

**Developing a Best Practice Guide for
Increasing High School Student Participation
and Satisfaction in the National School Lunch Program**



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National Food Service Management Institute The University of Mississippi

Building the Future Through Child Nutrition

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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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**DEVELOPING A BEST PRACTICE GUIDE FOR
INCREASING HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT PARTICIPATION
AND SATISFACTION IN THE NATIONAL SCHOOL LUNCH PROGRAM**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

School nutrition (SN) programs operating under the regulations of the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) continue to encounter the challenges of declining student participation at the high school level. The National Food Service Management Institute, Applied Research Division (NFSMI, ARD) has conducted a series of multi-faceted studies to address these issues. As a result, two high school foodservice surveys were developed: *The School Lunch Experience Survey* (Asperin, Nettles, & Carr, 2009), for students who eat school lunches three or more times per week; and *The Non-Participation Survey* (Asperin, Nettles, & Carr, 2008), for students who eat school lunches two or less times per week. The *High School Student Satisfaction and Non-Participation Survey Guide* (Asperin & Carr, 2009) was developed to provide step-by-step instructions for using the surveys and creating action plans framed around the “Continuous Quality Improvement” process.

Feedback received from SN directors indicated that in addition to providing survey tools to SN professionals, there was also a need for feasible strategies that could be used for completing the “Continuous Quality Improvement Action Plans” outlined in the *High School Student Satisfaction and Non-Participation Survey Guide*. Consequently, the primary objective of this project was to use a modified best practices research model (Mold & Gregory, 2003) to identify and confirm best practices and/or quality indicators for increasing participation rates and improving high school student satisfaction in SN programs operating under the regulations of the NSLP. To accomplish the project goal, two panels of exemplary SN professionals participated in

a work group session and a national review panel to systematically identify, describe, and combine best practices for dissemination (Mold & Gregory, 2003) to other SN professionals.

Four practice areas that affect high school student participation and satisfaction were identified based on results of NFSMI, ARD's *The Non-Participation Survey* (Asperin, Nettles, & Carr, 2008) and *The School Lunch Experience Survey* (Asperin, Nettles, & Carr, 2009). Draft best practice statements framed around the practice areas, "Food Quality," "Staff," "Program Reliability," and "Other Factors," were developed based on previous NFSMI, ARD research findings and pertinent foodservice, SN, and marketing literature. Eight SN professionals were chosen to participate in an expert panel work group session to accomplish the following: review the wording of each best practice statement; classify statements under the appropriate research-based practice area; and group similar statements into goals. Using a guided evaluation form, expert panel members reviewed the results of the work group session. Then, members confirmed the list of best practice statements; the renaming of the practice area from "Other Factors" to "Marketing and Communications"; the definitions of key words; and the formatting of the resource.

The best practice guide was then drafted using suggestions from the expert panel with regards to definitions of key terms, instructions for using the guide, and evaluation scales. A final guided evaluation was completed by a review panel composed of SN directors previously involved in pilot testing *The Non-Participation Survey* and *The School Lunch Experience Survey*. The review panel ($N=11$) evaluated the following: appropriate grouping of best practice statements into goals and practice areas; ease of use of assessment scales; formatting; and general content validity of the resource.

The resulting best practice guide, *NFSMI Best Practice Guide for Increasing High School Student Participation and Satisfaction in the National School Lunch Program*, contains 75 best practice statements grouped into 13 goals that support the four practice areas (“Food Quality,” “Staff,” “Program Reliability,” and “Marketing and Communications”). There are two components to the guide, the “Baseline Assessment” and the “Progress Review.” Both are provided to assist SN professionals in evaluating operational performance based on the best practice areas.

The “Baseline Assessment” was designed to help the SN director/supervisor and/or SN manager to initially identify practices that are applicable to his/her SN program. Completing this assessment will help identify strategies that the SN program can continue to implement (or implement in the future) to maintain and/or increase high school student participation and satisfaction. Each best practice statement is assessed using a “Current Status” scale (*fully addressed, partially addressed, not addressed, and not applicable*). The user is then instructed to assign a priority level (*high, medium, and low*) for addressing the best practices as these pertain to the user’s SN program. Upon assessing the current status and priority level of the best practices, SN professionals can establish an action plan to address and prioritize the practices identified as needing attention.

The “Progress Review” was designed to measure how effectively the action plan has been implemented to address challenges identified during the “Baseline Assessment.” Each best practice statement is evaluated using an “Implementation Status” scale (*demonstrates excellence, area of growth, needs improvement, unsatisfactory, and not applicable*). SN professionals are advised to perform the progress review annually to facilitate continuous quality improvement.

This best practice guide provides SN professionals a research-based tool to evaluate operational practices for program improvement. Use of the best practice guide can help SN directors focus improvement efforts on best practices that will produce the most impact on high school students' participation in the NSLP and satisfaction with their school lunch experience.