
**DETERMINING THE PERCEPTIONS, PRACTICES, AND THE PERCEIVED
BARRIERS ASSOCIATED WITH SCHOOL PROFESSIONALS SERVING THE
NUTRITIONAL NEEDS OF THE PREK CHILD IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOL
SETTING**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Decision makers in public education are increasingly recognizing the benefit of positive early educational experiences for young children and are moving toward providing education programs for the PreKindergarten (PreK) child in the public school setting. At present, 40 states have at least one state-funded preschool program and other states have programs forthcoming. To date, there has been no research related to identifying issues associated with serving the nutritional needs of this new customer, the PreK child, in the school setting. To address this issue, the National Food Service Management Institute (NFSMI), Applied Research Division embarked upon a two-phase research study to explore the perceptions, practices, and the perceived barriers facing school food service directors, school food service managers, and other school professionals (principals, classroom teachers, and early education directors) faced with serving the nutritional needs of the PreK child in the public school setting.

In Phase I of the research study, four 2-hour focus group sessions were conducted. Four food service directors from selected school districts in Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, and Mississippi were contacted and asked to identify a school nutrition

manager, a principal, a classroom PreK teacher, and the early education director and/or federal program director responsible for special education to participate in the discussion sessions. The school professionals were asked semi-structured, open-ended questions designed to explore issues associated with serving the nutrition needs of the children. Following the focus groups, the researchers thematically coded the responses into meaningful categories that were used to develop survey statements for Phase II of the study.

Phase II of the research study utilized survey methodology. The 4 section questionnaire was developed from the qualitative data obtained from the focus group sessions. The survey contained three sections asking participants to indicate their agreement with practices, perceptions, and the perceived barriers related to serving the nutritional needs of the PreK child at their school. In the fourth section, participants were asked to provide information about themselves or their school district. The sample participants for the study were food service directors, food service managers, elementary school principals, PreK classroom teachers, and early education directors in public school districts with PreK programs. From a listing of public school districts with PreK programs, researchers selected a stratified random proportional sample of 700 food service directors in public school districts with PreK programs representing the seven USDA regions (N=3500). Five packets of surveys were mailed to the food service director who distributed the packets to the food service manager, elementary school principal, PreK classroom teacher, and early education director. A follow-up letter was mailed to food service directors asking them to complete and return their survey and to

remind the school professionals to complete their surveys as well. The research sample generated a 21% response rate from the school professionals.

Respondents were provided with 42 statements regarding practices in serving the nutritional needs of the PreK child at their school and were asked to indicate their agreement with each statement using a scale ranging from 1, strongly disagree, to 4, strongly agree with a fifth response for “not applicable.” Practices with the highest agreement mean ratings were: “I encourage children to try new foods” ($3.59 \pm .54$), “the food service staff follows the USDA meal pattern” ($3.58 \pm .56$), “I encourage children to try the foods offered” ($3.58 \pm .55$), “my immediate supervisor supports a consistent routine for this age child” ($3.56 \pm .56$), and “children who do not have lunch money are fed following school policy” ($3.56 \pm .58$). Principal component factor analysis with varimax rotation generated seven practice factors: Communication and Training, Nutritious Meals and Meal Experiences, Administrative Support, Encouragement, Mealtime Opportunities, Dining Environment, and Healthy Wellness Practices. Analysis of variance resulted in significant differences by job titles of school professionals for four factors: Encouragement, Administrative Support, Nutritious Meals and Meal Experiences, and Communication and Training. Respondents were provided with 24 statements concerning perceptions in serving the nutritional needs of the PreK child at their school and were asked to indicate their agreement with each statement using the same 4 point scale. Perceptions with the highest agreement mean ratings were: “children feel safe in the cafeteria” ($3.42 \pm .57$), “school professionals can influence PreK children to make healthy food choices” ($3.40 \pm .57$), “children view the cafeteria as a friendly place” ($3.38 \pm .58$), and “teaching the child to make good food choices is challenging”

(3.30 \pm .63). Respondents were also presented with 18 statements regarding barriers that could inhibit school professionals from serving the nutritional needs of the PreK child at their school and were asked to indicate their agreement using the same 4 point scale.

Barriers with the highest agreement mean ratings were: “PreK children require additional time to eat” (3.10 \pm .72), “school staff needs continuous training on nutrition education” (3.06 \pm .68), “meals brought from home consist of unhealthy snack items” (3.04 \pm .73), and “handling trays and opening items present challenges for the PreK child” (3.01 \pm .73).

The findings of this research suggest that serving the nutritional and developmental needs of PreK children is a more wide-ranging and complex undertaking than just serving meals. A team approach should be implemented to fully meet the needs of the PreK child. Team members should include but not be limited to the food service director, food service manager, PreK teachers, principals, and early education director. Effective communication among team members is essential. Understanding how each team member can and does contribute in each practice area will enhance the provision of nutritional services for the PreK child.

Recommendations for additional education and training include the development of training modules to address each of the seven practice factors. The modules should provide strategies to address the significant differences identified in the research in order to improve the outcome of serving the PreK child. Other training modules could elucidate the appropriate role of each school professional and highlight best practices in serving the nutritional needs of the PreK child in the public school setting. Educational materials are needed to help school professionals address developmental issues of the PreK child.

Since PreK children are new customers in the public school setting, food service directors, managers, and staff need to be aware of the unique needs of 3- and 4-year-old children. Modules should address menu concerns, equipment issues, and motor/skill development for application in their school nutrition program. Training materials are needed to address the importance of effective communication among all members of the school team who service the nutritional needs of the PreK child. Recommendations should include examples of best practices in schools with effective school teams as well as strategies for improving communication. Education materials should be developed for food service directors and other school team professionals to utilize to overcome the barriers in their specific operations. Recommendations could be delineated on what could be done to decrease the barrier. For example, if opening food items presents challenges for PreK children, recommendations might be to purchase items that eliminate this problem or to provide closer adult-child interaction during mealtime. Additional education materials are needed on nutrition and menu recommendations to target parents of PreK children.