



Insight

A Publication for Child Nutrition Professionals from the National Food Service Management Institute — Winter 2001

Hands-On Team Technical Assistance

O The Hands-On Team Technical Assistance (HOT) Project was a two-year pilot project funded by the United States Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service and managed by the National Food Service Management Institute (NFSMI). The project was designed to assist schools and School Food Authorities (SFAs) in implementing the goals of the Healthy School Meals Initiative through specialized on-site technical assistance on a no-fee basis. Consultants provided the one-time-only assistance in areas of need as determined by the participating SFAs during the period between December 1997 and January 2000.

Typically, the length of the on-site technical assistance was three days.

A mail survey was sent to the 137 SFAs who were provided technical assistance (December 1997 through January 2000). The purpose of this study was to determine the benefits of the HOT Project. The survey addressed the following questions:

- ◆ Did participating SFAs feel they benefited

from the technical assistance?

- ◆ Did the project help SFAs:
 - ◇ meet the nutritional goals as set forth in the Dietary Guidelines for Americans?
 - ◇ improve their menu planning?
 - ◇ increase their use of standardized recipes?
 - ◇ increase their use of nutritional analysis?
 - ◇ improve their procurement systems?
 - ◇ improve their serving lines and food handling?
 - ◇ become more knowledgeable about resources available to them?
 - ◇ make operational improvements (e.g. increased participation, and improved financial position)?
- ◆ Did the project lead to an increase in management capacity (e.g. increased morale, confidence, teamwork, or administrative support)?
- ◆ Have action plans prepared during the on-site technical assistance been implemented?

EVALUATION OF THE HOT PROJECT BY PARTICIPATING SFAS

A total of 96 school foodservice managers or directors responded to an NFSMI survey, for a response rate of approximately 70 percent (N = 137). The number of responses to each question did not always total 96 because some individuals did not answer all the questions. Survey respondents were asked an overall question, "Did the Hands-On Team service help you to improve your school food service?" Of the 92 responses to this question, 90 respondents (98%) answered "yes" to this question; two respondents answered "no."

Respondents also were asked which types of programs benefited from the technical assistance: breakfast, lunch, or other. Ninety-one respondents (95%) indicated the school lunch program

benefited. Sixty-two respondents (65%) chose the school breakfast program. In all cases where school breakfast was listed as having benefited, the school lunch program also benefited. The three responses for "other" included benefits for the warehouse, the district office, and neighboring schools. Only one respondent indicated "none" as an answer to this question.

Nutritional Goals

Respondents were asked whether or not their students were eating more meals that meet the Dietary Guidelines for Americans because of the services provided by the HOT Project. As shown in Figure 1, 59 individuals (65%) answered "yes" to this question and 23 (26%) answered "no" to

the question. Eight respondents (9%) answered, "Our meals already conformed to the guidelines."

Respondents also were asked to indicate how helpful the HOT services were in helping them achieve specific nutritional goals. Respondents were asked to check "does not apply" only if they had met specific goals prior to the site visit and therefore did not need help with it. The percent of respondents who reported the service was *helpful* or *very helpful* in **increasing** aspects of the menu items offered/served were as follows:

- ◆ Nutritional content of foods—78%
- ◆ Variety of foods—66%
- ◆ Servings of grains—62%
- ◆ Dietary fiber in meals—62%
- ◆ Servings of fruits—58%
- ◆ Servings of vegetables—57%

The percent of respondents who reported the service was *helpful* or *very helpful* in **decreasing** aspects of the menu items offered/served were as follows:

- ◆ Fat calories in foods—73%
- ◆ Sodium level of meals—57%
- ◆ % of heavily fortified or processed foods—52%

Respondents also were asked to give their opinions regarding three statements on other benefits from the technical assistance service. The percent of respondents who *agreed* or *strongly agreed* with the following statements were:

- ◆ We improved the way that foods we serve are presented because of this service—64%.
- ◆ We serve better tasting food because of this service—44%.
- ◆ We make better use of commodities because of this service—39%.

Menu Planning

Responses indicated that the service generally helped to improve menu planning, though in most cases, it did not lead to a change in the menu planning system used (food based, enhanced food based, nutrient standard). The following percent of respondents reported **increases** in:

- ◆ their understanding of the general rules for the menu planning system(s) used—72%,
- ◆ the number of program requirements met for the menu planning system used—52%, and
- ◆ the number of reimbursable meals from the menus planned and served—45%.

Standardized Recipes

Sixty-one respondents (65%) reported the service helped them in using and developing standardized recipes. Thirty-three individuals (35%) reported the service did not help them in the use of standardized recipes. However, 29 of these 33 respondents indicated they did not need help in

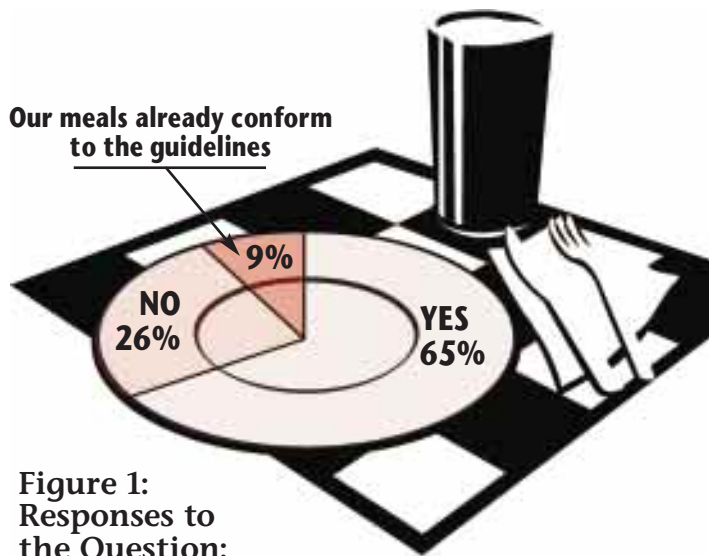


Figure 1:
Responses to
the Question:
Are your students eating more meals that meet the Dietary Guidelines for Americans because of the Hands-On Team service?
(N=90)

this area. Figure 2 shows responses regarding the impact of the service on the number of standardized recipes and procedures used. Specific ways the service helped respondents with regard to the use of standardized recipes included **some increase** in:

- ◆ the number of recipes they standardized—93%,
- ◆ the number of menus planned using standardized recipes and preparation techniques—87%, and
- ◆ staff acceptance of the use of standardized recipes and preparation techniques—84%.

Nutritional Analysis

Thirty-seven individuals (40%) reported receiving help in the nutritional analysis of meals. Fifty-five respondents (60%) indicated "no" for this item. Of the respondents receiving technical assistance in nutritional analysis, the following percent of respondents found the service **helpful** in:

- ◆ knowing what data are needed for nutrient analysis—89%,
- ◆ using the nutrient analysis to make menu changes—89%,
- ◆ knowing how to evaluate the results of a nutritional analysis—87%,
- ◆ knowing the procedures for doing a weighted nutritional analysis—86%,
- ◆ managing their nutrient database—67%,
- ◆ increasing the number of processed foods entered in their database and used in menu analysis—65%, and
- ◆ selecting nutrient analysis software—43%.

Procurement

Technical assistance in procurement was provided. Twenty-six respondents (28%) indicated the service helped them in several areas related to procurement. Sixty-eight individuals (62%) reported they did not receive help in procurement.

Serving Lines

Technical assistance in improving serving lines was provided. Of the 94 respondents, answering “yes” to serving line assistance, 20 indicated that they added a food, pasta, or pizza bar; 7 added or planned to add a self-serve station; and 19 indicated “other.” Of the 19 responses in the “other” category, two did not specify what “other” meant. Among the responses in this category were merchandising better, offering more choices, and using more decorations in the high school dining areas.

Resource Utilization

One objective of the HOT project was to help SFAs identify and use available resources in the implementation of the Healthy School Meals Initiative. Eighty-six respondents (90%) *strongly agreed* or *agreed* with the statement, “I am more likely to look for resources to help me in my work because of this service.” Only six individuals (6%) *disagreed*, and four (4%) answered *does not apply* for this item.

Similarly, when asked how helpful the service was in “increasing your knowledge of resources available to school foodservice professionals,” 83

respondents (88%) indicated the service was *very helpful* or *somewhat helpful*. Only 5 respondents (5%) rated it as *not helpful*, and 6 (6%) answered *does not apply*.

Management Capacity

One set of benefits that resulted from the technical assistance was improvement in the management capacity of the participating SFAs. This included the important, but perhaps secondary, benefits of: increased staff morale, enhanced credibility of managers with staff, increased staff support for needed changes, increased administrative support for the school foodservice program, and the resolution of management issues/concerns. The following lists the percent of respondents who rated the service as *very helpful* or *somewhat helpful* in building:

- ◆ acceptance among staff for providing healthier meals—77%
- ◆ staff acceptance/support for changes—76%
- ◆ credibility with staff—60%
- ◆ teamwork among staff—59%
- ◆ staff morale—56%
- ◆ momentum to address or resolve management issues/concerns—55%
- ◆ credibility with administrators—52%

The confidence of the manager also can be important in terms of management capacity. Eighty-eight percent of respondents *agreed* or *strongly agreed* with the statement, “This service helped me be more confident in my work in our

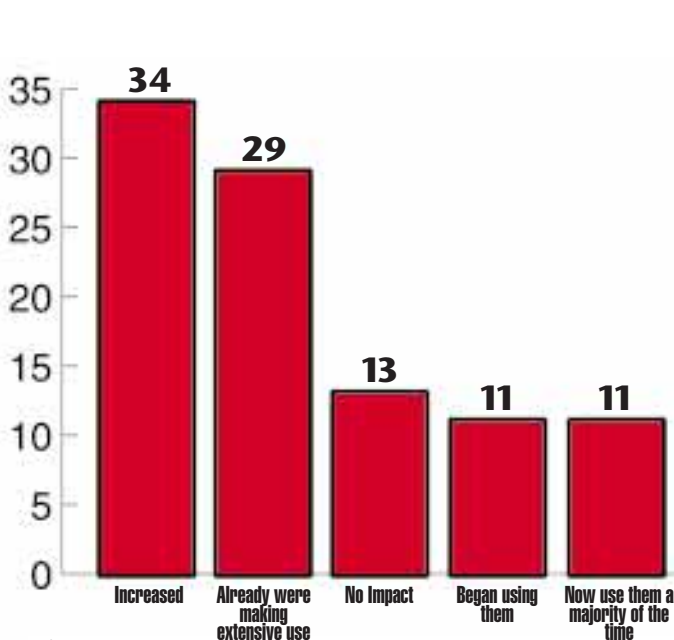


Figure 2
Impact of the Service on the Number of Standardized Recipes/Procedures Used (N=95; some answered in two categories)

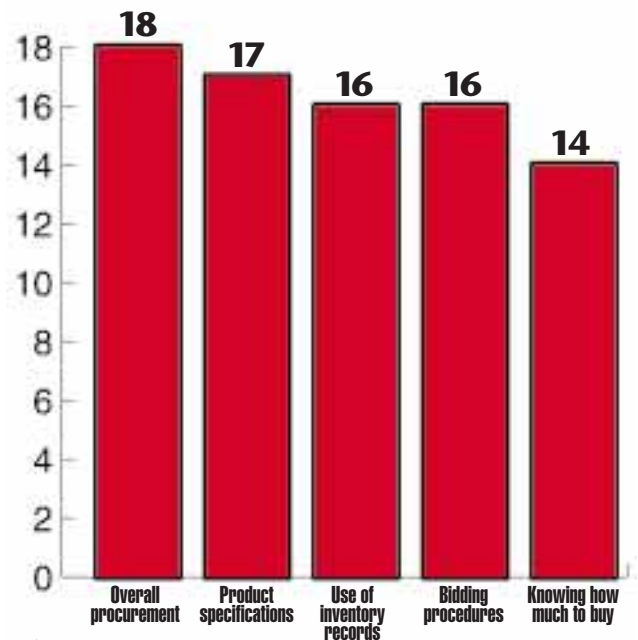


Figure 3
Number of Respondents Reporting Specific Improvements Related to Procurement as a Result of the Service (N=26)

school nutrition program.” Ninety-three percent of respondents *strongly agreed* or *agreed* with the statement, “This service helped me become a more effective manager/director.” Only six percent of respondents (six responses) *disagreed*. Six percent of respondents indicated *does not apply*.

Building management capacity in SFAs was accomplished by assisting school foodservice managers and directors to become more involved with their peers and in advocating for their school nutrition service. The following percent of respondents reported *getting involved* or *getting more involved* in:

- ◆ networking or talking with other school foodservice or nutrition professionals—67%
- ◆ advocacy for their school foodservice program—52%
- ◆ advocacy for school foodservice programs in general—48%
- ◆ local, state, or national organizations—44%

Twenty individuals (43%) answered “yes” to the direct question, “Did the Hands-On Team service, or the reports received as a result of this service, lead to an increase in administrative support for your food service?” Twenty-six respondents (57%) indicated “no.” Fifty individuals indicated that “administrative support was already high; this service did not affect it.”

Operations

Participants requested technical assistance in three operational areas to increase participation, reduce food waste, and improve the financial status of the program. To determine the actual benefits of the assistance in terms of program participation, respondents were asked to answer the question, “Did the Hands-On Team Service help you maintain or increase participation in your school breakfast or lunch program?” Thirty-one individuals (42%) indicated the service helped them maintain participation, while five respondents (7%) indicated the service helped them stop a decline in participation. Sixteen respondents (20%) reported that the service helped improve participation. In other words, 69 percent of respondents indicated the HOT service had some positive impact on participation. Twenty-three individuals

FACT FINDER

The following facts reference perceived benefits of the services received through the HOT Project with respect to operational issues in school foodservice programs:

60

What percent of respondents *strongly agreed* or *agreed* that HOT services helped create a more pleasant foodservice setting?

42

What percent of respondents *strongly agreed* or *agreed* that HOT services helped improve culinary skills?

41

What percent of respondents *strongly agreed* or *agreed* that HOT helped improve marketing of their programs?

58

What percent of respondents *strongly agreed* or *agreed* that HOT helped to improve or make better use of their facility?

98

What percent of respondents indicated the HOT service helped improve the school foodservice program?

(31%) reported the service did not help them with participation.

Of the 16 respondents who indicated the service helped them improve participation:

- ◆ 5 respondents indicated an improvement of less than 10 percent,
- ◆ 3 reported an improvement of 10 percent,
- ◆ 2 indicated an improvement of greater than 20 percent,
- ◆ 1 reported an improvement of 20 percent, and
- ◆ 1 indicated an improvement of 15 percent.

Four respondents did not provide the percentage of improvement in participation.

Ten respondents reported receiving assistance in reducing food waste. Of these 10, four indicated reducing food waste by 5 percent or less, one indicated reducing waste by 10 percent, one by 20 percent, and one by 25 percent. Three individuals were unable to quantify how much the service had helped them reduce food waste. Three respondents also noted that they were able to reduce food spoilage as a result of the service.

Respondents were asked if the service helped them improve the financial status of their school foodservice program. Fifty respondents (79%) answered “yes” to this item while 13 (21%) answered “no.” Thirty respondents indicated that no improvement was needed in this area. Of the 50 respondents answering “yes” to this item, 31 indicated the service helped them control costs, four indicated labor cost savings, and two indicated savings in food cost.

Action Plans

As a part of the technical assistance, the consultant worked cooperatively with the local director or manager to develop action plan(s) that included strategies, person responsible, and target dates. Figure 4 shows the implementation status of action plans prepared during the HOT consultant site visits. As shown in Figure 4, all but two of the respondents to this item indicated implementing at least some of the action plans. Of the two responses of “other,” one indicated that they are updating their action plans constantly,

and one indicated that they have used their action plans for developing future plans and targets.

In addition, 15 respondents indicated that they have used the action plan format to make their own action plans targeting priority areas. Nine respondents reported they used the action plans to gather administrative support.

Conclusion

Overall, the services provided by the Hands-On Team Project were well received and had a beneficial impact on the SFAs. Ninety-eight percent of respondents to this survey indicated that the HOT Project helped them to improve their school foodservice program. Moreover, 65 percent of respondents indicated their students were eating more meals that met the Dietary Guidelines for Americans because of the services provided by the Hands-On Team Project. It is encouraging to note that 79 respondents (95%) indicated they were implementing some or all of the action plans developed during the consultant’s site visit. Even if it is assumed that none of the non-respondents to this particular item were implementing their action plans, then 81 percent of the 96 total respondents to the overall survey were still implementing some or all of the action plans. Exactly half of the 96

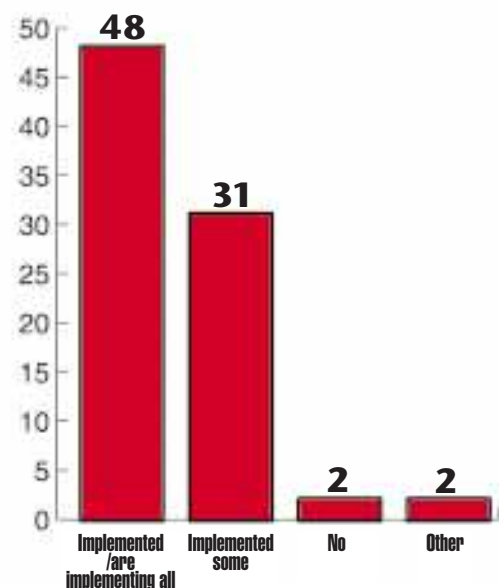


Figure 4
Responses to the Question: *Have you used the action plans?* (N=83)

respondents to the survey reported implementing all of their action plans.

PRACTICAL USE OF THIS INFORMATION

Since funding for the pilot project currently is not available, local Child Nutrition Program professionals may utilize the research questions to target areas of improvement to study in their own operation. Benefits of the on-site technical assistance included improving nutritional value of menus, improving menu planning, increasing use of standardized recipes, and improving the management capacity of the director or manager. These findings may be useful in developing continuous improvement opportunities at the state or local level through shared expertise across SFAs and volunteer efforts.

METHOD:

A survey of 137 SFAs participating in the HOT Project was conducted. The purpose of the survey was to determine what benefits, if any, were realized by the SFAs as a result of the technical assistance received through the HOT Project. A mailed questionnaire, designed by an independent evaluation consultant under contract with NFSMI, was developed using findings from earlier telephone surveys of the local site contacts, state child nutrition program contact persons, and HOT consultants. The project's stated goals and a wide variety of topic areas on which participants requested assistance also were used in developing questions for the survey. The questionnaire consisted of forced-choice items and a concluding free response item. NFSMI professionals, including the HOT Project Manager, established content validity. NFSMI staff distributed the 10-page questionnaire. A reminder card was sent to non-respondents 60 days after mailing the questionnaires. Responses to forced-choice questions were put into a flat file database and analyzed using Microsoft Excel. Responses to the open-ended question that concluded the survey were analyzed using qualitative research methods (thematic sorts).

For More Information

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