Professionals’ Focus Group Questions and Sample Responses (N=29)*

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**Focus Group Question**

• **Response**

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What do you like best about the school lunch you serve?

- We give them a lot of fresh fruits & vegetables
- We offer lots of different entrées/variety/choices
- We serve a very healthy lunch
- We give them high quality food that tastes good

In your opinion, what type of food items do middle/junior high school students prefer?

- Hot and spicy foods
- What they consider “fast food”
- Grab ‘n Go/Quick and easy to handle food items

In your opinion, why do students choose not to eat school lunches?

- They want to socialize
- Peer pressure/cool factor
- Long lines

Do students have enough time to eat?

- No
- 

*Table 4 continues*

(Table 4 continued)

*School Nutrition Professionals' Focus Group Questions and Sample Responses (N=29)*

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**Focus Group Question**

• **Response**

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If students are unhappy with the meal items they have been served:  
What can they do? How do you respond?

- Find out what the problem is: Is it the food or did they make the wrong choice
- Have established rules and regulations for this type of situation

What is the average daily participation for the middle/junior high school?

- 86% - 90%
- 71% - 79%
- 81% - 93%

What are some of the challenges you face with middle/junior high school student participation and/or satisfaction?

- School administrators/principals having restrictions regarding socializing during lunch
- Perception of school lunch
- Menu fatigue

How do you develop or plan strategies to improve student participation at the middle/junior high school level? Is there a committee for this?

- Menu advisory committee
- No committee

How do participation rates in the middle/junior high school affect your district's SN program? Does participation in the middle/junior high school off-set your losses in the high school?

- They don't affect it
- Participation is higher in the middle/junior high schools than in the high schools

How important is it for you to know the issues that impact participation in your middle/junior high schools?

- Very important
- Helps us plan and develop strategies

How has the implementation of the wellness policy impacted student participation and/or satisfaction?

- Wellness policy has geared our directions to address the entire population
- Don't think that our wellness policy does what it needs to do
- Not at all, our Wellness Policy is set at the district level; it is loosely defined; there is
- not much to it

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*Table 4 continues*

(Table 4 continued)

*School Nutrition Professionals' Focus Group Questions and Sample Responses (N=29)*

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**Focus Group Question**

- **Response**

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What information do SN professionals need to support their efforts in improving student participation and/or satisfaction in middle/junior high schools?

*SN Directors*

- Team approach, include the SN managers, the principals, and teachers
- The tough part is not the kids changing and growing with the times; it is us changing as well.
- Realize that the kids want customer service

*Middle/Junior High School SN Managers*

- If you have a food item that is not moving, offer samples of new items.
  - They are willing to try a new product based on how it is presented;
  - customers look at the display
  - Good atmosphere for the kids to come into
- 

Both SN directors and middle/junior high school SN managers stated that students really enjoy the taste of the food and the variety/choices offered. They also stated that students really like the SN staff because of the good customer service they receive from the “lunch ladies” in their cafeteria. SN professionals agreed that knowing the issues that impact participation in their middle/junior high schools is very important to them. Their advice to other SN professionals for improving middle/junior high student participation was to treat students as customers, talk to the students to get their input, make a meal that is appealing to them, and have a good atmosphere for the students.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

High school participation in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) continues to decline and to present challenges for school nutrition (SN) programs across the country. This decline in participation begins at the middle/junior high school level. It is important for SN professionals to identify these factors that are driving this trend. Positive perceptions and satisfaction of middle/junior high school students with SN programs may have the greatest influence on their school lunch experience and on their willingness to participate in the NSLP once these students advance to high school. The purpose of this research study was to investigate the perceptions and barriers of middle/junior high school students with participating in the NSLP.

Findings from this study identified four emerging themes that affect participation in and satisfaction with NSLP among middle/junior high school students: food quality, customer service, sanitation, and long lines. Results indicated that enhancing the appearance, taste, and freshness of the foods and ensuring properly cooked food items will have the greatest effect on improving student perception of food quality. This is a significant factor for SN professionals, because the results of the focus group discussion identified food quality as the top reason middle/junior high school students do not eat school lunch. Yet, SN professionals reported that “serving high quality food that tastes good” as one of the attributes they like most about the school lunch they serve. Both middle/junior high school students and SN professionals agreed that long lines in the cafeteria are an issue, and students not wanting to wait in line affect their decision to eat school lunch. SN professionals also mentioned one of the reasons students do not eat school lunch is because they want to socialize with friends. However, middle/junior high school students identified socializing as one of the top reasons they choose to eat school lunch in

the cafeteria. Students indicated that lunch in the cafeteria was one of the few times in the school day they could interact with their friends.

Responses from both focus group discussions suggested that there is a disconnect between the perception of SN professionals and the perception of middle/junior high school students regarding the student's school lunch experience. SN professionals indicated that middle/junior high school students are satisfied whereas students reported just the opposite. There are two distinct groups of middle/junior high school customers and each has different concerns. To address the needs of the students that are participating daily in the NSLP, SN professionals should develop strategies that focus on increasing customer satisfaction and retention. In regards to the group of students that participate occasionally or not at all, SN professionals should communicate with students to identify reasons they do not eat school lunch and to examine ways to address their concerns. Communication with students is a critical component for improving SN programs. Gaining a better understanding of middle/junior high school students' perceptions will assist SN professionals in providing products and services to satisfy these customers.

Results also suggested that SN directors and middle/junior high school SN managers should focus on staff friendliness and customer service, since middle/junior high school students indicated "poor customer service" and "mean lunch ladies" as the other primary reasons they do not eat school lunch. The students at the middle/junior high school level have grown up frequenting restaurants with their families, learning to recognize brands, and expecting good customer service. The customer service experience has also educated them on how to make decisions concerning what foods they will or will not eat. During the focus group discussion, advice SN professionals gave to improve middle/junior high school participation was to treat

students as customers, and talk to students to get their input. In accordance, the literature suggests that the best method to determine a customer's perception is to ask them (Meyer, 2000; Roseman & Niblock, 2006). SN professionals can conduct focus groups with middle/junior high school students in their districts to identify ways to improve these factors that are affecting student participation in and satisfaction with the NSLP. To improve participation, SN professionals need to listen to the concerns of students and explore the best course of action to address their needs. This opens up a line of communication where students will consider themselves not only as stakeholders but also as valued customers.

The top five reasons middle/junior high school students choose to eat school lunch were (a) food preference, (b) hungry, (c) no choice, (d) convenience, and (e) socialize. SN professionals can use this information to focus on promotional efforts that will support the reasons why middle/junior high school students choose to eat school lunch. Previous studies have shown that this is a critical school age group, given that participation begins to decline at the middle/junior high school level (McConnell et al., 1997). SN professionals can develop strategies to obtain student "buy-in" at the middle/junior high school level increasing the probability of retaining these students in high school. Results from this study will guide the development of a customer service survey that can accurately measure perceptions of the NSLP and lead to a deeper understanding of middle/junior high school students' school lunch eating behavior.

### **Education and Training Implications**

The following are recommendations for additional education and training:

- Training modules are needed to assist SN professionals in conducting focus groups with students in an effort to determine issues affecting participation and satisfaction.

Modules should incorporate brainstorming activities to guide the SN staff in creating efficient and effective solutions to address these issues.

- Educational materials are needed to assist SN staff in understanding consumer psychology and behavior, especially at the middle/junior high school level. The food and service expectations of these students are evolving as they become more exposed and accustomed to commercial and culinary dining experiences.

### **Research Implications**

Outcomes from this study and feedback from participating SN professionals indicated there is a need to develop a customer service survey to assess the perceptions of middle/junior high school students and measure factors affecting participation in and satisfaction with the NSLP. Survey development should include instructions to guide SN professionals through the process of planning, administering, and interpreting the results. This will assist SN professionals when developing strategies and providing products and services that middle/junior high school students desire in a school foodservice operation.

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