

# **Variables Impacting School Foodservice Employees' Job Satisfaction**



**National Food Service Management Institute**  
The University of Mississippi

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# **National Food Service Management Institute The University of Mississippi**

## **Building the Future Through Child Nutrition**

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The purpose of NFSMI is to improve the operation of Child Nutrition Programs through research, education and training, and information dissemination. The Administrative Offices and Divisions of Technology Transfer and Education and Training are located in Oxford. The Division of Applied Research is located at The University of Southern Mississippi in Hattiesburg.

### **MISSION**

The mission of the NFSMI is to provide information and services that promote the continuous improvement of Child Nutrition Programs.

### **VISION**

The vision of the NFSMI is to be the leader in providing education, research, and resources to promote excellence in Child Nutrition Programs.

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## Variables Impacting School Foodservice Employees' Job Satisfaction

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### Executive Summary

Because they feed approximately 28.5 million students daily, school foodservice operations impact many customers (United States Department of Agriculture, 2004). Studies have shown that school foodservice staff influence students' satisfaction with the school nutrition programs (Meyer, Conklin, & Carr, 1997; Meyer, 1998; Meyer, 2002). Sneed (1988) reported that job characteristics such as variety, autonomy, task identity, feedback, dealing with others, and friendship opportunities were not significantly related to job satisfaction for either school foodservice employees or managers and that school foodservice employees were least satisfied with pay and opportunities for promotion. Nettles and Partlow (1990) also found that job security and pay were the two lowest ranking satisfaction variables measured. They found that the type of production system and environmental factors of temperature, noise, and lighting did not impact day-to-day routines. Because employees are a vital component in the operation of a successful and financially sound school foodservice program, a research project was designed by the National Food Service Management Institute (NFSMI), Applied Research Division (ARD) to further investigate factors that impact job satisfaction of school foodservice employees and to determine whether foodservice employees' job satisfaction affects students' satisfaction with school foodservice programs.

In this study, the population used was schools contracting for the first time during 2004 with the Foodservice Analysis and Benchmarking Service (FABS) for analysis of NFSMI school foodservice surveys. FABS is a collaborative service between The University of Southern Mississippi and the NFSMI Applied Research Division (ARD). Of the approximately 100 employees in the population, 27 returned surveys (27% return rate). Demographics showed that 16 participants in the survey had attended some college, 9 had worked in school foodservice fewer than 5 years, and 12 had worked in school foodservice longer than 5 years. Complete demographics are included in the report.

The school was used as the unit of analysis. Due to the limited number of employees in comparison to the school's student population, it was necessary to collapse and aggregate the data for analysis. Results showed a significant difference between employees' satisfaction scores and students' overall satisfaction with the school foodservice. Multiple linear regression did not show a relationship between the employees' satisfaction with the job and students' overall satisfaction with the school foodservice program. However, this may be due to the small sample size, which is a limitation of the study. Job characteristics most liked by participants were working with students and having good co-workers. Aspects they would most like to change about their job were lack of hours, low pay, and inadequate equipment/facilities.

Although employees may desire more hours, higher wages, better facilities, and adequate equipment, in this study these factors did not impact their job satisfaction. It may be that the reward of having student contact and good co-workers is enough to satisfy employees. Therefore, school foodservice programs should highlight the benefits of working with children and good co-workers when recruiting new employees. School foodservice directors should focus on the positive aspects of working in school foodservice operations, and possibly the impact of wage and hours could be decreased.

## **Introduction**

Foodservice assistants in school foodservice operations nationwide are closely involved in receiving food products, preparing and holding food, and serving meals to students, teachers, and administrators. They are involved with every aspect of ensuring that customers receive high quality meals. School foodservice operations, which feed approximately 28.5 million students daily, impact many customers (USDA, 2004). According to the National Restaurant Association, foodservice employees have a direct impact on customer satisfaction and in creating repeat customers (Rice, 1997). School foodservice staff influences students' satisfaction with the school foodservice program. In studies conducted by the Applied Research Division (ARD) of the National Food Service Management Institute (NFSMI), Staff was a major factor influencing customer satisfaction for high school and middle/junior high school students and for school teachers/administrators (Meyer, Conklin, & Carr, 1997; Meyer, 1998; Meyer, 2002).

A literature review found that job satisfaction of school foodservice workers was measured in three studies. Sneed (1988) studied foodservice employees and managers in 50 Georgia school foodservice programs. The results showed that job characteristics were not significantly related to job satisfaction for either employees or managers. Results showed that employees were most satisfied with the work (1.8 on a 7-point scale with 1 as strongly agree and 7 as strongly disagree) and were least satisfied with pay and opportunities for promotion (4.9 and 4.1 respectively).

Nettles and Partlow (1990) studied school foodservice in eight elementary schools and two secondary schools in one medium-sized midwestern school district. They found that the type of production system and environmental factors of temperature, noise, and lighting did not impact day-to-day job routines. Overall, employees were satisfied with the job (5.6 on a 7-point scale). However, pay and job security were the two lowest ranking variables measured. Also, a difference was found between part-time and full-time employees with full-time employees being more satisfied than part-time employees.

Bartlett (1999) found that the variables feedback, job clarity, and autonomy were important in explaining job satisfaction of school foodservice employees. Dealing with students was not significantly related to job satisfaction of school foodservice employees.

School foodservice operations are under great pressure to maintain customer satisfaction and financial stability in an environment characterized by shrinking federal, state, and local funding and greater competition for a shrinking labor pool. Therefore, a research project was designed by the ARD to further investigate factors that impact job satisfaction of foodservice employees and to determine whether foodservice assistants' job satisfaction impacts students' satisfaction with school foodservice programs.

## **Method**

This study was the first phase of a two-part project. The major objective of this study was to identify variables that had an impact on job satisfaction of employees. These variables

would be validated later in the second year of the study through a national survey. The second objective was to determine whether the job satisfaction of school foodservice employees had an impact on students' satisfaction with the school foodservice program. This study was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at The University of Southern Mississippi (USM). SPSS 12.0 for Windows was used for data analysis. Multiple linear regression was used to determine whether a relationship existed between students' overall satisfaction with the foodservice program and employees' satisfaction with their job. Analysis of variance was used to determine whether differences existed between employee satisfaction and variables of education, length of time worked in the school, length of time worked in school foodservice, and hours spent as server or cashier. A paired t test was used to determine whether a difference existed between employees' satisfaction scores and students' satisfaction scores.

Schools contracting with Foodservice Analysis and Benchmarking Service (FABS) for analysis of the NFSMI school foodservice surveys were used as the population for the study. FABS is a collaborative service between USM and the NFSMI Applied Research Division. As schools or districts conducting an NFSMI foodservice survey for the first time in 2004 contracted with FABS, they were asked by the researcher to participate in an employee study. Fourteen schools with approximately 100 employees agreed to participate in the study.

The researcher discussed procedures for the study with each director prior to mailing survey materials. The director received a packet including a letter asking him/her to distribute the surveys to employees, a letter to employees explaining the study and requesting their participation, and a postage-paid return envelope. The employees were asked to complete the survey anonymously and return in the postage-paid envelope. The employee letter is shown in Appendix A. Each survey was pre-coded with the same identification number used by the school completing the NFSMI foodservice survey. Using identification numbers allowed easy matching of employees' surveys with students' satisfaction scores from the NFSMI foodservice survey.

A nine-question survey was used. The first survey question asked employees to identify their satisfaction level with their present school foodservice position. A 7-point scale of 1 as very dissatisfied to 7 as very satisfied was used. Two open-ended questions were included to identify both variables leading to job satisfaction and dissatisfaction of employees. Six additional demographic questions were posed. A complete survey is found in Appendix B.

## **Results**

Twenty-seven surveys were returned from six schools, for a return rate of 27%. One director telephoned the researcher in December 2004 and explained that her district has site-based management and that the principal administered the survey in an employees' meeting. He had employees sit at separate tables and complete the survey plus additional

questions. He then collected the surveys. Because the specified protocol for the study was not followed, these surveys were not included.

The survey sample included 26 females and 1 male. Of those participating, 9 had completed high school, 16 had fewer than 2 years of college, 1 had completed college, and 1 person did not answer this question. When asked how long they had worked in the school, 9 indicated that they had worked there longer than 5 years. Participants were also asked the length of time they had worked in school foodservice; 12 responded longer than 5 years. Table 1 shows complete results of these work history questions. Employees were asked to identify the number of hours they worked in direct contact serving students as either a server or cashier. Of the 26 answering this question, 20 spent more than 2 hours in contact with students. Other tasks performed by employees included food preparation, cooking, baking, and washing dishes.

Table 1  
Length of Time Working in the School and School Foodservice

Years	< 1	1-2	3-5	6-10	>10
School	5	5	8	5	4
School foodservice	3	4	8	8	4

n=27

Results showed that employees were very satisfied, with a mean score of 6.07. Although elementary school employees were more highly satisfied (mean 6.6) than high school employees (mean 5.9), no significant difference existed. There were no differences in satisfaction among the sample according to education, length of time worked at the school, length of time worked in school foodservice, hours spent in contact with students as a cashier or server, or other tasks performed.

To measure whether the employees' satisfaction level had an impact on students' satisfaction with the school foodservice program, a paired sample *t* test was used. Due to the limited number of employees in comparison to the school's student population, it was necessary to collapse and aggregate the data for analysis. The unit of analysis was the school. Data were collapsed into one mean score for employees and one mean score for students to avoid violating equality of variance assumptions. Results showed that significant differences did exist between employees' job satisfaction scores and students' overall satisfaction with the school foodservice,  $t(5) = 7.92, p = .001$ . However, multiple linear regression showed no relationship between employee satisfaction and student satisfaction. However, results could be due to low sample size.

When asked what they liked best about their job, 15 responded working with the students and 5 stated co-workers. These variables are similar to two of the characteristics identified by NFSMI ARD in a report *Characteristics of Successful Long-Term Employees* (Meyer, 2002). When study participants were asked what they would change about their job, 12 stated either more hours or higher pay, and 5 stated improved facilities or repaired equipment. These results are consistent with those of Nettles and Partlow

(1990) and Sneed (1988). In addition, two participants stated they liked their job just as it was. Complete results of these two questions are shown in Appendices C and D respectively.

### **Limitations**

Several major limitations impacted this study. First, the population size was smaller than expected. Fewer schools than average contracted for the first time in 2004 with FABS for analysis of NFSMI foodservice surveys. Also, the researcher felt that having employees individually complete and return the survey rather than having them complete the survey and return them as a group from each school adversely affected the return rate. The third limitation was that only elementary and high schools were represented in the population.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Although employees may desire more hours, higher wages or better facilities and equipment, in this study those factors did not impact job satisfaction. It may be that the reward of having student contact and good co-workers are enough to satisfy employees. Interestingly, two employees would not change anything about their job. Although employees' attitudes can impact students' satisfaction, that result was not shown in this study. Employees were more highly satisfied with their job than students were satisfied with the overall school foodservice meal program. Therefore, students' overall satisfaction scores were not impacted by employees' satisfaction with the job. Even though the sample was low, this shows what dedicated employees school foodservice operations attract.

In the NFSMI ARD study *Characteristics of Successful Long-Term Employees*, the attributes *likes children, relates well to the child as a customer, has respect for others, gets along with others, enjoys working with the public, and does not gossip about others on the job* were found by school foodservice directors to be important interpersonal skills for successful long-term employees. Among variables identified by employees in this study *working with children* and *having good co-workers* mirror characteristics identified by directors. To have good co-workers one must be a good co-worker and exhibit interpersonal skills of *having respect for others, getting along with others, enjoying working with the public, and not gossiping about others on the job*. Both employees and directors agree that *working with children* and *having good co-workers* are important job characteristics of school foodservice employees.

School foodservice directors often have little control over wage and salary issues; wages and benefits are frequently set by school boards. By focusing on the positive attributes of *working with children* and *having good co-workers* during marketing, recruitment, and hiring of future school foodservice employees, employers might overcome employees' discontent with the low wages and short hours.

Because the results of this study mirror other studies and school foodservice directors have little control over wages and benefits, it is recommended that NFSMI not continue this line of research and not conduct the follow-up survey as originally planned.

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**Appendix A**  
**School Foodservice Employee Letter**

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## Appendix A

October 19, 2004

Dear School Foodservice Employee,

Your school foodservice director has agreed to participate in a research project being conducted by the National Food Service Management Institute. This survey is designed to identify what foodservice employees like and do not like about their jobs.

Approximately 10-15 schools nationwide will be asked to complete this survey.

Information from this survey will be used to develop a more comprehensive survey that will be distributed nationwide. Information gathered from this overall study will help school foodservice programs recruit and retain the best employees.

All information is anonymous and confidential. The survey is voluntary and participation may be discontinued at any time without penalty or prejudice. The survey will take only 5-8 minutes. The researcher is the only person who will read your sheet and know the school identification number. Please assist us with this project. Complete the form in pencil and place in the postage paid return envelope provided.

This project has been reviewed by the Human Subjects Protection Review Committee, which ensures that research projects involving human subjects follow federal regulations. Any questions or concerns about rights as a research subject should be directed to the chair of the Institutional Review Board, The University of Southern Mississippi, Box 5147, Hattiesburg, MS 39406, (601) 266-6820. Any questions about this research study should be directed to:

Mary Kay Meyer  
Senior Research Scientist  
National Food Service Management Institute  
601-266-5773

Thank you for helping with this project and feeding our future leaders.

Sincerely,

Mary Kay Meyer, PhD, RD  
Senior Research Scientist

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**Appendix B**  
**School Foodservice Employee Survey**

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**Appendix C**  
**Like Best About Their Job**

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## Appendix C

### Like Best About Their Job

Comment	Frequency
Student contact	2
Working with kids	2
The students	1
Students and co-workers	1
The hours and having days off with my kids	1
The students	1
Working with the kids	1
Being involved with the children	1
Seeing the kids	1
Social time with the kids	1
I really like the kids telling me things	1
Interacting with the kids	1
Working with the children	1
People I work with and the kids	1
People who work with me	1
Ladies I work with, entrée choices and other choices	1
Ladies I work with, good monitors	1
Employees know the job and help one another	1
Working by myself	1
Wide selection of entrees and extras	1
Wide selection of high quality food and salad bar	1
Ability to work independently and as a group	1
Cool boss, freedom on the job, enjoy job and workers	1
Request for input by FSD	1
The hours I work	1

n=27

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**Appendix D**  
**Would Change About Their Job**

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## Appendix D

### Would Change About Their Job

Comment	Frequency
Need more hours	4
More hours	2
Higher pay and benefits	1
Better pay	1
Better wages and benefits	1
Better wages	1
Better wages that keep up with the district	1
Higher wages and better benefits	1
Add job classifications	1
I like it just the way it is	1
Nothing	1
New serving line	1
Better storage areas	1
Register located in better spot	1
Get broken equipment repaired faster	1
Make all schools have the POS system	1
Co-workers leaving problems at home	1
Large breakfast on Monday and supplies don't get here	1
Our attire	1
Take turns filling in at other schools, not by seniority	1
Wasting food	1
More fresh fruits and vegetables	1
Have a helper on busy days	1

n=27