



Insight

A Publication for Child Nutrition Professionals from the National Food Service Management Institute

Best Practice Guide for Improving High School Student Participation and Satisfaction in the National School Lunch Program

Over the past several years, 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. Although increasing student participation is important to the success of SN programs, it is also advantageous for SN directors to focus on retaining the customer base that already participates in the NSLP. In light of this, the National Food Service Management Institute, Applied Research Division (NFSMI, ARD), conducted a series of multi-faceted studies addressing high school student satisfaction and declining participation at the high school level. As a result, two high school foodservice surveys were developed, namely *The School Lunch Experience Survey* and *The Non-Participation Survey*. *The High School Student Satisfaction and Non-Participation Survey Guide* was then developed to provide step-by-step instructions for using the surveys and for

developing action plans framed around the Continuous Quality Improvement process.

Outcomes of these studies showed that in addition to providing survey tools to SN professionals, there was also a need to develop a compilation of best practices and/or strategies that complement the Continuous Quality Improvement Action Plans outlined in the *High School Student Satisfaction and Non-Participation Survey Guide*.

OBJECTIVES

The specific objectives of this project included the following:

- Identify sustainable best practices used by successful SN programs to increase high school student participation and satisfaction;

- Classify best practices into identifiable practice areas and actionable goals;
- Develop a best practice guide that can be used as an assessment tool for establishing baseline performance and evaluating the improvement of the SN program;
- Validate and evaluate the usefulness of the best practice guide; and
- Disseminate the information by providing the best practice guide to SN professionals in an accessible, downloadable format on the NFSMI Web site.

METHODOLOGY

This project used a modified best practices research model (BPRM) to identify and confirm best practices and/or quality indicators for increasing participation rates and improving high school student satisfaction.



Phase I

- Four practice areas that affect high school student participation and satisfaction were identified based on results from the NFSMI, ARD *The Non-Participation Survey* and *The School Lunch Experience Survey*.
- Draft best practice statements were developed from previous NFSMI, ARD research findings and pertinent foodservice, school nutrition, and marketing literature.
- Eight SN professionals were chosen to participate in an expert panel work group session to (1) review the wording of each best practice statement, (2) classify statements under the appropriate research-based practice area, and (3) group similar statements into goals.
- Expert panel members reviewed the results of the work group session and confirmed the list of best practice statements using a guided evaluation.

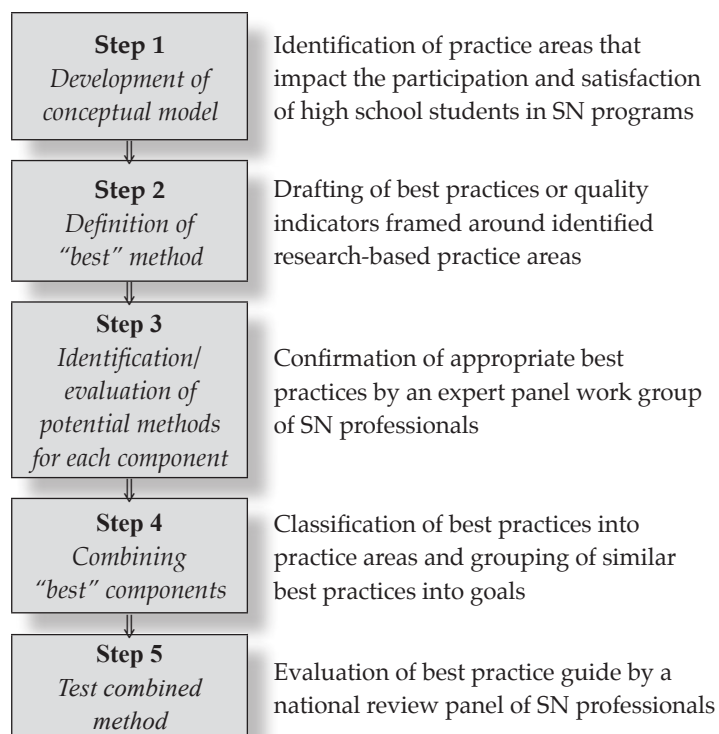
Phase II

- The best practice guide was drafted using suggestions from the expert panel, with regard to definition of key terms, instructions for using the guide, and evaluation scales.
- A final guided evaluation was completed by a review panel composed of exemplary SN directors previously involved in pilot testing *The Non-Participation Survey* and *The School Lunch Experience Survey*.
- The review panel evaluated the following items:
 - 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.

National Review Panel Evaluation of Draft Best Practice Resource (N=11)	
Evaluation Statements	Level of Agreement ^a Mean ± Standard Deviation
The best practice guide is organized in a logical sequence.	3.73 ± .47
The best practice guide uses language that is familiar to school nutrition professionals.	3.64 ± .50
The best practice guide offers sufficient recommendations to school nutrition directors for increasing participation and satisfaction of high school students in the National School Lunch Program.	3.64 ± .50
The guide gives guidance for selecting the appropriate strategies for the school nutrition program.	3.18 ± .60
The format of the best practice guide is easy to use and understand.	3.73 ± .47
The Current Status and Priority Level scales are appropriate for completing a Baseline Assessment.	3.46 ± .52
The Implementation Status scale is appropriate for completing a Progress Review.	3.46 ± .52
The Baseline Assessment and the Progress Review are BOTH essential for using the best practice guide effectively.	3.64 ± .50
The best practice guide is a useful tool for school nutrition professionals.	3.70 ± .67

^a Scale (Min/Max): 1=strongly disagree/4=strongly agree

Research Method



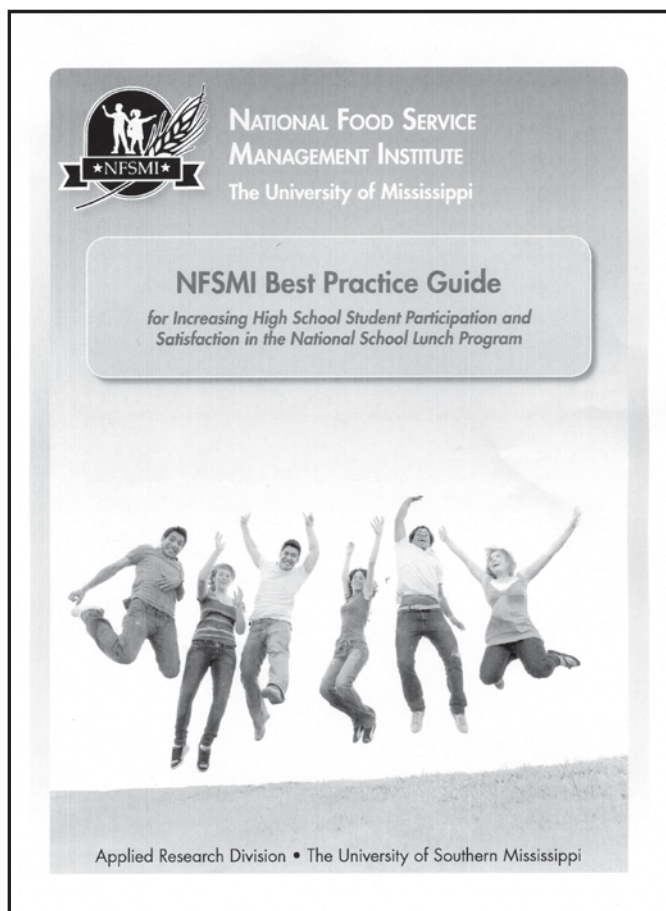
Definitions of Best Practice Areas

- **Food Quality:** Practices that focus on improving the overall appeal of food to students (i.e., taste, appearance, aroma, and temperature)
- **Staff:** Practices that address student concerns regarding staff attitude toward work, service efficiency, and staff behavior toward students
- **Program Reliability:** Practices that reflect the SN program's ability to meet NSLP regulations and student expectations on the delivery of food and services in a consistent, timely and reliable manner
- **Marketing and Communications:** Practices that affect the awareness of students and other stakeholders regarding services offered through the NSLP. This also includes practices that affect and/or influence the students' dining experience and perception of the NSLP.

FINDINGS

The resulting best practice guide, *NFSMI Best Practice Guide for Increasing High School Student Participation and Satisfaction in the National School Lunch Program*, follows a user-friendly format and is readily accessible online.

- The introduction provides a brief overview of the best practice guide research, and also includes a section with definitions of key terms.
- The guide contains 75 best practice statements grouped into 13 goals that support the four practice areas ("Food Quality," "Staff," "Program Reliability," and "Marketing and Communications").
- The two major components to the guide are the "Baseline Assessment" and the "Progress Review." Both are provided to assist SN professionals in evaluating operational performance based on the best practice areas.



Baseline Assessment

This section is designed to help the SN director/supervisor and/or SN manager 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.

Excerpt from Baseline Assessment Section

Baseline Assessment

Practice Area: Food Quality

In this section, you will consider the goals and best practices that focus on improving the overall appeal of food to high school students. This includes characteristics such as taste, appearance, aroma, freshness, temperature, variety, and perceived healthfulness of menu items.

Goal 1 The school nutrition director/designee establishes a system to effectively plan and prepare nutritious, high quality, good tasting meals that appeal to high school students.	Current Status				Priority Level		
	Fully Addressed	Partially Addressed	Not Addressed	Not Applicable	High	Medium	Low
The school nutrition director/designee and/or manager establish a menu planning team that may include, but is not limited to, school nutrition staff, high school students, school wellness team members, and other school staff.	2	1	0	N/A	H	M	L
Healthier versions are provided for menu items commonly preferred by high school students (e.g., whole grain pizza with low-fat cheese, hamburgers on whole wheat buns).	2	1	0	N/A	H	M	L
The planned menu offers a variety of food choices to accommodate the nutritional, ethnic, and religious/cultural diversity of students.	2	1	0	N/A	H	M	L
The school nutrition manager ensures that the appropriate quantity is prepared.	2	1	0	N/A	H	M	L
The school nutrition staff is trained to develop and follow standardized recipes.	2	1	0	N/A	H	M	L

Total Score _____ ÷ # of BPs (exclude N/A) _____ = Goal Score _____

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Progress Review

This section is 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.

Excerpt from Progress Review Section

Progress Review

PRACTICE AREA: FOOD QUALITY

In this section, you will evaluate your performance on the best practices that focus on improving the overall appeal of food to high school students. This includes characteristics such as taste, appearance, aroma, freshness, temperature, variety, and perceived healthfulness of menu items.

Goal 1 The school nutrition director/designee establishes a system to effectively plan and prepare nutritious, high quality, good tasting meals that appeal to high school students.	Implementation Status				
	Demonstrates Excellence	Area of Strength	Needs Improvement	Unsatisfactory	Not Applicable
The school nutrition director/designee and/or manager establish a menu planning team that may include, but is not limited to, school nutrition staff, high school students, school wellness team members, and other school staff.	3	2	1	0	N/A
Healthier versions are provided for menu items commonly preferred by high school students (e.g., whole grain pizza with low-fat cheese, hamburgers on whole wheat buns).	3	2	1	0	N/A
The planned menu offers a variety of food choices to accommodate the nutritional, ethnic, and religious/cultural diversity of students.	3	2	1	0	N/A
The school nutrition manager ensures that the appropriate quantity is prepared.	3	2	1	0	N/A
The school nutrition staff is trained to develop and follow standardized recipes.	3	2	1	0	N/A
Total Score _____ ÷ # of BPs (exclude N/A) _____ = Goal Score _____					

PRACTICAL USE OF THIS INFORMATION

This best practice guide provides SN professionals a research-based tool to evaluate operational practices for program improvement. The guide is organized in a logical sequence and uses language that is familiar to SN professionals. The best practice guide is easy to use and understand, and is available in a free downloadable format.

Suggestions and Implications for Using this Best Practice Guide

- SN professionals can use the Baseline Assessment to identify best practices applicable to their SN program.
- SN professionals can use the Baseline Assessment to identify strategies that can be included in an action plan designed to maintain and/or increase high school participation and/or satisfaction.
- SN professionals can use the Progress Review to measure the effectiveness of their action plan and to facilitate continuous quality improvement of their SN program.
- SN professionals can use the results from subsequent Progress Reviews in reporting program improvements to the district and/or school community.

For More Information

- Asperin, A. E., & Carr, D. (2009). *High school student satisfaction and non-participation survey guide: Internal benchmarking for school nutrition programs*. (Resource Item No. R-147-09). University, MS: National Food Service Management Institute.
- Asperin, A. E., & Castillo, A. (2009). *Developing a best practice guide for increasing high school student participation and satisfaction in the National School Lunch Program*. (Technical Report No. R-148-09). University, MS: National Food Service Management Institute.
- Asperin, A. E., Nettles, M. F., & Carr, D. H. (2009). *Exploring factors that affect the school lunch experience of high school students participating in the National School Lunch Program*. (Technical Report No. R-147-09). University, MS: National Food Service Management Institute.
- Asperin, A. E., Nettles, M. F., & Carr, D. H. (2008). *Investigation of factors impacting participation of high school students in the National School Lunch Program*. (Technical Report No. R-133-08). University, MS: National Food Service Management Institute.



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